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BARCELONA

# The circulation of unofficial art from Central Europe beyond the Iron Curtain: exhibitions and transnational networks between 1971 and 1981

Juliane Debeusscher

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TESIS DOCTORAL

**THE CIRCULATION OF UNOFFICIAL ART FROM  
CENTRAL EUROPE BEYOND THE IRON  
CURTAIN: EXHIBITIONS AND TRANSNATIONAL  
NETWORKS BETWEEN 1971 AND 1981**

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NETWORKS BETWEEN 1971 AND 1981  
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*à Luis, León et Émile*

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the circulation and visibilisation of Central European art during the Cold War, with a particular focus on Southern Europe as a space of reception and exhibition throughout the 1970s. It argues that a transnational approach to artistic relations in the European context must take into consideration these two complementary phenomena and their related mechanisms: circulation on the one hand, visibilisation on the other. The first part looks at the trajectories of different agents and communities involved in artistic networks and long distance collaboration, addressing activities and projects carried out in the fields of visual poetry, contextual and sociological art, and engaged art criticism. The second part focuses on case studies of international exhibitions and biennials in Spain, France and Italy in order to identify the interpretative frames and narratives through which artists and works from socialist Central Europe have been envisaged in these contexts, taking into account the misunderstandings and strategies of imposition and resistance to models at stake in these operations.

The journey proposed through six interconnected chapters thus seeks to deepen the understanding of the logics of construction, negotiation and re-articulation of meaning that have accompanied visual and critical interactions between Central Europe and Southern Europe. It suggests that the analysis of the relations between these two culturally and politically constructed spaces have much to contribute to a decentered history of Cold War artistic relations in the Cold War.

## **Résumé**

Cette thèse examine la circulation et la mise en visibilité de l'art d'Europe Centrale pendant la Guerre Froide, avec un accent particulier sur l'Europe du Sud en tant qu'espace de réception et d'exposition dans les années 1970. Elle suggère qu'une approche transnationale des relations artistiques dans un contexte européen doit prendre en considération ces deux phénomènes complémentaires et leurs mécanismes connexes: la circulation d'une part, la mise en visibilité d'autre part. La première partie s'intéresse aux trajectoires de différents agents et communautés impliqués dans les réseaux artistiques et la collaboration à distance, en abordant des activités et projets réalisés dans le domaine de la poésie visuelle, de l'art contextuel et sociologique, et de la critique d'art engagée. La deuxième partie se concentre sur des cas d'expositions et de biennales internationales en Espagne, en France et en Italie afin d'identifier les cadres d'interprétation et les récits à travers lesquels les artistes et les

œuvres des pays socialiste d'Europe Centrale ont été considérés dans ces contextes, en tenant compte des malentendus et des stratégies d'exportation et d'imposition de modèles en jeu dans ces opérations.

Le parcours proposé à travers six chapitres interconnectés cherche ainsi à approfondir la compréhension des logiques de construction, de négociation et de réarticulation du sens qui ont accompagné les interactions visuelles et critiques entre l'Europe centrale et l'Europe du Sud. Il suggère que l'analyse de ces relations entre ces deux espaces culturellement et politiquement construits a beaucoup à apporter à une histoire décentrée des relations artistiques de la Guerre froide.

## **Resumen**

Esta tesis investiga la circulación y la visibilización del arte de Europa Central durante la Guerra Fría, con especial atención al sur de Europa como espacio de recepción y exhibición a lo largo de la década de los 1970s. Propone que un acercamiento transnacional de las relaciones artísticas en un contexto europeo debe tener en cuenta estos dos fenómenos complementarios y sus mecanismos relacionados: la circulación, por un lado, y la visibilización por otro. La primera parte de la tesis presta atención a las trayectorias de diferentes agentes y comunidades implicadas en las redes artísticas y la colaboración a larga distancia, considerando actividades y proyectos desarrollados en el ámbito de la poesía visual, el arte contextual y sociológico, y la crítica de arte comprometida. La segunda parte se centra en casos de exposiciones y bienales internacionales en España, Francia e Italia para identificar los marcos interpretativos y las narrativas a través de las cuales los artistas y las obras de la Europa Central socialista han sido contemplados en estos contextos, teniendo en cuenta los malentendidos y las estrategias de exportación e imposición de modelos en juego en estas operaciones.

El recorrido propuesto a través de seis capítulos interconectados pretende así profundizar en la comprensión de las lógicas de construcción, negociación y rearticulación de sentido que han acompañado las interacciones visuales y críticas entre Europa Central y Europa del Sur. Sugiere que el análisis de las relaciones entre estos dos espacios cultural y políticamente construidos tiene mucho que aportar a una historia descentrada de las relaciones artísticas durante la Guerra Fría.



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# INTRODUCTION

## Crossing the Iron Curtain

First as a concept, then as a concrete physical boundary and military device, the Iron Curtain both symbolised and performed the partition of the European territory on a north-south axis between 1946 and 1989-1991. Winston Churchill's famous metaphor from 1946 turned reality at the end of the 1950s, when the Communist states of Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia took measures to close their Western borders and prevent their citizens from fleeing to Western Europe.<sup>1</sup> This action culminated in 1961, with the erection of the wall between East and West-Berlin. The Iron Curtain became an unavoidable element, whose existence had physical and symbolic repercussions. Territorially, it consolidated a European geography already defined by interruption and division.<sup>2</sup> Politically, it had a decisive influence on the articulation of intra-continental and inter-continental (particularly on the Atlantic axis, in relation to North and South America) alliances and strategies; in the social field, it left a strong mark on European citizens, whose personal and collective identities were partly defined by the side they had happened to live on or had decided to emigrate to.<sup>3</sup>

Whether contemplated as an impenetrable wall that punctuated border territories with its fortifications, metal fences and highly militarized no-man's lands, or as a

---

<sup>1</sup>“From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe, Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia; all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, all are subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but also to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow.” Winston Churchill, “Sinews of Peace”, speech pronounced at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, 5 March 1946, available online at <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/> (Accessed July 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The partition of the European territory in distinct fractions was not new, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). However, the delimitation of two regions separated by a militarized line of such magnitude was unprecedented. An example of division from the same period can be provided by the Apartheid regime in South Africa (1948-1991), one of the major distinctions being that the Iron Curtain did not determine the segregation and oppression of a majority by a minority on a racial basis, but rather separated two antagonistic systems, under which civil populations lived as equal.

<sup>3</sup> Muriel Blaive and Libora Oates-Indruchová, “Introduction: Border Visions and Border Regimes in Cold War Eastern Europe”, special issue on borders, *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 50, no. 3, 2015, 656-659; Sophie Cœuré and Sabine Dullin, eds., *Frontières du communisme. Mythologies et réalités de la division de l'Europe, de la révolution d'octobre au mur de Berlin, 1917-1961* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007).

porous screen that let selected information and, sometimes, people pass through—a “nylon curtain”, as György Péteri suggested—, the Iron Curtain imposed itself in people’s mind as an indisputable presence, a “ligne d’horizon”.<sup>4</sup> During the main period discussed in this dissertation, i.e. the years comprised between 1971 and 1981, its end or destruction was closer to science fiction than to a real possibility. Ironically, the protective function of what had first appeared as a theatrical engineering—in the context of 18<sup>th</sup> century theatre, an “iron curtain” separated the public from the stage in case of fire—, was literally applied by Soviet-type regimes: the Iron Curtain was supposed to “preserve” the territories and the peoples from external hostile forces and influences while at the same time, it prevented them from circulating to the outer space.<sup>5</sup> If the physical and metaphorical existence of this barrier informed political, economic and military decisions, it also had a significant impact on cultural developments and activities. This impact, however, must not be contemplated only in terms of impossibility and retention, but also from the perspective of actions and operations that contributed to overcoming this logics of separateness, by creating or enabling the emergence of contact zones that challenged the idea of isolated blocks.

This dissertation thus explores the dynamics of circulation and visibilisation—these terminological choices are clarified below—generated and experienced by cultural agents *while crossing* the material and symbolic line of the Iron Curtain, from socialist to non-socialist environments and vice-versa. The persons, objects and ideas contemplated in the six chapters that compose this study have in common the experience of “passing” from one side to another, whether in dematerialized or embodied form. This six interconnected “stories” draw a path that deepens the understanding of the logics of construction, negotiation and re-articulation of meaning that accompanied the transnational circulation and visibilisation of Central European art and artists during the late Cold War, paying particular attention to their interaction with the south of Europe as a specific space of reception and exposure.

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<sup>4</sup> György Péteri, “Nylon Curtain-Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe”, *Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures & Societies* 18, 2006, 1-14.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 66.

For this purpose, the dissertation articulates a twofold approach: first, a critical examination of the modalities through which artists, artworks and ideas from Central Europe were mobilised across the Iron Curtain and connected with other agents, particularly from Spain, France and Italy; second, an analysis of the conditions of their inclusion and appearance in the framework of international exhibitions in these three countries, with particular attention to the different narratives that were formulated and consolidated on these occasions.

## **Contexts**

### **A zone of transregional contacts between Central Europe and Southern Europe**

Focusing on Europe, this dissertation adopts a transnational and transregional perspective to explore the space of cultural, social and political interactions constituted by Central Europe and Southern Europe, and between them.

Each approach is tied to distinct scales and methodologies and one of the challenges of this dissertation was in fact to bring these two topographical perspectives into dialogue. To what extent can their combination or imbrication help to shed light on differentiated aspects of these artistic transactions? This question has informed the writing process, operating more as a motor for reflection than as the catalyst for a single or categorical answer.

On the one hand, the transnational approach reflects the need, already expressed by a significant branch of art historiographical scholarship, to insist on points of contact and comparison beyond the national paradigm. In the particular framework of the study of artistic relations in Cold War Europe (especially from an East/West perspective) this perspective has contributed to challenge binary views and to emphasize the existence of numerous interactions between and within the Blocs. Observing such relations beyond the national paradigm, however, does not mean that we are getting rid of any kind of national identification. On the contrary, the transnational approach allows to capture the specificity of each context in which artists and their production are inscribed or interact with. National belonging or national idiosyncrasies remained for artists and cultural agents an important source of definition and self-definition, especially in an international context—and we will

observe across this dissertation that artists frequently referred to their origins to situate themselves in relation to an interlocutor, or to explain the conditions under which they carried out artistic practice and exhibited it in international settings; some of them also used visual, linguistic or sound motives related to their national belonging and cultural references.

While the transnational perspective is particularly useful to address artistic mobilities, the transregional approach allows to capture another layer of shared conditions and references.

The area referred to as Central Europe here comprehends the socialist people's republics of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary; Southern Europe (part of the European Mediterranean) corresponds with Spain, France and Italy. Far from considering them as authoritative categories, these two geo-cultural ensembles—which artificial and constructed dimension is recognised from the outset—are convoked to delimit a space of research that corresponds to a heterogeneous area of cultural transfers and entanglements, so far scarcely addressed from a transregional perspective. They disclose a series of connections (of sociopolitical, economic, cultural, linguistic character) that are, in my view, essential for a better understanding of artistic relations in Cold War Europe. Despite their constructed character (or thanks to it), using these delimitations can help raising new questions and escape the simplistic perspective of East versus West in a geographical approach to European art history. By setting precise geopolitical coordinates to the study of artistic transactions, this study seeks to avoid the pitfalls of a simplistic division between two great blocs, and proposes at the same time an area wide enough for enabling a polyphonic approach based on dialogues and resonances between different—local, national, regional—topographies. The study of these encounters—and, equally important, missed encounters or “mis-encounters”—between agents and artifacts from Central and Southern Europe aims at identifying different regimes of political, social and cultural identification applied in these localities or in relation to them, and at examining the way such regimes came into tension with other processes operating on an international or global scale.

The three territories that compose “our” Central European ensemble were absorbed into the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War; they were part of the Eastern bloc, understood as the ensemble of territories that remained under the Soviet rule from the post-Second World War till the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991. While they all experienced state socialism as a political-economic system, the histories of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia throughout the Cold War have not been homogeneous nor synchronic. In the three contexts, popular requests for reform and pluralisation of the political system were formulated and violently repressed at different times (in 1956 in Hungary and Poland, 1968 in Czechoslovakia, 1981 in Poland), in a way that crystallised expressions of protest and solidarity in other countries. In the artistic domain, each state applied its proper official policy that had an impact on the development of art making on the territory and its circulation abroad.

Discussions aiming at identifying the most appropriate term, if Central Europe, Eastern Europe or East-Central Europe, are recurrent in the field of art history and the arguments defending each choice are multiple.<sup>6</sup> Among the ones who have shown reluctance on the use of the term Central Europe, Piotr Piotrowski considered it a “politically more neutral term than Eastern Europe or Eastern bloc” and justified this conception by the fact that, according to him, all Eastern European societies depended on the same state ideological apparatuses, borrowing Louis Althusser’s theory.<sup>7</sup> Piotrowski, whose essential contribution to the field of Eastern European art history

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<sup>6</sup> Valuable contributions to the discussion on the origins and use of the terminology include Eva Forgács, “How the New Left Invented East-European Art”, in *Centropa* Vol. 3, no. 2, 2003, 93-104; Béata Hock, “Introduction”, in Béata Hock and Anu Allas, eds., *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present* (New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 7-9; Edit András, “The Obscure Object of Desire Is there any place for Eastern Europe on the Map of World Art or Global Art (History)?”, in *Mezosfera*, Aug 2020. [http://mezosfera.org/the-obscure-object-of-desire/#\\_ftn1](http://mezosfera.org/the-obscure-object-of-desire/#_ftn1). On the other hand, we should signal that the same terminological and narrative issues have been problematised in the case of other areas, starting with China, which art was also confronted with the ambiguities of the “dissident” reading. See Laia Manonelles Moner, *La construcción de la(s) historia(s) del arte contemporáneo en China, conversaciones con curadores, historiadores y críticos* (Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, “From the international to the cosmopolitan”, in *L’Internationale: Post-War Avantgardes between 1957 and 1986* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2012), 303. On the notion of ideological state apparatuses, see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1969), in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London-New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127-186, cited in Piotr Piotrowski, “How to Write a History of Central–East European Art?”, *Third Text* vol. 23, no. 1, January 2009, 5.



has become authoritative and, we could even say, canonical, thus opted for considering political conditions as an essential factor of commonality. On the other hand, Eva Forgács has stressed the non autochthonous origin of the expression “Eastern Europe”: it was never adopted by the inhabitants of the region themselves nor by the artists, who “did not identify themselves as East European either during the interwar era or throughout the cold war period”.<sup>8</sup> According to Forgács, artists in particular lacked “regional consciousness” or “regionalist identification” and identified themselves through national belonging or, ultimately, “as European artists”.<sup>9</sup> We can already see by confronting the views of Piotrowski and Forgács that the way artists from the region self-identified was not necessarily reflected in subsequent historiographical readings, motivated by the desire to inscribe these practices into a specific narrative. While this study does not pretend to judge or resolve this dilemma, it nevertheless takes it into account and acknowledges the contradictions that will inevitably appear around this terminological issue.

In the framework of this dissertation, several analysis from the fields of political history and art history have been particularly influential to establish Central Europe as a framework and argue that if Central Europe was undoubtedly part of Eastern Europe and experienced the same condition of satellite of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the dilemmas and problematics intellectuals and artists from Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia faced in the late 1960s and the 1970s significantly differed from what their peers in other socialist contexts experienced.

In her essay *Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings*, the historian Barbara J. Falk analysed the literary and theoretical production of dissident intellectuals in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia from the late 1960s to 1989. Observing that the history of the three countries had in common “an internal regional dynamic of influence and subsequent revision”, she considered that dissident practices from the region shared a similar sociology of knowledge that enabled them to construct a coherent oeuvre of political

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<sup>8</sup> Forgács, “How the New Left Invented East-European Art”, 93.

<sup>9</sup> Forgács, “How the New Left Invented East-European Art”, 93.

theory.<sup>10</sup> While her book focused mostly on intellectuals and their theoretical and literary production, Falk also evoked other forms of production, including art (“forms of performance art”) and other cultural expressions that “made opposition so distinct, creative, and clearly difficult to penetrate and effectively stop.<sup>11</sup>” Importantly, she contemplated the phenomenon of Central European dissidence from a regional perspective, insisting on the transnational connections between the three countries and on the willingness of intellectuals to communicate:

[...] as intellectuals they were more likely to want to make connections across borders and build upon the knowledge of experience of their peers elsewhere; in fact, there was a true sense of “internationalism”, in an idealist Marxist sense. Marginalized academics, writers, and oppositionally-minded members of the intelligentsia were also concerned (and perhaps obsessed) with constructing an alternative to the Yalta division of Europe. Breaking the East-West axis by positing the real and imagined existence of a “Central Europe” was a form of revisionist history, a political goal, and a strategy of increasing the layers of interconnectedness. As a result of the above, a commonality of themes and approaches can be ascertained from a detailed analysis of their work.<sup>12</sup>

Leaving aside for now the notion of “dissidence”, we will reexamine critically in this dissertation as a label often applied without discernment to the artistic production from the region, Falk’s reflections raised important issues. In particular, her evocation of the cohabitation of a “real and imagined” Central Europe already highlighted the constructed nature of this idea, she nevertheless decided to use in her study as a common denominator to the practices she analysed. In Falk’s mind, the idea of Central Europe functioned in fact more as a strategic construction aiming at

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara J. Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe: Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003). Among the authors examined in Falk’s book were Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik in Poland; Václav Havel and Jan Patočka in Czechoslovakia; and Miklós Haraszti and György Konrád in Hungary. Falk’s book was actually her PhD dissertation, from which these quotes and those following are retrieved. Barbara J. Falk, *Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings: The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe 1968-1989*, PhD Dissertation (Toronto: York University, 1999), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Falk, *Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings: The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe 1968-1989*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Falk, *Citizen Intellectuals and Philosopher Kings: The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe 1968-1989*, 21.

challenging Cold War's bipartition and highlighting points in common than as an effective reality.

The political systems experienced by Central European societies in the 1970s shared what the Czech intellectual and writer Václav Havel has described as a “post-totalitarian” condition: a form of political pragmatism that led socialist leaders to adapt to new economic and political needs, while maintaining at the same time a repressive authority and strong control over the citizens.<sup>13</sup> Within the field of art history, Klara Kemp-Welch has explored the correlation between the post-totalitarian nature of Central European regimes, new forms of non-oppositional or “anti-political” resistance to them and a set of artistic practices that also manifested a distrust towards the political, understood in this case as an explicit ideological positioning and activism. Kemp-Welch has argued that such attitude in the arts, characterised by withdrawal, disinterest and skepticism, mirrored key aspects of the Central European dissident thought of the 1970s and 1980s, including authors like Václav Havel himself or György Konrád.<sup>14</sup> Kemp-Welch's study is an important precedent for this dissertation, not only because it challenged the national framework as a dominant point of reference and connected transversally different contexts; it took also distance from a radical separation between political or committed art, and apolitical art, thus contributing to demystify the idea of Central European artists as dissidents, heroes or martyrs of the totalitarian regimes.

With the above-mentioned references in mind, I will refer to Central Europe in relation to the artists whose particular trajectory is analysed in this dissertation, while the term Eastern Europe will be used to refer to situations or structural conditions that were common to all the countries of the socialist bloc. This alternate use seems more appropriate than the halfway and too unspecific expression East-Central or Central-

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<sup>13</sup> Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless” (1978), in Jan Vladislav, ed., *Václav Havel or Living in Truth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 40.

<sup>14</sup> Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central-European Art. Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956-1989* (London/New York: IB Tauris, 2014). The artists whose work was put under scrutiny were Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Bereś in Poland, Július Koller and Jiří Kovanda in Czechoslovakia, Tamás Szentjóby and Endre Tót in Hungary. The title of Kemp-Welch's book refers to György Konrád's essay first published in the United States, *Antipolitics. Pushing the state out of our nightmares* (New York: H. Holt, 1984). Significantly, the Hungarian edition of Konrád's book issued by the independent publisher AB Kiadó in 1986 was subtitled “Central European Meditations.”

Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the use of the generic designation Eastern Europe in a study almost exclusively focused on the Polish, Hungarian and Czechoslovak contexts would contribute, in my opinion, to a reductive and in a way misleading vision of Eastern Europe since the absence of other realities from Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany and the Baltic states wouldn't be problematised.

The second regional space delimited in this dissertation is constituted by another group of three bordering states, geographically located on the Western south border of Europe: Spain, France and Italy. In contrast to socialist Central Europe, this ensemble was politically heterogeneous. Since the end of the civil war in 1939, Spain had been under the fascistic and national-catholic dictatorship of the General Francisco Franco. Franco's death in December 1975 after a long agony marked the start of the so-called "democratic transition", leading to the country's first general elections 1977. While the victory went to the centre party governed by Adolfo Suarez, still imbued with Franco's legacy, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)) imposed itself as the second national political force, anticipating its victory in the 1982 elections. For the Spanish Communist Party (Partido Comunista Español (PCE)), illegal under Franco, the elections marked its return to the public arena as the third force of the country—with a result, however, far below what its leaders had hoped for.<sup>15</sup>

On the other side of the Pyrenees, the French landscape was dominated in the 1960s by the economic growth of the "Trente glorieuses" (the "Glorious thirty"), associated with the paternalist and authoritarian figure of the General De Gaulle. In parallel, France's colonies in Africa were undergoing processes of decolonization that culminated with the independence of Algeria, in 1962. Reflecting a return to order and more conservative values after the wave of May 1968, the presidencies of Georges Pompidou (from 1969 until his death in 1974) and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974-1981) pursued the process of modernisation started by their predecessor and

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<sup>15</sup> Juan Francisco Fuentes Aragonés, "“Lo que los españoles llaman la transición”", *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* [on line] 36-1, 2006, <https://doi.org/10.4000/mcv.2359> (Accessed April 2021); Germán Labrador Méndez, *Culpables por la literatura. Imaginación política y contracultura en la transición española (1968-1986)* (Barcelona: Akal, 2017).

placed technocracy at the centre of their policies of economic, social and territorial management. In the cultural field, the politics of decentralisation carried out from the 1960s reflected a concern for territorial planning, which hardly managed though to pluralise France's highly centralised political and cultural system.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast with the progressive return to order of its transalpine neighbour after the 1968 outburst, Italy experienced in the 1960s and 1970s a very tormented and complex period in its history. Across the country, movements of workers and students protested contested the institutional power and called for a renewal of the structures. In the field of parliamentary politics, the search for a government pact (the so-called "historical compromise") between the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI)) and the Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana (DC)) from 1973 onwards led to further misunderstanding and radicalisation of part of the civil society. The social and political turmoil created by mass protests, the raise of the extra-parliamentary left and its constant tension with far-right organisations lead several groups to embrace clandestine armed struggle. Street fights, bombings and shootings followed by more repression, marked a period later encapsulated as the "anni di piombo" ("leaden years"), an expression itself borrowed from the German context.<sup>17</sup>

I should specify that the Southern European region referred to in this dissertation differs from the idea of Southern Europe that has emerged in the 1970s, and embraced those European societies that were experiencing or had experienced right wings dictatorships (Portugal, Spain and Greece at that time, Italy due to its fascist past).<sup>18</sup> Interestingly enough, numerous connections and entanglements were observed

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<sup>16</sup> Lily Woodruff, *Disordering the Establishment: Participatory Art and Institutional Critique in France, 1958-1981* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), 4-29.

<sup>17</sup> For an account of this period marked by the authors' own experience of the movement, see Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L'orda d'oro (1968-1977. La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale)* (Milan: SugarCo Edizioni, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Numerous analysis on this period join the cases of Portugal, Spain and Greece. In Portugal, the Carnation Revolution started on April 25th, 1974, and put an end to 48 years of dictatorship ; in Greece, the military junta that was governing since 1967 fell on July 24th, 1974, with the Turkish invasion of Cyprus ; in Spain, Franco's death on November 20th, 1975 put an end to his dictatorship. See *Southern Europe? Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece from the 1950s until the Present Day*, Martin Baumeister and Roberto Sala, eds. (Frankfurt: Campus, 2015), in particular Martin Martin and Roberto Sala, "A Long Road South: Southern Europe as a Discursive Construction and Historical Region After 1945", 19-50; Effie Pedaliu, "The Making of Southern Europe: An Historical Overview," in Eirini Karamouzian, Effie Pedaliu, and Emma de Angelis, eds., *A Strategy for Southern Europe?*, LSE Reports, (London: LSE, 2013), 8-14.

between this Southern Europe and socialist Eastern Europe, not only because of their conditions of societies under authoritarian regimes but also afterwards, in the phase of “post-authoritarian transition” to democracy. An example of such entanglement was the interest of Central European political dissidents and reformists for the Spanish model of political transition: already in 1976, the Polish intellectual and dissident Adam Michnik saw in the “Spanish way” a possible alternative to the political stalemate in Poland.<sup>19</sup>

Applied to both fascist-type and communist regimes, the concept of totalitarianism brought the South and the East of Europe together in opposition to a liberal and democratic Western Europe they would eventually join, once democratic transitions would be achieved and economic growth restored.<sup>20</sup> In this process of “returning to Europe”, “Europe” unquestionably embodied the democratic and liberal supranational entity any citizen of these newly liberated societies should aspire to be part of.<sup>21</sup> Diagnostics regarding these “entangled transitions” have remained however focused on the institutional and state levels, leading successive analysts to observe that “[w]ith these comparative or centre-periphery approaches to European history, not only the diversity of exchanges and crossovers across Europe has been lost but also often the agency and perspective of actors in these peripheries themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

Regarding now economic and industrial development in these European regions, we should mention that the idea of Europe’s “third world” was used to refer to the lesser level of development of its Southern part, in a way that projected the already

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<sup>19</sup> Fuentes Aragonés, ““Lo que los españoles llaman la transición””, paragraph 2.

<sup>20</sup> “Against the backdrop of an ever closer and wider European Union (EU), such works buttressed a rather ‘flattening’ and teleological account in which the economic modernisation of both regions was closely connected with their decision to escape their supposed isolation and ‘return to Europe’.” Kim Christiaens, James Mark and José María Faraldo, “Entangled Transitions: Eastern and Southern European Convergence or Alternative Europes? 1960s–2000s.” *Contemporary European History* 26 no. 4, 2017, 582. doi:10.1017/S0960777317000261 (Accessed May 2020). Similarities between the two regions in terms of economic growth were observed already in the 1970s in Béla Kádár, “Specific Features of Development of South-European Countries”, *Acta Oeconomica* 15, no. 2, 1975, 217-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40729795> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Christiaens, James and Faraldo, “Entangled Transitions: Eastern and Southern European Convergence or Alternative Europes? 1960s–2000s”, 579.

<sup>22</sup> Christiaens, James and Faraldo, “Entangled Transitions: Eastern and Southern European Convergence or Alternative Europes? 1960s–2000s”, 584.

existing world order on a European scale.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos significantly emphasised the existence of internal colonialism in Europe between North and South (especially Portugal and Spain) since the seventeenth century, and recalled that at that time, “Southern Europe became a periphery, subordinated in economic, political, and cultural terms to northern Europe and the core that produced the Enlightenment”.<sup>24</sup> Pointing out the limits of the idea of a homogeneous European modernity, De Sousa Santos’ post-colonial critique has a particular resonance with this study focused on the analysis of interactions between two European regions considered as peripheral.

In a special issue of the journal *RIHA* dedicated to southern modernisms in Portugal, Spain, Greece and Italy, Joana Cunha Leal observed in fact that the “meridional Europeanness of the targeted countries” was key, because it “opened the possibility to engage in an ongoing discussion on European peripheries that had been mainly focusing on Central and Eastern Europe so far.”<sup>25</sup> Cunha Leal’s comment signaled the comparable status of both regions and the historiographical challenges escaping dominant narratives related to Eurocentric modernity implied for them.<sup>26</sup>

Parallelisms between Southern Europe and socialist Yugoslavia were also pointed at by Armin Medosch in his study on the “New Tendencies” exhibitions in Zagreb. Observing that “the implementation of the Fordist paradigm in Yugoslavia was incomplete”, Medosch connected them with of “other semiperipheral and peripheral regions, such as southwestern Europe and Latin America”, they shared conditions of lower economic and industrial development with. He then listed a number of countries that were part of what the Puerto Rican curator Mari Carmen Ramírez

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<sup>23</sup> This reading was applied during the interwar period, see Derek H. Aldcroft, *Europe’s Third World. The European Periphery in the Interwar Years* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> “Boaventura de Sousa Santos”, in Katy P. Sian, *Conversations in Postcolonial Thought* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 72. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South. Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder/Londres: Paradigm Publishers, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Joana Cunha Leal, “0131 An Introduction: Around Southern Modernisms”, *RIHA Journal*, 0131, 15 July 2016, unpaginated. <https://doi.org/10.11588/riha.2016.1.70197> (Accessed April 2021).

<sup>26</sup> “[...] these southern boundaries were privileged as a field of inquiry because they also disrupted general assumptions on Eurocentric narratives. The fact is that these countries, despite being European, have given rise to artistic and architectural manifestations generally taken as peripheral, or dislocated, and at odds with modernism’s standard definition.” Cunha Leal, “0131 An Introduction: Around Southern Modernisms”, paragraph 3.

designated as a “constructive nexus”, characterised by the convergence of industrial belatedness and artistic innovation: “not only Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela, but also Yugoslavia, Italy and Spain, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria [...]”.<sup>27</sup>

While it considers attentively these specific forms of “Europeanness” and their coordinates, this dissertation will shift however from the exclusive focus on political and economic conditions and factors to propose a slightly different Southern European configuration, articulated this time (also) through the lens of shared social and cultural references. From this perspective, if Portugal is undoubtedly a key player in Southern Europe, it has not been included in this study because the dynamics of cultural exchange between this country and Central Europe during the period of the 1970s did not appear to be particularly as active as in the case of France, Italy and even Spain, and did not seem in any case to respond to a logic that could be integrated into a regional analysis of a Mediterranean arc of circulations which, in contrast, strongly connected cultural agents from the three above-mentioned countries.

In addition to the absence of Portugal, this dissertation differs from the above-mentioned political-economic analyses focused on Southern Europe for its inclusion of France in this ensemble. Indeed, despite its higher level of industrialization and the absence of authoritarian experience in its recent history, France’s connection with Spain and Italy can be justified from different angles in the context of a study of artistic exchanges in Europe during the Cold War.<sup>28</sup> The first and the more obvious is its geographical position: France operated as a meeting place and an intermediary space between the Iberian and the Italian peninsulas, a sort of “passage obligé” from

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<sup>27</sup> Armin Medosch, *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961-1978)* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016), 9.

<sup>28</sup> The non authoritarian character or the French political system might be discussed, however, in the light of its colonial history, an aspect actually shared with Spain and Italy. In the case of Southern Europe, the tensions between a “peripheral” condition in relation to a more industrially and socially progressive Northern Europe and the proper past of Southern European states as colonial powers would certainly deserve further investigation. This raises the question of whether Southern Europe is part of the “Global South”, and we can only suggest that the answer varies according to the scale on which one stands. For a more general reflexion on the Souths, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Roland Béhar, “Parler des Suds: le défi de Caliban”, *Artl@s Bulletin* 8, no. 2, 2019, 4-11.



one place and another.<sup>29</sup> This position was observable not only in terms of physical transportation, but also of intellectual exchange and circulation of ideas, as well as their translatability. In fact, theoretical and literary publications from France and Italy were rapidly translated and circulated extensively in the other countries.<sup>30</sup> Although already heavily challenged by English and, in the case of Central Europe, by German, French still represented at that time an important “lingua franca”, especially in Southern Europe.

Due to its geographical position, France constituted also a privileged crossroad between the south (especially for the Iberian side) and the east of Europe. As Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius well signaled, Paris continued to fascinate the avant-garde on the other side of the Iron Curtain, which operated “as a two-way mirror, able to hide and reveal several Parises”.<sup>31</sup> We should underline the paradox of this position at a time when the avant-garde’s leadership had moved to the other side of the Atlantic and Paris had ceded its position of artistic capital to New York, thus reintegrating through its decline a position that was, perhaps, more marginal or peripheral. Seen in this light, and albeit in a manner quite distinct from its southern neighbours, France’s position in the 1960s and 1970s had already been, if I dare use the term, “peripheralised”.<sup>32</sup>

France was also a territory of exile for artists and intellectuals from both sides of the Iron Curtain. Escaping Franco’s dictatorship, a group of Catalan artists in Paris rapidly integrated the French art scene and some of them benefited from its

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<sup>29</sup> Studies that have highlighted intersections between artistic and critical practices in Spain, France and Italy include Paula Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017); Jacopo Galimberti, *Individuals against Individualism: Art Collectives in Western Europe (1956-1969)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> To give an exemple from this dissertation, the artists who published the magazine *Neon de Suro* in Mallorca, Spain, cited in their manifest “La gratuïta es una agressió” (“Gratuitousness is an aggression”) (1978) authors like the Italian art historian Francesco Poli and the French philosopher Olivier Revault d’Alonnes. Despite the fact that they were far from being mainstream authors, Poli and Revault d’Alonnes had their books translated in a short delay in Spanish language (both were published by the editor Gustavo Gili from Barcelona), confirming a circle of common intellectual and theoretical references. Neon de Suro, “Gratuitousness is an aggression”, in *A l’entorn de Neon de Suro, 1975-1982* (Palma de Mallorca: Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró: Ajuntament de Palma, 1999), 111-112.

<sup>31</sup> Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, “Paris from behind the Iron Curtain”, in Sarah Wilson and Eric de Chassey, eds., *Paris: Capital of the Arts 1900-1968* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002), 250.

<sup>32</sup> Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983).

connections with Central Europe. This was, for example, the case of Joan Rabascall, who participated in exhibitions in Poland along with artists who developed sociological-type research in France (see Chapter two).<sup>33</sup>

Despite their radically different political systems, France, Italy and Spain also shared an important point in common in the 1970s: the increasing importance of their communist parties in the national political landscape even when, like in the case of the Spanish Communist Party, it had to exercise its activities in exile—the PCE was legalized in April 1977, two months before the first general elections in Spain. The Spanish, French and Italian communist parties and their respective leaders (Santiago Carrillo, Georges Marchais and Enrico Berlinguer) were major actors in the articulation of Eurocommunism, a political hypothesis and strategy that strongly marked the European landscape in that decade, not only in the political realm. Surged in the context of the Thaw and influenced by Central European attempts to build a socialism with a human face (especially in Czechoslovakia), Eurocommunism promoted a democratic socialism that would overcome the blocks division and operate with greater autonomy from the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> In the framework of this study, we will see that Eurocommunism had significant repercussions on the way socialist societies were perceived in Southern Europe, in particular in relation to the phenomenon of Eastern European dissidence. On this respect, the case of the Venice Biennale from 1977 dedicated to cultural dissidence (addressed in Chapter six) is a perfect illustration of how internal politics in Southern European states interfered with, and even instrumentalised cultural initiatives involving participants from

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<sup>33</sup> The group of Catalans in Paris was constituted by Antoni Miralda, Dorothee Selz, Jaume Xifra and Joan Rabascall. See Pilar Parcerisas, *Conceptualismo(s) poéticos, políticos y periféricos. En torno al arte conceptual en España, 1964-1980* (Madrid: Akal, 2007), 369-373.

<sup>34</sup> Valentine Lomellini, “A Window of Opportunity? Eurocommunism(s) and Détente”, in Elena Calandri, Antonio Varsori and Daniele Caviglia, eds., *Détente in Cold War Europe: Politics and Diplomacy in the Mediterranean and the Middle East* (London: IB Tauris 2012), 89-101. Marc Lazar, “La gauche et le défi des changements dans les années 70–80. Les cas français et italien”, *Journal of Modern European History* 9, no. 2, 2011, 241-62 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26265938> (Accessed May 2020); Emanuele Treglia, “El PCE y el movimiento comunista internacional (1969-1977)”, *Cuadernos De Historia Contemporánea*, no. 37, 2015, 225-255.

socialist Central Europe.<sup>35</sup> More generally, from a wide range of positions that will be discussed in this dissertation, the communist and socialist parties in Spain, France and Italy played an important role of mediation between the two regions, fostering debates about development, democratisation and Europeanisation.<sup>36</sup>

### **Terminological dilemmas: unofficial, neo-avant-garde, experimental art?**

Up to a recent time, the historiography of art under Soviet-type systems favored a clear division between, on one hand, an official production recognised and promoted by the socialist authorities and, on the other hand, practices commonly designated as “unofficial, alternative, underground, nonconventional, marginal”.<sup>37</sup> Contrasting this view, recent studies and projects connected with global and/or transnational art history demonstrated however that the idea of two isolated spheres—one authorized, the other forbidden—was in no way representative of the much more complex and plural realm of the “actually existing art worlds of socialism”, especially in the late Cold War period.<sup>38</sup>

The term “unofficial” in the title of this dissertation does not refer in any way to an attitude of opposition or political dissidence. In the period we deal with, socialist realism had already lost its hegemonic weight and artistic production out of the official realm not necessarily articulated a discourse against the regime. “Unofficial” thus rather designates a position in the sociocultural system of the socialist states, which could be described as apart from the officially promoted aesthetics and the institutional and professional structures that supported the field. However, even this

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<sup>35</sup> On the relation between the Italian and French lefts and Eastern European dissent, see Valentine Lomellini, *Les relations dangereuses. French Socialists, Communists and the Human Rights Issue in the Soviet Bloc* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2012) and Valentine Lomellini, “The Dialogue that Never Blossomed? The Complex Relations between the Italian Left and Eastern Dissent”, in Guia Migani and Antonio Varsori, eds., *Europe in the International Arena During the 1970s: Entering a Different World* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2010), 279-300.

<sup>36</sup> Christiaens, Mark and Faraldo, “Entangled Transitions: Eastern and Southern European Convergence or Alternative Europes? 1960s-2000s”, 598.

<sup>37</sup> A useful critical review of the binary pair official/unofficial is proposed in Suman Gutpa, “Conceptualising the Art of Communist Times”, *Third Text* 106, September 2010, 571-582.

<sup>38</sup> See the special issue on “Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism”, *Third Text*, Vol. 32 no. 4, 2018, in particular Maja Fowkes & Reuben Fowkes, “Introductions. Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism”, 371-378, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1532719> (Accessed May 2020). Also Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg-Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski, eds., *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).

broad definition is undermined by the constant intertwining of professional affiliation (membership of Artists Unions, in particular, was a mandatory condition for receiving public art commissions, an essential source of income for many artists), public activities (artists or agents whose work was not officially promoted but who nevertheless exhibited occasionally in public or state-supported spaces) and state-supported pedagogical experiences (the same producers taught in art academies or organised cultural or didactic activities in the framework of public organisations).<sup>39</sup>

Unofficial practices in Central Europe occupied in fact a “grey zone” in which the conditions of making and exhibiting art oscillated between indifference, tolerance and prohibition, in close relation with the changing political and social conjunctures.<sup>40</sup> There was no fixed patron of state censorship in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, since its definition and application varied in function of the local authorities, the period and the kind of artistic production in question. While Poland was considered to be the most liberal country of the Eastern bloc in terms of cultural policies, the Hungarian official directives oscillated between tolerance and repression in accordance with the famous “3T” doctrine, which application was often unpredictable.<sup>41</sup> As for Czechoslovakia, the landscape changed radically in the early 1970s, passing from a relatively open cultural policy to a strict control during the period of normalisation that started a few months after the repression of the Prague Spring by the Warsaw pact troupes, in August 1968.

In the light of this wide variety of contexts and situations that changed in time, the simplistic dichotomy between an official art, understood as purely propagandistic, and an unofficial art that would follow the paradigm of dissidence, turns out to be poor and even inappropriate, and calls for a more nuanced and critical approach. On the

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<sup>39</sup> Regarding artists’ Unions, see *ARTMargins*’ special issue “Creating for the State: The Role of Artists’ Unions in Central and Eastern Europe”, edited by Raino Isto and Caterina Preda, October 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Júlia Perczel, “The Art Sphere as a Grey Zone: Techniques of Power and the Context of Artistic Practices”, in Sándor Hornyik, Edit Sasvári and Hedwig Turai, eds, *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980: Doublespeak and Beyond* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 59-76. The entire Eastern Europe was designated as a grey zone in Piotr Piotrowski, “The Grey Zone of Europe”, in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, David Elliott and Bojana Pejić, eds. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), 35-41.

<sup>41</sup> The “3T” went for “támogatni, tűrni, tiltani” (“promote, tolerate, ban”), the three possible approaches to artistic production in Kádár’s Hungary after 1956, under the supervision of the main cultural official György Áczel. See Cristina Cuevas-Wolf and Isotta Poggi, eds., *Promote, Tolerate, Ban: Art and Culture in Cold War Hungary* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2018).

other hand, if we take into account the fact that the term “unofficial” was also used on the international scene to take distance from the reading grid of dissidence, as will be seen in Chapter six with the case of the exhibition “La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale” on view at the Venice Biennale in 1977, it can be envisaged then as a broader notion that embraced different facets of the art production under state socialism in the 1970s, even practices actually exhibited in officially sanctioned events or initiatives. The different meanings of the term according to its contexts of use therefore deserves to be acknowledged and analysed more closely, taking into consideration the instrumental uses it has been subject to, both during the period under scrutiny and in the present.

Several recent studies focusing on artistic practices in Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia in the 1970s have deliberately adopted the denomination neo-avant-garde. However, in contrast to Peter Bürger’s considerations on the return of the historical avant-gardes in the second half of the twentieth century in a “failed” form because of their deprivation of radicality, while addressing Eastern European contexts, the term neo-avant-garde is rather used as a cohesive category to circumscribe conceptual-type practices that privileged a dematerialised expression, often through collective authorship, and incorporated elements from science, ecology, performance, corporality.<sup>42</sup> Using this term has also facilitated comparisons with other regions, like in the case of Tomáš Pospiszyl’s essays that composed an associative art history.<sup>43</sup>

While the distinction between neo-avant-garde and avant-garde may seem anecdotal and akin to the endless and unresolved terminological debates around the use of the terms Eastern, Central or East-Central Europe, this choice needs to be clarified since both designations have endorsed very different meanings in the

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<sup>42</sup> Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015); Tomáš Pospiszyl, *An Associative Art History: Comparative Studies of Neo-Avant-Gardes in a Bipolar World* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier; Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2018); Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe*; Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković, eds, *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avantgardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003); Katalin Néray, “The Great Decade of the Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde: 1968-1979”, in *Aspects/Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe, 1949-1999*, exh. cat., Lóránd Hegyi, ed. (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Vienna, 1999), 261-265.

<sup>43</sup> Pospiszyl, *An Associative Art History: Comparative Studies of Neo-Avant-Gardes in a Bipolar World*.

historical context this transnational and transregional study focuses on. To give an example, we do not find the term neo-avant-garde in the Spanish scene of the 1960s and 1970s, much more attached to that of avant-garde and experimental art (later turned into “experimentalism” to designate a combination of different languages, in particular at the intersection of poetry and the visual arts). The designation neo-avant-garde was also absent from discourses that emanated from or were related to the French scene, whereas in Italy, the “neoavanguardia” was present but referred exclusively to the literary avant-garde of the 1960s, embodied most particularly by the Gruppo 63.<sup>44</sup>

It is also important to specify that a significant number of artists and critics from both sides of the Iron Curtain examined in this dissertation who considered the social function of art and its inscription in reality as an essential aspect of their practice privileged the term avant-garde or experimental art to refer to their activity or that of their peers.<sup>45</sup> This leads us to insist on the continuity of their practice, or at least its dialogue, with the transformative claim of the historical avant-gardes rather than with their reactivation under depoliticised auspices.<sup>46</sup>

### **The decade 1971-1981. Ruptures and beginnings**

The main temporal framework addressed in this dissertation (1971-1981), as we shall soon see, tends to spill over on both sides and particularly upstream, towards the 1960s.

The 1970s decade refers to an intensification of artistic circulations, particularly in the field of informal artistic exchange and networks (the Net, launched in 1971 by the Polish artists Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski and the Section des

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<sup>44</sup> Renato Barilli, *La neoavanguardia italiana. Dalla nascita del “Verri” alla fine di “Quindici”*, (Lecce: Manni, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> The term “experimental” was privileged in Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2018); Galántai György and Júlia Klaniczay, eds., *ARTPOOL-The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe* (Budapest: Artpool, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> According to Aleš Erjavec, “[m]uch of the neo-avant-garde activity is political only in its complete lack of attention to political ideas and positions: the artists not only create art that they want to keep completely untainted by politics, but they create art as if politics doesn’t exist.” Aleš Erjavec, “The Three Avant-Gardes and their Context”, in Djurić and Šuvakovic, eds, *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avantgardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, 54.

Envois at the 1971 Paris Biennale are to examples of this phenomenon, cited in the Chapters one and five). It was also characterised by a process of institutionalisation, with the increasing absorption of these independent and grassroots initiatives into public and officially supported events.

At the same time, the cases under study and their respective contexts cannot be understood without bearing in mind events and initiatives from the previous decade that mostly crystallised around the year 1968, but were also anticipated in the previous years. Suggesting a temporary progression—not entirely linear, as it also follows topical and conceptual nodes—, the first chapter of the dissertation will go back to the mid-1960s, to see how experimental scenes between poetry, music and the visual arts formulated the possibility of an extra-national language and a space of communication for artists from different origins. Chapter three, centered on art criticism also goes back to the 1960s to examine the first contacts between professionals from socialist and non socialist countries in the framework of the AICA congresses in Poland (1960) and Czechoslovakia (1966).

Despite these forays into the 1960s, however, the time span between 1971 and 1981 remains the main focus of our study, especially in its second part. The decade epitomises a moment when, after the strong mobilisation and the “contestataire” stream around 1968 that were characterised on both sides of the Iron Curtain by a hope for deep transformations in the social sphere, the hardening of internal politics and the generalised return to order impacted artistic practices and relations, making visible an increasing number of contradictions and deadlocks. Revolutionary aspirations and impulses started losing their force of attraction. The 1970s were, in fact, a much lesser optimistic period than the 1960s insofar as they were marked by a progressive disenchantment with the universalist claims that had marked political and social struggles in the 1960s. After the repression of the Prague Spring in 1968, the military coup in Chile in 1973 deeply impacted Eastern and Western European societies, as the suppression of a possible model of democratic socialism. As one of the last attempts (and a failed one) to constitute a front aimed at reforming Soviet-type socialism from inside, Eurocommunism surged from Southern Europe, but quickly faded away. From a sociological, or socio-historical perspective, the decade

represents a complex moment for European societies (East and West of the Iron Curtain) with multiple crises, reshuffling, and returns to the previous order. At the territorial level too, consequences of the rural exodus are becoming increasingly visible, but also the rise of mass tourism, the increase of living standards and of people's mobility.

The 1970s were also a decade in which the generation who had lived through the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, Stalinism and de-Stalinisation coexisted with a younger generation of baby-boomers, whose relation to culture and politics was radically different, especially regarding the way to face authoritarian regimes. This generational gap was particularly visible in the context of the Pamplona Encounters (Chapter four), but it was also present in the relations between Jan Swidzinski and the young contextualists like Anna Kutera (Chapter two), between Giulio Carlo Argan and Carlo Ripa di Meana and other Italian art critics, like Enrico Crispolti (Chapter six). This generational gap or discrepancy and the misunderstandings and tensions it generated are, in my opinion, an important element to take into account when addressing this decade.

While being reticent at framing this temporal arc by particular milestones, we can mention several initiatives or actions that signal a change. One of them might be the seventh Paris Biennale conceived as a "transitional edition" (see Chapter five) and its famous above-mentioned Section des Envois. While not analysed in depth in this dissertation, it represented a touchstone for the premises of the internationalised and centralised model of Paris Biennale implemented between 1973 and 1977, which limits would become more and more visible towards the end of the decade. Also in 1971, the Czech artist Jiří Valoch started to introduce images into his work, previously centered on semantic and non-semantic language; it is also the year in which the magazine *Lotta Poetica* was founded in Italy. These seemingly unrelated events and many others, not particularly noted in the history of art, offer possible points from which drawing lines of reflection and research.

The year 1981 has a more directly political resonance, insofar as in the Central European context, it evokes the implementation of martial law in Poland, which strongly impacted the cultural and artistic field and its ramifications abroad. The same



year, Jan Świdziński, whose trajectory is addressed in Chapter two, planned a personal exhibition that never happened, since its opening was planned the 13 December 1981 in Kraków, when the martial law was implemented in Poland. Its title, “Freedom and limitations”, sounds like a possible way to conclude the study of a period in which the notion of contestation and direct militancy was increasingly challenged with claims for autonomy, decentralisation and localised actions.

### **Resources and existing lines of research**

The above-mentioned elements set the temporal and spatial framework of this research, and the evocation of the shifting terminologies it deals with show the challenges geographical and linguistic definition brings into play. They configure a field of practical exploration that can be designated as the working space of this dissertation. However, this working space would be nothing without the body of intellectual and conceptual work that constitutes an important precedent, and in which I have been interested and inspired. Before approaching the hypothesis of work that sustain my dissertation, we need in fact to examine the existing contributions to the field and, in particular, the ones that have directly inspired or influenced this research.

The main field of inscription of this research is the history (with a social and multi-scale approach) of transnational artistic relations and exchanges in a Cold War context. This broad issue and its field of inquiry have been so far contemplated by different authors and research projects, under different angles of approach. Rather than an exhaustive list of works, I would like to draw here a map of affinities and references that have been essential for the development of my reflections. They have in common a focus on the transnational analysis of art and artistic relations seen as a broader social phenomenon, and an interest for its inclusion into a transdisciplinary setting analysing not only artistic phenomena but also the social, political, intellectual and institutional coordinates that have made its production possible (or impossible sometimes) and accompanied it.

Research projects (most often developed in academic environments, but not only) occupy a central place in this itinerary, insofar as these platforms constitute, in my opinion, privileged spaces for the collective articulation and discussion of complex

and ramified problematics. Furthermore, the multiplicity of forms through which these projects socialise their research in progress or its results and make them available not only to the scientific community, but also to a broader audience, are also an important source of inspiration for reflecting about possible forms of disclosure, sharing and visualisation of art historical research in a more democratic and accessible setting.

The project “MoDe(s) Decentralized Modernities. Art, counterculture and politics in the Transatlantic Axis during the Cold War” has intended since its beginnings to map artistic practices and political, institutional and extra-institutional relations during the Cold War with a focus on the transatlantic axis. One of its major contributions is undoubtedly its insistence on not limiting its field of inquiry to artistic processes alone, but replacing them within a complex net of geopolitical, social and cultural dynamics that influenced them.<sup>47</sup> The project also contributes to de-hierarchise the subjects of inquiry, paying attention to different facets of visual and popular culture, intellectual and audiovisual production, among others. Besides its attention towards transatlantic exchanges between Europe and South and North America, as a project anchored in the Iberian peninsula and the South of Europe, MoDe(s) has also established points of contact within this region, in particular with Portugal (thus contributing to the re-articulation of an under-considered South).<sup>48</sup> The project’s forays into the field of digital humanities are also an interesting point to consider the possibility of quantitative studies and visualisations of historical data, in a field of art history still attached to empirical and qualitative research

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<sup>47</sup> As a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Universities and Innovation, MoDe(s) is based at the University of Barcelona and is led by Paula Barreiro López (and, in its second phase, María Ruido). For an overview of the project’s lines of inquiry and past and future activities, see [www.modernidadesdescentralizadas.com](http://www.modernidadesdescentralizadas.com) (Accessed May 2021). Among the numerous conferences and seminars, we should mention the international symposia “Cold Atlantic. Cultural War, Dissident Artistic Practices, Networks and Contact Zones at the Time of the Iron Curtain”, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 5 to 7 September 2016 and “Transnational solidarity and visual culture: resistance and revolutionary memories from WWII to the Cold War”, Université Grenoble Alpes, 24 and 25 June 2019; research outcomes of the members of the project are recollected in Paula Barreiro López, ed., *Atlántico Frío. Historias transnacionales del arte y la política en los tiempos del Telón de Acero*, (Madrid: Brumaria, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Some of them were addressed in the international conference “Through, From, To Latin America: Networks, circulations and artistic transits from the 1960s to the present”, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa (Lisbon, Portugal), 27 and 28 November 2017.

methodologies.<sup>49</sup> While Eastern and socialist Europe have not been an important focus of the project, it has nevertheless been present in various events, confirming the deeply intertwined nature of artistic and political relations during the Cold War, notably under the principles of internationalism and solidarity.<sup>50</sup>

Centered on the European context, different projects are focused on particular notions or concepts, envisaged as common threads to address transnational relations but also the mutation of these notions in relation to geopolitical and institutional contexts, professions or eras. This approach is particularly productive insofar as it allows at the same time for a conceptually narrow (at least, apparently since the notions themselves can be extremely vast and polyphonic) and geographically expanded study. The project “To Each His Own Reality” has explored the notions of real and reality in art discourses in France, East Germany, West Germany and Poland between 1960 and 1989, showing the significant implications of shared and diverging views around these notions and their centrality in the articulation of a European identity on both sides of the Iron Curtain, in a period marked by the politics of the Thaw but also the resurgence of social and political tensions in each national context.<sup>51</sup> We will see in fact on different occasions in this dissertation that the notion of reality is particularly relevant also in other national contexts of Europe’s Cold War and adopts very different expressions. Interestingly, the focus on a specific topic and on interactions between European socialist and non-socialist contexts of “To Each His Own Reality” resonates with those of the project “On both sides of the Iron Curtain: Cultures of Dissent and the Definition of a European Identity in Italy, France and

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<sup>49</sup> See on this respect the series of online study cases addressing issues such as mail art, international exhibitions and biennials, or individual trajectories of artists and art critics through data geospatial visualisation, <https://modernidadesdescentralizadas.com/gis-en/> (Accessed May 2021).

<sup>50</sup> Within the project and over its activities, mentions to socialist Europe (Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia) were made by researchers like Mathilde Arnoux, Klara Kemp-Welch, Bojana Piškur, Katarzyna Cytlak, Cristina Cuevas-Wolf. This dissertation, carried out in the framework of MoDe(s) is also a contribution in this direction.

<sup>51</sup> To Each His Own Reality was carried out at the Centre Allemand d’Histoire de l’Art in Paris from 2012 to 2016 and involved an international team of researchers led by Mathilde Arnoux. The numerous outcomes of the project can be consulted on the site <https://dfk-paris.org/en/ownreality> (Accessed May 2021), including research tools, as well as archival documents and interviews; see Mathilde Arnoux, “To Each His Own Reality: How the analysis of artistic exchanges in Cold War Europe challenges categories”, *Artl@s Bulletin* 3, no. 1, Spring 2014, 30-40; Mathilde Arnoux, *La réalité en partage. Pour une histoire des relations artistiques entre l’Est et l’Ouest en Europe pendant la Guerre froide* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, Paris, 2018).

USSR (1956-1991)”, which addressed the diversity of forms of protest (“contestazione”) against the cultural and political establishment, such suggesting the existence of intersections between a “Franco-Italian area” and a “Slavic one (Soviet Russia, Belarus and Ukraine”).<sup>52</sup> Here again, more than a simple comparative study, the research highlights the articulation of a common space invested by different actors which, according to its leaders, contributed to the elaboration of a particular European identity.

The question of European commonalities is in fact a key element in these attempts to address cultural phenomena beyond the blocs divisions. On this respect, the publication *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* edited by Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg-Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski has articulated an important reflexion that contradicted the exact correspondence between geographies and ideological systems to affirm the existence of a common, yet plural, communist culture within Europe connecting realities that were a priori antagonistic. The sections that make up the book emphasise the need to approach cultural exchange from the point of view of movement (with an important division between objects and people), and then of gathering, before tackling the essential issue of Europe’s definition by itself, but also in mirror or seen from other topographical spaces.<sup>53</sup>

All the approaches so far mentioned have been influential in the articulation of my research and the structure of this dissertation, in their attempt to escape dichotomies and simplistic oppositional views to look at cultural forms of making and thinking that brought these European topographies and their protagonists closer, without falling into the opposite excess of asserting a consensual relationship.

The emergence of new formulations to refer to these geopolitical and cultural realities has contributed to rethink the definition of this European space. While the notion of “Communist Europe” contributes to blur a cartography based on the commonly accepted equivalence between territories and political systems, the notion

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<sup>52</sup> This project was carried out between 2017 and 2019 at the Università deli Studi di Firenze under the direction of Teresa Spignoli and Claudia Pieralli. <https://www.culturedeldissenso.com/en/abstract/> (Accessed May 2021)

<sup>53</sup> Bazin, Dubourg-Glatigny and Piotrowski, eds., *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)*. The book is divided in four parts, dedicated to “Moving People”, “Moving Objects”, “Gathering People” and “Defining Europe”.

of “Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism” defended by Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes seems also productive, not only because it suggests the translatability and transposability of such art worlds of socialism outside the Eastern bloc, but because it challenges the dichotomy between official and unofficial space, political and non-political art.<sup>54</sup>

Projects looking at the history of institutions and organisations from a plural and decentered perspective have offered important insights for reviewing the impact of more “formal” international relations on the development of artistic scenes in dialogue. “Au prisme de la Biennale de Paris” has reflected on the issues at stake in the medium of the international exhibition at that time, a place of confluence of experimentation but also of expression and promotion of identities in tension between national forms of identification and the desire to be part of an international scene sharing the same codes and interests. The lectures and discussions held in the context of this project have reinscribed the history of the Paris Biennale in a global context, paying also attention to its margins and collateral events, to invisible processes related with the event.<sup>55</sup> Also connected with institutional histories, PRISME (“Contemporary Society (1948-2003) through the Prism of Art Criticism”) addresses the role of art criticism as a sounding board and active agent of cultural dynamics during the Cold War, with a particular focus on the role of the AICA (Association Internationale des Critiques d’Art).<sup>56</sup> In the context of this essay, as we shall see, the role of art criticism is all the more central in that it abandons this static function to become an essential agent of meaning-making and initiative. Paula Barreiro López has analysed the history of cultural exchanges during the period of late Francoism from the point of view of intellectual history and art criticism, highlighting the importance of the

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<sup>54</sup> Maja Fowkes & Reuben Fowkes, eds., *Third Text*, special issue “Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism”, Vol. 32 no. 4, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> “1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris” was directed by Elitza Dulguerova and hosted by the Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art, in collaboration with the institutions in which the archival funds of the Biennale are currently conserved (the Bibliothèque Kandinsky in Paris and the Archives de la Critique d’Art in Rennes). <https://bdp.hypotheses.org>. (Accessed May 2021). Upcoming publication Elitza Dugluerova, ed., *1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris* (Paris: INHA, 2021).

<sup>56</sup> The multidisciplinary research program PRISME directed by Antje Kramer-Mallordy has its basis at the Archives de la Critique d’Art in Rennes and operates in collaboration with them, as a fundamental source of documents for researching this particular aspect of cultural history. It has issued various online publications regarding specific issues, available from <https://acaprisme.hypotheses.org>. (Accessed May 2021).

circulation of ideas and, above all, the existence of important networks of exchange between different European (especially France and Italy) and non-European regions.<sup>57</sup>In particular, her research has made it possible to highlight the confluence of European art criticism around the idea of “militant art criticism”, of particular importance at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. Insofar as her study has highlighted the existence of important connections between Spain, France and Italy, it constitutes also an important precedent for this essay’s attempt to propose a regional vision of this Southern Europe.

The critical look at the construction of a historical narrative around Eastern European is also an important reference for this research. The exhibition “Sitting Together” has constituted a catalyst for reflections on the way of looking at Eastern European or Central European art through the lens of art exhibitions and establishing a series of frames to address this phenomenon and its historicisation.<sup>58</sup> The history of exhibitions and in particular Biennales is also an essential element. In the context of my analyses of the two Biennales of Paris and Venice, the reflections of Anthony Gardner and Charles Green on the Southern Biennales have allowed me to take a new look at the “other Biennales”, their models and the attempts at democratisation and decentralisation that are applied (before a return to order in the 1970s). They allow us to place these events in a necessary global context.<sup>59</sup> Southern Biennales have been also examined in the framework of the Artl@s project, another important agent in the field of transnational studies. With important contributions in the field of digital humanities, Artl@s pays particular attention to the question of the geographies of art, and significantly contributes to the analysis of artistic networks and circulations, in a context not only limited to the history of the second half of the twentieth century, but

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<sup>57</sup> Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*; Paula Barreiro López and Fabiola Martínez Rodríguez, eds., *Modernidad y vanguardia: rutas de intercambio entre España y Latinoamérica (1920-1970)* (Madrid: MNCARS, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> “Sitting Together. Parallel Chronologies of Coincidences in Eastern Europe”, at [tranzit.sk](http://tranzit.sk), Bratislava, 2017, curated by Zsuzsa László and Petra Feriancová. Zsuzsa László and Petra Feriancová, eds., *Sitting Together*, exh. cat. (Bratislava/Budapest: [tranzit.sk/tranzit.hu](http://tranzit.sk/tranzit.hu), 2016).

<sup>59</sup> Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, “South as Method? Biennials Past and Present”, in *Making Biennials in Contemporary Times: Essays from the World, Biennial Forum no. 2* (São Paulo: Biennial Foundation, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, and Instituto de Cultura Contemporânea, 2014), 28-36; Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, “Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global”, *Third Text* vol. 27 no. 4, August 2013, 442-455. See also the seminar “Biennales du Sud” directed by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, in 2016-2017.

also connected with recent processes of globalisation accompanied by the production and mobility of important fluxes of images.<sup>60</sup> Regarding the study of circulations and networks with a focus on Eastern European art and its regional and international connections, Klara Kemp-Welch's contribution to the field cannot be overlooked. With a focus on specific topographies and "nodes", her analysis of artistic networks in action takes into consideration the seemingly more pragmatic or even trivial aspects of these artistic relationships, nevertheless fundamental in the elaboration of a common world experienced as a space of dialogue and friendly confrontation. Her approach to these micro-histories and the way she has woven connections between them has been inspiring in looking for a suitable form of writing about artistic relations.<sup>61</sup>

Looking at this ensemble of differentiated approaches, this dissertation seeks to occupy an intermediate space, relying on these existing contributions essential for understanding the artistic history of Europe (but also of the already globalised world) during the Cold War from a transnational and transregional perspective, while at the same time proposing possible lines for addressing a series of interactions that have not been subject to in depth study, involving the geocultural spaces Central Europe and Southern Europe.

### **Hypothesis of work: circulations and visibilisation, a combined approach**

The main objective of this dissertation is to show that the study of the transnational circulation of Central European art and artists, and their particular interaction with Southern Europe, cannot be captured without taking also into consideration the points where they became publicly visible and the consequences of such visibility on the elaboration of narratives through which these subjects were identified.

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, eds., *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015); the Artl@s Bulletin has published various thematic issues of particular relevance to this research, like "The Challenge of Caliban", Joyeux-Prunel and Béhar, eds. or "Migrations, Transfers, and Resemanticization", Artl@s Bulletin 6, no. 2, 2017. For more see <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/> (Accessed May 2021).

<sup>61</sup> See Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981*; Klara Kemp-Welch and Cristina Freire, special issue "Artists networks in Latin America and Eastern Europe", *ARTMargins* 1 no. 2-3, 2012.

Why circulations? In my understanding, circulations refer to a spatial dynamic, a movement that can be temporarily suspended and resumed. It also implies an absence of hierarchy or qualification of such movement. While terms such as communication, exchange and even network suggest in first place the participation of human subjects and their interaction, the notion of circulation has been privileged in this dissertation for its inclusiveness and its applicability to things (objects, artefacts) and ideas. If human relations are involved, it is more as a consequence of circulations than as a primary condition for them. We could say then, that circulations emphasize spatial mobility over the negotiations it can give place to. At the same time, they inevitably produce relations.

In introduction to the book *Circulations in the global history of art*, the editors Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Catherine Dossin noted that the study of circulations can help to break away from, among other things, the categories of centre and periphery that still permeate many historical approaches.<sup>62</sup> Paying attention to transnational circulations of artworks, ideas and individuals is undoubtedly an essential step in implementing a more horizontal approach to art history. However, while focusing on mobility enables us to challenge binary conceptions of the Cold War period and reaffirm the importance of transnational exchanges beyond stereotypical divisions, on the other hand, I suggest that these views should be complemented by an analysis of the forms and media through which art became apparent in the cultural field: exhibitions, meetings, publications. This aspect seems in fact just as important, insofar as it highlights the set of projections and representations applied to Central European art—and, by extension, Central European societies—as well as the reactions they generated.

The case of the Czech artist Petr Štembera might help to understand this paradoxal situation. Looking at the path of the artist, who has spent all his life in Prague, the names of the cities where he exhibited draw an extensive map, whose boundaries extend well beyond those of the eastern block, and even Europe: Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, Paris, Mayagüez, Barcelona, Pamplona, Amsterdam, among others. Seen

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<sup>62</sup> DaCosta Kaufmann, Dossin and Joyeux-Prunel, eds., *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, 2.



from a geospatial perspective, the international dimension of Štembera's career is unquestionable. Thanks to his active involvement into more or less formal networks of artistic communication and collaboration, the artist's works were highly mobile and could circulate abroad. In fact, he certainly embodied what was later called a "networker". However, his trajectory should be also considered in terms of appearance and visibility and in many cases, like for example the Pamplona Encounters (1972) or the Paris Biennale (1977), having his name in the catalogue or in the programme did not mean that the artist actually participated or was even aware of his participation. If we deduce the involvement of artists in the international art system exclusively from the geographical trajectory of their work or the presence of their names in a poster, we are exposed to overlook the social and political context surrounding the mediation of their work, the conditions under which it became visible and was interpreted.

Focusing on the presence of Central European artists across the Iron Curtain, in fact, does not only imply to contemplate issues of circulation, communication and networks; it also requires to tackle the difficulties, missed encounters and invisibilities resulting from these displacements and contacts abroad. On this respect, the history of exhibitions is particularly useful to illuminate the politics of selection, inclusion and interpretation of Central European art in determined structures of public presentation across the Iron Curtain.<sup>63</sup> Considering such temporally and spatially determined frames of visibility allows to contrast and pluralise a first approach exclusively based on the study of circulations and networks. In fact, while the first part of this

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<sup>63</sup> The history of exhibitions has expanded significantly over the past decade. Studies on the topic include Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic, eds., *The Manifesta decade: debates on contemporary art exhibitions and biennials in post-wall Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2006); Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Ovstebo, eds., *The Biennial Reader* (Bergen/Berlin: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz, 2010); Caroline A. Jones, *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Felix Vogel, "On the Canon of Exhibition History", in Ruth E. Iskin, ed., *Re-Envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon: Perspectives in a Global World* (London: Routledge, 2017), 189–202; Saloni Mathur, "Why Exhibition Histories?", *British Art Studies* Issue 13, September 2019 <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/conversation> (Accessed May 2021); Olga Fernández López, *Exposiciones y comisariado. Relatos cruzados* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2020); Jean-Marc Poinot, *Quand l'œuvre a lieu : l'art exposé et ses récits autorisés* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2020) (reed. from 1999). We should also mention the "Exhibition Histories" collection launched by Afterall (London) in 2010 with its focus on study cases.

dissertation insists on the mobility and the internationalist dimension of practices based on distance communication and collaboration, pointing at the existence of several transnational communities of artists and cultural practitioners, the focus on international exhibitions in its second part gives us a rather different—and complementary—perspective, in which the communitarian spirit gives way to a set of organizational and classificatory parameters that reflected the sometimes conflicting or contradictory agenda of different institutions, sponsors and partners. From the decentralised and decentralising, somewhat atomised dynamics of circulation and networking, the study of exhibitions brings us back to concrete sites and contexts of reception, contemplated as powerful catalysts of identification and fixation of meanings and representations.

In other words, what this dissertation puts at stage is the relationship between, on the one hand, the pair circulation/mobility and on the other, visibilisation/fixation, and their critical articulation.

The term “visibilisation” to which I refer here is actually articulated from the French expression “mise en visibilité”, itself inspired by the “mise en exposition”. This “mise en”, supposes an action of “putting something” under a gaze, it is then much more voluntary than the simple idea of visibility and this is why I have opted for using this neologism. If visibility is the fact of “being visible” and refers then to a state or a condition, visibilisation refers instead to the fact of “becoming visible”, through a process that is highly determined by a series of factors which mediate this appearance. Referring to “visibilisation” helps to understand that visibility is actually not given, and that when it is finally acquired, it is through a process that does not leave the object intact, but on the contrary, alters and transforms it. “Becoming visible” also implies that visibilisation does not happen sometimes. I was particularly interested in showing these lacks and gaps and the misunderstandings they could generate. To do so, the study of exhibitions has constituted a privileged field.

The combined approach focused on circulations and visibilisation, I suggest, makes possible to bring together a complex set of actors and agents, both individual and institutional, and to highlight the sites where meanings and identities were constructed and displayed, accepted or rejected, and the processes through which this

happened. Examining the processes of circulation and visibilisation related with Central European art in Southern Europe permits to reflect and highlight other crucial aspects of the relation between this cultural production and its respective spaces of production and reception, and put them in tension. Among these aspects, the identification with given national or regional features and its tension with internationalist aspirations; the question of marginality versus recognition, as well as integration; the constitution of real and imaginary communities and their strategies of belonging; the non obvious correlation between participation and visibility; the logics of centralisation and decentralization at stake in several activities and the possible alternatives formulated by strategies of localisation and relocation.

In exploring connections between Southern and Central Europe, this dissertation contemplates whether the social and political stakes and debates proper to these societies played an important role in the shaping of a sphere of interaction between them. Did the specific coordinates of Spain, France and Italy within the Cold War scenario contribute to produce a particular set of discourses and representations on Central European art? What “field of experience” and “horizon of expectation”, in Reinhart Koselleck’s terms, could the presence of Central European art and artists fulfill in the context of Southern European societies?<sup>64</sup> In other words, what did Central European art brought, in terms of symbolic and material values, to Southern European contexts, and vice-versa? What can an analysis of the conditions of visibility of Central European art or artists themselves tell about these expectations? But also, what did these artists and, more generally, cultural practitioners from Central Europe look for and find in the often-erratic dialogue with protagonists from these other contexts, and vice-versa? Was it about artistic recognition, intellectual exchange, friendship? Answers to these questions are certainly not univocal, and will vary according to each singular case. I hope that the variety of responses will be useful in

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<sup>64</sup> These two expressions were coined by Koselleck in 1979 to articulate a particular relationship of subjects to history, between past, present and future. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (first ed. 1979) (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004). Also Hervé Mazurel, “Présences du passé, présences du futur”, *Écrire l'histoire* [on line], 11 | 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4000/elh.310>.

drawing a differentiated and more accurate map of artistic exchange between Central European art in Southern Europe between 1971 and 1981.

## Methodology

By focusing on the relations between two areas characterised by elements of regional cohesion and others of internal diversity, this study seeks to broaden the usual geographical approaches on European artistic exchange during the Cold War, proposing an alternative topography based on a combined analysis of processes of circulation and visibility. To do so, it relies on a set of methodological tools and references, including a transnational perspective, a multidirectional approach and an alternance of scales (or alternated scaling).

Since the end of the Cold War, numerous studies and publications in the field of art history, as well as institutional exhibitions, have addressed the artistic and cultural production of the former Eastern bloc. Recent studies and curatorial projects have opened up lines of research paying more attention to transnational processes generated within Eastern Europe (East-East relations), as well as with interlocutors situated outside of the Eastern bloc (East-West relations, or with non-aligned Eastern European countries like Yugoslavia).<sup>65</sup> Whether as monographic studies or addressing broader thematic, they have reflected the evolution of a disciplinary field crossed by new epistemological and methodological questions, as well as shifts from a general view towards a more localised approach.<sup>66</sup> Their inscription within the disciplinary field of global and world art history has also permitted to relocate Eastern European

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<sup>65</sup> Arnoux, *La réalité en partage. Pour une histoire des relations artistiques entre l'Est et l'Ouest en Europe pendant la Guerre froide*; Bazin, Dubourg-Glatigny and Piotrowski, *Art Beyond Borders. Artistic Exchanges in Communist Europe (1945-1989)*; Klara Kemp-Welch and Cristina Freire, "Artists networks in Latin America and Eastern Europe", *ARTMargins* 1 no. 2-3, 2012, 3-13. [https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM\\_e\\_00015](https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_e_00015); Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981*; Cristian Nae, "A Porous Iron Curtain: Artistic Contacts and Exchanges across the Eastern European bloc during the Cold War (1960-1980)", in Ann Albritton and Gwen Farrelly, eds., *Art History in a Global Context: Methods, Themes, and Approaches* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, planned 2021); Péteri, "Nylon Curtain-Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe"; Piotr Piotrowski "The Global Network: An Approach to Comparative Art History", in *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, eds. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015).

<sup>66</sup> An example of attention to such aspects in an artist's individual trajectory is the catalogue of Július Koller's exhibition "One Man Anti Show" at MUMOK Vienna. Daniel Grún, Kathrin Rhomberg and Georg Schöllhammer, eds., *One Man Anti Show*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2016).

art and its history “as a viable and productive subject field for knowledge production in the transnational and global paradigm.<sup>67</sup>”

As seen in the previous section, the focus on networks and circulations has become a mandatory step in the process of articulating a history of Central Eastern European art that flees both the national paradigm and the binary vision of two antagonistic blocks. The adoption of a transnational, global, or cross-cultural perspective has largely contributed in providing multifaceted and pluralistic insights into specific activities, helping to restate them within a wider set of relations and mechanisms of diffusion and representation. It provides new methodological frameworks that make possible, and even desirable, to think not in terms of fixed cultural and social identities, but rather through fluctuating representations that, at some point, crystallise—under the form of an object, a publication, an exhibition or a simple documented meeting—and then are back into circulation. On this respect, the definition of the transnational given by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih seems particularly appropriate, especially in the precisions it brings in relation to the global and its “universal core”:

Whereas the global is, in our understanding, defined vis-à-vis a homogeneous and dominant set of criteria, the transnational designates spaces and practices acted upon by border-crossing agents, be they dominant or marginal. The logic of globalization is centripetal and centrifugal at the same time and assumes a universal core or norm, with spreads out across the world while pulling into its vortex other forms of culture to be tested by its norm. It produces a hierarchy of subjects between the so-called universal and particular, with all the attendant problems of Eurocentric universalism. The transnational, on the contrary, can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Hock, “Introduction”, 6; Éva Forgács, “The Necessity of Writing Local Art History in the Global Context”, *Acta Historiae Artium Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae AHistA*, 49 no.1, 2008, 103-108. <https://akjournals.com/view/journals/170/49/1/article-p103.xml> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>68</sup> François Lionnet and Shu-Mei She, *Minor Transnationalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

This absence of mediation from the center, or the emergence of different sites of mediation (with the set of power relations it implied) and their questioning through artistic and critical practices from both sides of the Iron Curtain constitute an important node in this study.

On this respect, an analysis exclusively focused on the reception and perception of Central European art in other contexts would risk to perpetuate the relation between a passive and victimised object and an active field of reception and interpretation that would perpetuate historiographical hierarchies, even with the intention of challenging them. It is thus essential to take into consideration the multidirectional dimension of the exchange that took place within this European space, the ways it affected both parts and their capacity to change and acquire new meanings over this process. On this respect, the sociological notion of “field” remains a useful tool to circumscribe the area in which these relations and interactions took place and emphasise the multidirectional character of transactions within it. We subscribe here to the definition of cultural field given by Pierre Gaudibert, in accordance with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory:

[a cultural field is] a system of social relations where each agent or group of agents is defined by a position of belonging to a whole, which is never the simple addition of juxtaposed individuals, instead of constituting works of art as objects aesthetic to be studied in their internal structures and their meanings (history of art or sociology of works), we grasp them as “products”, “goods”, “goods” which circulate; they then play the role of hubs around which revolve at one end producers or “artists” at the other end consumers or receivers, clienteles and audiences.<sup>69</sup>

Importantly, Gaudibert also observed that all the actors of the field are concerned with its existence and its functioning: even “those attitudes of rejection, revolt, marginality

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<sup>69</sup> “[N]ous dirons qu’il s’agit d’un un système de relations sociales où chaque agent ou groupe d’agents se définit par une position d’appartenance à un ensemble, qui n’est jamais la simple addition d’individus juxtaposés, au lieu de constituer les oeuvres d’art comme des objets esthétiques à étudier dans leurs structures internes et leurs significations (histoire de l’art ou sociologie des oeuvres), nous les saisissons comme “produits”, “biens”, “marchandises” qui circulent; elles jouent alors le rôle de plaques tournantes autour desquelles gravitent à une extrémité des producteurs ou “artistes” à l’autre des consommateurs ou récepteurs, clienteles et publics.” Pierre Gaudibert, “Champ culturel et formation artistique”, in Jean Cassou, ed., *Art et Contestation* (Bruxelles: La Connaissance, 1968), 137-150.

are only defined by reference, implicit or explicit, to this social reality.<sup>70</sup> This aspect of self-definition and self-positioning in relation to a field of belonging—and, coming back to the previous point, to supposed “centers”—will also appear as an essential issue over this study.

In this particular configuration of a transnational and multidirectional approach, it seems particularly important to take the issue of scale into consideration. If, on the one hand, the practices examined here must be situated within a broader context of cultural and geopolitical processes that largely bypassed the local and national limits, it is necessary, on the other hand, to pay attention to the different contexts of production, exchange and exhibition they are related with. In accordance with Jacques Revel’s claim on the importance of “scale games” (*jeux d’échelles*) for historiographic practice and experience, this dissertation has sought to alternate different scales of analysis in order to provide a differentiated vision of its subjects, as close as possible to its multiple realities.<sup>71</sup> Following this path, this dissertation integrates a variety of viewpoints and shifts from one to another: from the global perspective of Cold War’s superpowers cultural and political stakes, to a transregional approach that connects ideas and objects with plurinational areas (Southern Europe and Central Europe) that shared common cultural and political references and discussions, to a close-up view on individual practices, spaces and artworks the existence of which depended on very localised factors.

Primary sources offer a precious opportunity for such a combination of approaches and scales. Field research in personal and institutional archives, as well as interviews and exchanges with different agents who generously shared their experience and documents have been essential for the delimitation of my working field and its related problematics. The most important archival funds consulted for this research include the Archives Raoul-Jean Moulin (MAC VAL, Vitry-sur-Seine), the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (Porto Marghera), the Archivio del Centro de Estudios y

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<sup>70</sup> “[...] les comportements de refus, de révolte, de marginalité ne se définissent eux-mêmes qu’en référence, implicite ou explicite, à cette réalité sociale.” Gaudibert, “Champ culturel et formation artistique”, 137-150.

<sup>71</sup> Jacques Revel, ed., *Jeux d’échelles. La micro-analyse à l’expérience* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

Documentación (MACBA, Barcelona), the AICA fund at the Archives de la critique d'art (Rennes), the Fonds Hervé Fischer and Biennale de Paris at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky (MNAM, Paris) and the Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian gallery in Brno. Interviews and exchanges with artists and curators, among whom José Luis Alexanco, Elżbieta and Emil Ciešlar, Hervé Fischer, Anna Kutera, Loraine Leeson, Jan Mlčoch, Antoni Muntadas, Jean-Marc Poinot, Petr Štembera, Andrzej Welmiński and Jana Želibská were also essential.

If the dual structure of the dissertation based on the notions of circulation and visibilisation was rapidly established, on the other, the study cases were defined more progressively, and this definition was in great part determined by the sources I had access to. The way in which each case was addressed differs in the two parts of the thesis. We could say that it follows a more linear (but also possibly sinuous or meandering) progression in the first part, since the narrative is subordinated to the logics of my findings (sometimes accidental or unexpected) and to the opportunities offered by archival material, often unpublished and untranslated. In the second part of the thesis, focused on exhibitions, the cases were more rapidly identified and the preliminary research was more organised and systematic. I started with exhibition catalogues, then institutional archives (in the case of the Paris Biennale and the Venice Biennale), then the press and in some cases, testimonies collected from the protagonists themselves or their intermediaries. By doing this, the discrepancies between one account and another appeared more clearly. For example, it became obvious that artists presence in the catalogue of an exhibition of biennial was not necessarily a proof of their effective participation.

Regarding the languages of the sources, I have sought to draw on my knowledge of French, Spanish, Italian and Catalan to cross-reference these sources. As for sources in Polish, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian languages, I relied on studies by specialists of the region translated into languages that I master, and I also translated myself or have translated certain passages when they seemed particularly essential. This was the case, for example, of Jindřich Chaloupecký's text, "All power to workers' committees" ("Všechnu moc dělnickým radám"), published in early 1969 in Czechoslovakia and mentioned in Chapter three. Aware of its importance, I did an



imperfect translation from Czech before finally finding a version in Italian in the magazine *Quindici*, with an introduction by its editors. This not only confirmed my hypothesis about the impact of Chalupecký's thought on Italian artists and intellectuals, it also showed the dynamism of exchanges and translations between Czechoslovakia and Italy. Finally, I should also specify that regarding the particular case of artists whose work crossed the Iron Curtain and who were involved in international networks and exhibitions, an important number of primary sources, in particular documents from institutional archives such as the Paris Biennale but also private correspondence between artists and art critics, were actually in English, French or, in some cases, Italian, precisely because of these relations established across the borders.

Archival research has brought to light a number of sources that had remained unstudied since their archiving, thus contributing to open several windows and perspectives on these particular phenomena.<sup>72</sup> Archival documents are multi-layered and provide multiple accesses to historical events and processes, from the macro-scale of Cold War geopolitics to the intimacy of personal thoughts and feelings addressed to a remote interlocutor. The correspondence between Raoul-Jean Moulin and Jindřich Chalupecký, analyses in chapter three, is particularly illustrative of this fact. Personal thoughts, expectations and hopes regarding their engagement in the diffusion and support of contemporary art was constantly permeated with historical processes that impacted their way to experience and address reality in subtly different ways.

I have wished to alternate a broader analysis of the mechanisms of transnational circulation and visibility with the analysis of concrete objects or situations of production, taking the risk of producing contradictions and ruptures. These can be seen, I hope, as invitations to deepen critical nodes and reflect on their particular resistance to analysis. As Maria Todorova has suggested, there is no privileged scale but different questions that can be answered through different scales; for “[...]”

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<sup>72</sup> This is the case for example of the exchange between Jiří Valoch and Ugo Carrega (Chapter 1), between Raoul-Jean Moulin and Jindřich Chalupecký (Chapter 3) the participation of the artists Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch and Jana Želibská in the Paris Biennale (Chapter 5) and the contribution of the French art historian Geneviève Benamou to the Venice Biennale with an unpublished text on Czech and Slovak art (Chapter 6).

changing scales is not an innocent exercise: it alters radically the narrative that emanates from it.<sup>73</sup> In fact, the ramified and sometimes meandering nature of the cases studied here is taken up as a challenge and an invitation to keep on reflecting on possible ways to write a history of circulations and exchanges in which immaterial relations count as much as tangible objects.

### **Structure of the dissertation**

The main hypothesis underlying this dissertation is that transregional artistic exchange during the Cold War cannot be grasped without taking into account two significant aspects of its development: circulation *and* exhibition or, in other words, mobility and visibility. According to this purpose, this dissertation is structured in two poles or main parts, both of them divided in three study cases. The cases presented here do not pretend to be representative of the whole scene and its transnational dynamics, but are envisaged instead as possible paths to explore the complexities of the circulation and visibilisation of artists, ideas and objects across the Iron Curtain. The cases also differ in their consistency and scope from one part to another, and from one chapter to another.

The first part considers the circulatory dimension of Central European art in the geopolitically and culturally changing context of the 1970s (the “long 1970s”, starting from the mid-1960s and ending in the early 1980s). This angle of approach focuses on non-institutional contacts and bounds established between artists and cultural agents, through their participation in informal networks and collaborative projects made possible through long distance communication. In this first part, the phenomenon of art’s circulation across the borders and bloc’s division, is contemplated through three possible–fluctuating and unstable–communities.

Chapter one focuses on the productive crossings in the expanded field of experimental poetry from 1965 on. Experimental poetry not only constituted a crucial space of contamination of different disciplines and expressions, it was also a dynamic vector of diffusion and collective creation. Concrete poetry, visual poetry,

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<sup>73</sup> Maria Todorova, *Scaling the Balkans: Essays in National, Transnational and Conceptual History* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 4.

experimentalism, spatial poetry, action music, new writing, public poetry, poetic struggle (“lotta poetica”) were some of the artistic expressions artists from Spain, Czechoslovakia and Italy explored and invested, creating a space of confluence in the arts. Examining the intersecting paths of artists and groups including Jiří Valoch, Zaj and Ugo Carrega, this chapter sheds light on the dynamic and ramified network that connected Central European (especially Czechoslovak) artists and their peers from Spain and Italy already in the mid-1960s. In particular, the trajectory of Jiří Valoch between poetry, conceptual art, art criticism and exhibition organisation operate as a red thread to conduce us some meanders of this European poetic scene. The activities of the Czech artist deployed in connection with Spain and Italy suggest also the existence of distinct registers of visuality and action, he selected in function of the particular context in which his work was presented.

From an emphasis on poetry and communication, Chapter two turns to reality as a field of social intervention, and context-based art as an instrument of decentralisation. It addresses the complex set of ideas and aspirations that gave rise to the “Third Front”, a transnational collective project aimed at challenging the authority of the centralised New-York scene between 1975 and 1977. Mainly articulated by artists and cultural operators from Poland (Jan Świdziński, Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera, Lech Mrożek, Emil Cieślak), France (the Collectif d’Art Sociologique) and Canada (Amerigo Marras and the members of the Centre of Experimental Art and Communication in Toronto), with punctual contributions from Spain and the United Kingdom (among others), this attempt did not last very long but is particularly significant to us insofar as it permit to identify similar searches for a sociological and contextual approach to art and reality and compare its understanding and application in radically different contexts or localities like Toronto, Paris, Kazimierz nad Wisłą, Warsaw, Mallorca or Lund.

Chapter three focuses on a particular sector, that of art criticism, and the dilemmas and choices faced by some of its actors at the turn of the 1970s in the face of the political situation in Eastern Europe, particularly after the repression of the Prague Spring. It examines the positioning of various critics around the idea of a militant practice and the less overtly politicised variations of the term, envisaged as active

criticism (Giulio Carlo Argan), a confraternal (Jindřich Chaloupecký) or a companionship activity (Raoul-Jean Moulin). Solidarity and even empathy, and a pragmatic use of their power of diffusion of ideas were key elements in the relationships between the Czech art critic Jindřich Chaloupekcy and his French peers Raoul-Jean Moulin and Aragon. In the midst of this web of exchange, the work of Jiří Kolar opened a critical space for transnational interaction and dialogue.

The circulation of Central European artists and art raises the question of the relationship between distinct sociocultural spheres and the terms that govern it. If, on the one hand, the study of transnational and transregional circulations makes it possible to challenge a vision of the cultural relations of the Cold War long confined to the field of interstate diplomacy, and based on a binary East-West relation, we should remain attentive to the pitfalls of a conception which, on the contrary, would insist too much on the mobility and fluidity of these relations without taking into account the factors that conditioned them, especially in the field of an artistic production that did not benefit from the support of the communist authorities.

Concerning the participation of artists from Central Europe in the creation and consolidation of transnational artistic communities, it is worth considering whether these communities could really exist and evolve on the margins of national cultural institutions and policies. With this objective in mind, the second part of this dissertation returns to a more institutional and public realm to focus on the participation of Central European artists to international exhibitions and biennials in France, Italy and Spain. It examines the role played by international exhibitions in the construction of specific narratives around Central European art, as platforms of public visibility where meanings and interpretations were temporarily fixed through curatorial, critical and theoretical discourses.

The three chapters that follow are thus methodologically related with the history of exhibitions, a branch of art history that contemplates these events as a cultural phenomenon necessarily intervened by social and political debates proper of their time and place. The study of this medium provides a rich insight on the history of ideas and their impact on societies; it offers critical tools to address art's

interconnectedness with other disciplines and fields of thought, and to examine the tensions between its conditions of production and the context in which it publicly appears. In some cases, public visibility did not result in the acknowledgement of the existence of these practices from Central Europe and their authors. This particular situation is addressed in Chapter four, centered on the Encuentros de Pamplona (Pamplona Encounters), a multidisciplinary arts festival held in NorthWestern Spain in 1972. Departing from the observation of the participation of Central European artists in one of the exhibitions held in the context of this manifestation, the chapter reconstructs the circumstances of this participation mediated by an Argentinian organisation, the CAYC of Buenos Aires, and more particularly its cofounder Jorge Glusberg. This triangular relation will be addressed from the angle of the reception of the theoretical framework based on art systems and regional practices produced by the CAYC to accompany its exhibitions abroad, in a Spanish context of generational tensions around the function of art and its relationship with the authoritarian power. In this context, the plastic proposals of the Czech and Slovak artists remained almost invisible and were mostly instrumentalised by Glusberg for the promotion of his own ideas.

The questioning of the traditional international exhibition models happened in the wake of the 1968 protest movements. In this respect, the Biennale des Jeunes Artistes in Paris and the Venice Biennale implemented new formats and approaches (from 1973 and 1974 respectively) to respond to the need for more democratic artistic events without national intervention. The transformation of the Paris Biennale through the adoption of a “centralised and internationalised” model and its particular consequences on Central European (and more generally here, East European) participation is the subject of Chapter Five. It analyses the mechanisms of participation and their repercussions on the trajectory of Central European artists. It also examines the frames under which socialist Europe was placed in the critical production produced by and around the Biennial. The most important was its insertion into the group of industrialised countries with a developed economy, thus bringing it closer to capitalist Western Europe in the face of a Third World which, in the context of these editions of the Paris Biennale, constituted the “real other”. If these proposals

were fully in line with the trends in international avant-garde art that the Biennial sought to highlight and did not differ from other creations presented in Paris, it is important to highlight the specificity of certain forms of production (collaborative work with local artists in Bratislava in the case of Jana Želibská) and the possible obstacles encountered in producing and distributing their work (Jan Mlčoch and Petr Štembera's unrealized joint performance). While the Biennale's display in 1973 sought to establish a relation between Eastern European, Spanish and Latin American producers based on their experience under non democratic systems, the idea of art's autonomy was reaffirmed in 1977 by Jesa Denegri as an essential character of experimental practices in socialist Europe, highlighting once again the differences in the understanding and use of this notion from one side of the Iron Curtain to another.

Focusing on the 1977 "Biennale del Dissenso" ("Dissidence Biennale") in Venice, Chapter six aims to understand the mechanisms through which a wide range of artistic practices and artefacts from the socialist bloc was assimilated with a specific attitude, i.e dissent or dissidence, and how this identification was defended or, on the contrary, questioned by different agents from Southern and Central Europe in relation to the Biennale. To do so, it is also necessary to contemplate, once again, the complex web of political events and relations that surrounds this debate, from the position of the Soviet and Central European authorities, to the tensions within the Italian political landscape, at a time when discussions between Italian, French and Spanish politicians regarding the transformation of the Western left and the possibility of Eurocommunism were at their height. Not only is the event a great indicator of these issues, it also generates discussions that reflected other dynamics and alliances than the territorial and geopolitical partitions traditionally associated with the Cold War period. Finally, the debates on dissidence, whether directly or transversally related, reflected a process that underlies a large part of this study: on the one hand, the disenchantment with the great stories of struggles and protests consolidated in the 1960s and, on the other hand, the interest for more targeted, local actions, marked by collective gestures and by the desire to retain or obtain or greater autonomy.

Far from denying the existence of political, social and cultural singularities among the observed territories and societies, they are contemplated in this dissertation as influential ensembles that have, at some point or another, had an incidence on the trajectory of art and artists from Central Europe and contributed to the formulation of specific narratives on them. At the same time, working with and through these two interconnected areas, the intention is not to produce new geographical categories or reinforce already existing ones from an identitarian perspective, but rather insist on the mutability of these categories and on what could be designated as their “conjunctural resourcefulness”, i.e. the fact that they are appropriate in the particular context of this study, to articulate and explore the hypotheses that sustain this dissertation.

# **PART 1**





## CHAPTER 1

### **Experimental poetry as an expanded field of exchange. Connections between Czechoslovakia, Spain and Italy (1965-1979)**

Avant-garde poetry and its abundant variations and nuances operated in the 1960s and early 1970s as a privileged field of contamination of different disciplines and expressions. Concrete poetry, visual poetry, experimentalism, spatial poetry, action music, new writing, public poetry and even poetic struggle (to borrow the title of the Italian magazine *Lotta poetica*, addressed further), just to mention the different modulations that appear in this chapter, were adopted and practiced by a wide range of artists without any concern for establishing an orthodox line or attracting exclusive adhesions. They formed an expanded field of confluence of the arts, which protagonists did not limit themselves to the production of literary artifacts but also endorsed the role of organisers, art critics, theorists, and even historians of the movement in which they were involved.

Observing the central role played by the New York correspondence school launched by Dick Higgins in the development of mail art in Latin America, Zanna Gilbert has observed that “the absolutism of this history leaves little room for alternative genealogies and topologies of the rise of this complex network with hundreds of participants that spanned continents.”<sup>1</sup> To counter such narratives, she has reaffirmed the importance of concrete and visual poetry as a space of linguistic exploration (semiotic and non semiotic) the representatives of which were actively involved in the production of circulating publications and artifacts relying on long-distance communication. Gilbert’s reflections on the highly imbricated spheres of experimental poetry, mail art and conceptualist networks in Latin America can be transposed and used to analyse artistic connections between Central and Southern Europe. Of particular interest in her analysis is the appearance of the notion of

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<sup>1</sup> Zanna Gilbert, “Genealogical Diversions: Experimental Poetry Networks, Mail Art and Conceptualisms”, *caiana. Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)* no. 4, 2014, 1.

“system” as a catalyst of interest and convergence among artists and poets from Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay and Brazil in the 1960s. According to Gilbert, different aesthetic inquiries had in common the concern for “the notion of systems of all kinds—postal, linguistic, epistemological, bureaucratic, political—” and she suggests that “these artists’ interest in semiotic systems led them to concerns that overlap with the language experiments of conceptual art, which then merged easily with the internationalizing mail art networks that developed related aesthetic investigations”.<sup>2</sup> Far from dissolving with the 1970s, the interest in the notion of system would become even more pronounced and explicit in that decade.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than separate branches influenced by iconic figures or manifestos, poetic, musical, postal and conceptual practices developed between the mid-1960s and the end of the 1970s are envisaged in this chapter as communicating vessels. The activities, works and ideas produced by artists like Jiří Valoch, Bohumila Grögerová and Josef Hiršal, Ladislav Novák, Milan Grygar, Julio Campal, Fernando Millán, zaj, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, Ugo Carrega or Sarenco can help us to capture these particular dynamics and their intertwining with social and political processes at stake in Spain, Czechoslovakia and Italy.

## **1. Jiří Valoch in dialogue with Spanish experimentalism**

### **1.1 Contexts: Spain and Czechoslovakia**

Experimental poetry and the networks operating within or in relation to this sphere played a central role in the establishing of artistic networks between Central Europe and Southern Europe from the mid-1960s onwards. Exploring this idea further will allow us to nuance the idea according to which the “networking habit” was adopted by artists under the exclusive influence of Fluxus-like activities and mail art initiatives inspired in the New York correspondence school. On this respect, Jiří Valoch is a significant example of overlapping disciplines and roles. The activity of the Czech artist reflects in fact the flourishing in Europe of international collaboration relying on

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, “Genealogical Diversions: Experimental Poetry Networks, Mail Art and Conceptualisms”, 1.

<sup>3</sup> To give an example, the concept of “arte de sistemas” (“art systems”) was popularised and widely disseminated by the Buenos Aires-based Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) through exhibitions across Europe in the early 1970s, including contributions by Central European artists (see Chapter 4).

distance communication, at the intersection of avant-garde poetry, experimental music and the visual arts. Valoch, who spent most of his life in city of Brno, capital of the region of Moravia, was in fact actively involved in international networks not only as an artist, but also as a theorist, and a cultural worker.

Valoch studied Czech, German and aesthetics at the Faculty of Philosophy in his hometown and graduated with a thesis focused on visual and phonic poetry. He became involved in visual poetry in the mid-1960s under the influence of the older generation of Czech and Slovak poets that comprised Jiří Kolář, Bohumila Grögerová, Josef Hiršal and Ladislav Novák. From May 1967 until its dissolution in 1971, Valoch was a member of the Club of Concretists (Klub Konkretistu), founded in Prague by the theoretician Arseny Pohrebny and the artists Radek Kratina, Jiří Hilmar and Tomas Rajlich, and including participants from the fields of visual arts, industrial design poetry, music and film. In 1972, at the age of twenty-six, Valoch was appointed curator at the House of Arts in Brno (Dům umění města Brna), a function he occupied until 2001. In this particular context, he carried out a programming that introduced Czech and Slovak, as well as international avant-garde art to a local audience.

Among the existing studies dedicated to Valoch and his multifaceted career, Helena Musilová's monograph published in 2018 provides valuable information on the artist's broad range of activities, their geographical extension and crossing with different disciplines.<sup>4</sup> While Musilová's study relies on a wide variety of primary sources and archival documents, her monograph doesn't address however the relations between the artist and his Spanish and Italian pairs—except, regarding the latter, through a very brief mention to the exhibition of Italian visual poetry Valoch organised in 1969 in Jihlava in collaboration with Ugo Carrega (addressed in the second part of this chapter). Since Valoch's exchanges and collaborations with Spanish and Italian artists between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s were nevertheless frequent and resulted in his participation in various exhibitions and publications in both countries, we may explain the absence of studies on this topic by

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<sup>4</sup> Helena Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980* (Prague: National Gallery Prague, 2018). Regarding Valoch's circulation and collaborations with another national scene (in this case from a socialist non-aligned country), see Ivana Janković, "Here/There and Somewhere Else: The Artistic Connections of Jiří Valoch with Former Yugoslav Territory during the 1960s and 70s", *MIEJSCE* no. 5, 2019. <https://www.doi.org/10.48285/8kaewzco3p> (Accessed May 2020).

the extent of the artist's personal archive and collection of artworks, important parts of which have not been catalogued yet, and also by the fact that the Spanish art scene as a space of reception and interlocution has so far remained beyond the scope of Eastern and Central European art history. The first part of this chapter seeks to fill this gap by paying attention to unpublished material from the Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno, as well as exhibition catalogues and publications from Spain in which the artist's works have been presented.<sup>5</sup> While this chapter focuses on the figure and trajectory of Valoch, we should specify however that his presence in the context of artistic events in Spain from the year 1966 on often coincided with that of small group of poets from Czechoslovakia, including Vladimír Burda, Jiří Kolář, Ladislav Novák, Bohumila Grögerová, Josef Hiršal and Eduard Ovčáček. All of them were involved at that time in networks of concrete and visual poetry, through which their work circulated, was exhibited and published, mostly in Europe and Latin America.

The rise of concrete and visual poetry in Spain reflected the interest of local artists and intellectuals for participating in an expanded movement, the most important ramifications of which were located in Brasil, Switzerland and Germany. Such engagement opened new international perspectives and inspirational sources precisely at a moment in which Francoist Spain was experiencing transformations in the economic, social and cultural sector, as a consequence of the so-called "developmentalism" ("desarrollismo").<sup>6</sup> In 1959, the Francoist regime introduced a plan of stabilisation and liberalization ("Plan de Estabilización y Liberalización") based on series of measures designed to promote economic growth and reverse Spain's position as the poorest country in Western Europe, along with Portugal. The

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<sup>5</sup> The Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch have been acquired by the Moravian Gallery in Brno, where a small part is on display in the framework of the permanent exhibition "Art is here: New Art after 1945", opened in 2015 and curated by Ondřej Chrobák, Petr Ingerle and Jana Písaříková. The curator Jana Písaříková and the archivist Viola Borková are in charge of its organisation and diffusion of the Jiří Valoch Archive. I am thankful to Viola Borková for her precious collaboration in identifying and sending numerous documents from the Archive.

<sup>6</sup> This aspect has been addressed by Paula Barreiro López in her study of the relationship between concrete poetry and painting between the 1960s and 1970s. See Paula Barreiro López, "Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista", *Bulletin of Hispanic studies* Vol. 95, no. 9, 2018, 983.

country entered a process of industrialisation that had a direct effect both on populations' mobility (generating a massive rural exodus) and on the economy, with a new access to consumer goods. This phase of intensive development that would end up in 1968 relied on three main factors: the rise of foreign inversions and of the industry of tourism in Spain, and the arrival of foreign currencies sent to their families by Spanish émigrés workers abroad.<sup>7</sup> In the field of art and architecture, the Francoist regime had adopted in 1951 on a policy aimed at modernising its image abroad and showing the country's participation in the artistic processes of its time.<sup>8</sup> It thus strategically promoted informal art as an example both international and typically Spanish, with references to the Golden Age.<sup>9</sup>

While artistic exchanges between Spain and Western Europe were already commonplace, especially with the neighboring France and Italy, official collaboration with socialist states in matter on culture was almost inexistent due to political divergences and, also, a lack of interest from the Spanish side. Initiatives to establish closer relations came mainly from the socialist countries, in particular Poland and Hungary.<sup>10</sup> As late as in 1972, the Spanish Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) confessed its lack of knowledge about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and in 1973, an official report on cultural relations between Spain and the countries situated beyond the Iron Curtain specified that “despite attempts to establish specific exchange programmes by the countries of the socialist bloc, there

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<sup>7</sup> Jorge-Luis Marzo and Patricia Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939-2015): ideas, prácticas, políticas* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2015), 250; Mónica Núñez Laiseca, *Arte y política en la España del desarrollismo (1962-1968)* (Madrid: CSIC, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> See Julián Díaz Sánchez, *La idea de arte abstracto en la España de Franco* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2013); Julián Díaz Sánchez, “Al calor de la Guerra Fría. Opciones del arte español en la posguerra europea”, in ed. Serge Guilbaut, *Bajo la bomba. El jazz de la guerra de imágenes transatlántica: 1946-1956*, exh. cat. (Barcelona, Madrid: MACBA, MNCARS, 2007), 169-179; Genoveva Tusell, “The Internationalisation of Spanish Abstract Art (1950-62)”, *Third Text* vol. 20 no. 2, 2006, 241-249; Jorge Luis Marzo, *¿Puedo hablarle con libertad, excelencia?: Arte y poder en España desde 1950* (Murcia: CENDEAC, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the reference to the Golden Age, see Paula Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), 2017, 74-78; Paula Barreiro López, “Reinterpreting the Past: The Baroque Phantom during Francoism”, *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, vol. 91 no. 5, 715-734, [10.1080/14753820.2014.908566](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2014.908566) (Accessed May 2020); Marzo and Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939-2015): ideas, prácticas, políticas*, 167-180.

<sup>10</sup> See María Magdalena Garrido Caballero, *Las relaciones entre España y la Unión Soviética a través de las Asociaciones de Amistad en el siglo XX*, PhD Dissertation, Universidad de Murcia, 2006, unpaginated. <http://hdl.handle.net/10803/10891> (Accessed May 2020).

were no standard conditions for the implementation of international agreements.”<sup>11</sup> Despite this categorical statement, the report exposed some early attempts from the Polish General Director of Cultural Relations, Jan Druto, to establish official collaboration in the fields of science, theatre and the visual arts.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the obvious ideological motives that made communication difficult at an institutional level, geographical and linguistic factors can also explain the intermittent character of interpersonal relationships, if compared with exchanges between socialist Eastern Europe and other Western countries.<sup>13</sup> Unlike France and Italy which, despite their location West of the Iron Curtain, remained geographically close to the socialist bloc and traditionally hosted an important community of Central European emigrés, Spain still appeared in the 1960s and 1970s as a remote country and its language implied a substantial barrier to artists who were used instead to communicate in English, French or German—Valoch, for instance, had an excellent knowledge of German.

## 1.2. Czech presence in early poetic events

One of the figures who played a crucial role for the introduction and promotion of concrete poetry in Spain was the poet Julio Campal. Born in Uruguay, Campal was the son of Spanish emigrés from the Asturias region. He moved to Buenos Aires at a very young age and in 1962, he left Argentina for Spain where he remained until his

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<sup>11</sup> The report is cited in Garrido Caballero, *Las relaciones entre España y la Unión Soviética a través de las Asociaciones de Amistad en el siglo XX*, unpaginated (footnote 180).

<sup>12</sup> Garrido Caballero, *Las relaciones entre España y la Unión Soviética a través de las Asociaciones de Amistad en el siglo XX*, unpaginated.

<sup>13</sup> A remarkable exception regarding official exchange between Spain and socialist Eastern Europe in the visual arts field is the Premi Dibuix Joan Miró (Joan Miró Drawing Prize) held since 1962 in Barcelona. It included, from 1967 onwards, a significant number of artists from socialist Eastern Europe—also among the winners of the prize—and art critics who contributed to the catalogue. To give an example, the ninth edition of the Premi Dibuix in 1970 included representatives from Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and the Soviet Union (*IX Premi Internacional Dibuix Joan Miró*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Secretariat del Premi internacional de dibuix Joan Miró, 1970)). Bulgaria was also regularly represented. As far as socialist countries are concerned, the selection of participating artists relied on official channels and was mostly mediated by the national Artists Unions. This annual event, many aspects of which remain to be investigated, can be related to the rise of print and graphics exhibitions as important vectors of cultural diplomacy and national representation abroad (like the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts since 1955, the International Biennial of Graphic Design in Brno since 1964, or the International Print Biennial in Krakow since 1966, to mention few of them), which, at the same time, enabled artists to circulate their works and exchange across the Iron Curtain. On the particular function of the prints and graphics biennials, see Wiktor Komorowski, “Hard Ground-Soft Politics: The Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana and Biting of the Iron Curtain”, *Humanities* vol 7, no. 4, 97, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7040097>.

prematured death at the age of thirty-five, in 1968. Over his six years of activity in Spain, Campal became a central promoter of avant-garde poetry, organising exhibitions and conferences that introduced prewar movements such as futurism and dadaism to a public of non specialists. In 1963, he founded the literary section of the group Problemática 63, established in the headquarters of the organisation Juventudes Musicales (“Musical Youth”) in Madrid. Juventudes Musicales was the national section of the international organisation Jeunesse Musicales International; it was created in 1952 as an instrument of international diplomacy with the aim of facilitating the acceptance of Spain in the UNESCO—this would happen in January 1953.<sup>14</sup> On this respect, it is worth observing that while the diffusion and interest for concrete poetry occurred on the margins of the regime’s cultural policy, its public presentation might paradoxically take place through official organisations, the avant-garde character of which resulted useful to the regime’s image of modernity abroad, like the Juventudes Musicales. Regardless of its link to the regime, the association enjoyed a high degree of independence and became across the 1960s and the early 1970s the site of important initiatives that promoted new artistic expressions and favoured disciplinary crossings. Focusing on contemporary creation, Problemática 63 had the ambition in fact to offer a “join vision of arts and sciences” and the members of its literary section actively contributed to this purpose.<sup>15</sup> This paradoxical relation between institutions or organisations sponsored by a non-democratic state and their contribution to the diffusion of progressive art could resonate, albeit in an opposite environment, with what Central European artists could experience in the late Cold War period in relation to the ambiguous and complex relationship with state-

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<sup>14</sup> See Juan José Martínez Espina, “Música y Poder: Juventudes Musicales de España como instrumento de política exterior para el reconocimiento internacional del Régimen de Franco: Florentino Pérez-Embid”, *Investigaciones Históricas, época moderna y contemporánea*, no. 40, 2020, 645-676. <https://doi.org/10.24197/ihemc.40.2020.645-676> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>15</sup> The main founders of Problemática 63 were Tomás Marco, Ricardo Bellés and Manuel Andrade. The first members of the literary section were the young authors Carlos Oroza, Carlos Álvarez, Julian Marcos, Fernando Millán, Manuel Andrade, Antonio Hernández, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño and Enrique Uribe. See Iñaki Estella, “Problemática 63 y la revista Aulas: educación y cultura. Estrategias del experimentalismo tras el silencio”, in Juan Albarrán Diego and Rosa Benítez Andrés, eds., “Ensayo/Error. Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960–1980)”, *Hispanic Issues On Line* no. 21, 2018, 74-97; Juan José Lanz Rivera, “La Poesía Experimental en España: Historia y Reflexión Teórica”, *Iberoamericana (1977-2000)* vol. 16, no. 1, 1992, 53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41671295> (Accessed May 2020); José Antonio Sarmiento, *La otra escritura: la poesía experimental española, 1960-1973*, (Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 1990), 11; Alfonso López Gradolí, *La escritura mirada: una aproximación a la poesía experimental española* (Barcelona: Calembur, 2008), 113-114 and 119.



sponsored institutions that allowed the exhibition of avant-garde cultural and artistic expressions.

Along with the Basque artist Enrique Uribe and with the collaboration of painters Isabel Krutiwig and Ignacio Urrutia, Julio Campal organised the first exhibition of concrete poetry in Spain. “Poesía concreta” (“Concrete poetry”) was inaugurated the 27 January 1965 at the gallery Grises in Bilbao and lasted one week.<sup>16</sup> In a definitely international perspective, the event brought together artists from Germany, Brasil, Spain, Scotland, France, Holland, England, Japan and Czechoslovakia—the only representative from the latter being the poet Vladimir Burda. In November the same year, Campal presented “Poesía visual, fónica, espacial y concreta” (“Visual, phonic, spatial and concrete poetry”, 18 to 24 November 1965), including works of twenty-four artists—from Czechoslovakia, Burda and Ladislav Novák participated. The exhibition was hosted by the Sociedad Dante Alighieri in Zaragoza with the support of the Oficina de Poesía Internacional (International Poetry), a group of artists and poets from the Aragon region (of which Zaragoza was the capital) who regularly organised discussions and debates about avant-garde art. **[Fig. 1.1]**

Campal saw avant-garde poetry as a liminal discipline that “work[ed] in border zones with the other arts”, in a combination that produced an expression differing from the “articulated phonetic and written language”.<sup>17</sup> Concretism was, for him, “[a] poetry to see or feel, [a poetry that] uses the blank space in its plastic and rhythmic value, using the tensions and vibrations played by the words in that space”. In contrast to traditional poetry, concrete poetry sought “an essential communication that transcends national linguistic peculiarities”.<sup>18</sup> The same concerns were expressed by

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<sup>16</sup> José Luis Campal, “Noticia de Julio Campal en el XXX aniversario de su muerte”, communication at the Fifth International Meeting of Independent Publishers (Punta Umbría (Huelva), 7-9 May 1998). Reported in the online platform MerzMail, publication by the mail artist Pere Sousa, <http://www.merzmail.net/jucampal.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> “La poesía experimental y de vanguardia trabaja en zonas fronterizas con las otras artes, pero éstas (pintura o música) no son más que elementos de lo literario, medios de expresión diferentes al del articulado lenguaje fonético y escrito.” Quoted in José Luis Campal, “Noticia de Julio Campal en el XXX aniversario de su muerte”.

<sup>18</sup> “El concretismo era, para Campal, “poesía para ver o sentir, [una poesía que] utiliza el espacio en blanco en su valor plástico y rítmico empleando las tensiones y las vibraciones que las palabras juegan en ese espacio”, y que, frente a la poesía tradicional, buscaba “una comunicación esencial que [rebasara] las peculiaridades lingüísticas nacionales.” José Luis Campal, “Noticia de Julio Campal en el XXX aniversario de su muerte.”

Jiří Valoch who was exploring at that time non-semantic poetry and looked for interactions between the poetic, visual and musical dimensions of his work:

In 1964 I began (after several years, after having tried traditional literature) to deal systematically with the possibilities of showing the visual features of a text. There were a number of reasons—the awareness of the devaluation of language and its manipulability as well as the awareness of my own incapacity to come close to the quality of what great writers I admire have produced but also an intrinsic desire to seek and find new forms and characteristics of poetry. Extremely important for this work was also my strong interest in visual art and new music, including my own experimentation with untraditional visual processors. I was aware that rational, controllable forms of composition were common in music and in the visual arts, that their content/statement had long done away with literary content and references. It didn't seem just natural but also imperative to try something similar with the material of language.<sup>19</sup>

By 1966, Valoch started to receive information from Julio Campal: invitation cards to conferences, seminars and exhibitions in the Basque country and in Madrid. If the origin of the artists' first contact remains unclear, we can formulate at least two hypotheses. On the one hand, Helena Musilová has noted that Valoch's large correspondence network was initially facilitated by Jiří Kolář and Ladislav Novák, as well as by the Fluxus-related mailing lists he had access to.<sup>20</sup> The French poet Pierre Garnier, known for being at the origin of the idea of spatialism in poetry along with his wife Ilse Garnier, was one of Valoch's early contacts and since 1964, he had been publishing Czech experimental poetry in his magazine *Les Lettres*, printed in France. In 1966, Garnier was already in touch with Campal—Campal and Uribe had met through him—and it might be by his intermediary and that of *Les Lettres* that Campal became aware of the Czech poetry scene and started to include its protagonists in his

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<sup>19</sup> Jiří Valoch, statement for the anthology of Czech visual poetry of the sixties “Der Würfelwurf” prepared for printing by Odeon, Prague, and banned in 1969. Reproduced in *Détente*, exh. cat. (Wien : Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1993), 118.

<sup>20</sup> Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 41.

projects.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Valoch's participation in the exhibition "Poesia concreta internacional" ("International concrete poetry") organised by Mathias Goeritz in 1966 in Mexico City certainly opened another front for collaborations and could have contributed to give his work greater visibility across the Atlantic and in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>22</sup> Even without knowing its origin with certainty, we can affirm that the long-distance relationship Campal-Valoch captures the sprawling nature of the experimental poetry network and the importance of word of mouth and the disinterested sharing of artists' lists for its expansion beyond the blocs divisions.<sup>23</sup>

Valoch's work eventually made its first appearance in Spain through the "Exposición internacional de poesía de vanguardia" ("International exhibition of avantgarde poetry") organised by Campal at the Galería Juana Mordó in Madrid in June 1966. **[Fig. 1.2]** The gallery Mordó, opened in 1964, played a significant role in the promotion of Spanish and international painting and the consolidation of an emerging art market. In the exhibitions, Jiří Valoch and Jiří Kolář figured among a group of creators who represented concrete, spatial, cinetic, semiotic and experimental art.<sup>24</sup> In September the same year, contributions from both artists and also from the poets Václav Havel, Eduard Ovčáček and Vladimír Burda were presented in Campal's week of avant-garde poetry at the Galería Barandiarán in San Sebastián, in which "poster-

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<sup>21</sup> In 1964, the issue 33 of *Les Lettres* published by Pierre Garnier included for the first time experimental poetries from Czechoslovakia. The same year, no. 34 included poems and texts by Jiří Valoch, Eduard Ovčáček, Ladislav Novák, Josef Hiršal, Bohumila Grögerová and Enrique Uribe, among others. No. 35 from 1966 dedicated to Spatialist theatre included a text by Ladislav Novák, "identification", and another one from Zdenek Barbroka.

<sup>22</sup> The exhibition opened from March to May 1966 at the Galería Universitaria Aristor in Mexico-City, and was accompanied by a catalogue with texts by Max Bense, Ernst Jandl, Jasia Richard and Ida Rodríguez. Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> Besides Campal, others agents played a key role in the dissemination of concrete poetry in Spain, such as art critics Ángel Crespo and Pilar Gómez Bedate through the *Revista Cultural Brasileña* (both left Spain in 1967 to Brazil and then, Puerto Rico, where they became involved in the Department of Hispanic Studies of the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez), as well as artists Julio Plaza and José María Iglesias, to mention just a few. Since they did not have a direct relationship with Central European artists at that time, however, our focus remains on Campal's activities and their continuity in the work of other artists. For a detailed account of this other branch of the Spanish concrete scene, see Barreiro López, "Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista", 95-97; Ángel Crespo and Pilar Gómez Bédate, "Situación de la poesía concreta", *Revista de Cultura Brasileña* no. 5, June 1963, 89-130.

<sup>24</sup> The artists exhibited on this occasion at the Galería Juana Mordó included Julien Blaine, Adriano Spatola, Henri Chopin, Kurt Schwitters and the Spanish Enrique Uribe, Fernando Millan, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño and Blanca Calparsoro.

poems, openings, phonetic poems, poetic objects, mobiles” reflected the aesthetic research and first achievements of “cinetic, semiotic, experimental, visual and independent vanguardist tendencies”.<sup>25</sup> [Fig. 1.3] Campal’s words in the exhibition booklet expressed his feeling of being on the threshold of a new art, that was still subject to misunderstanding but needed to be relentlessly promoted by engaged cultural workers like himself:

Poets in particular, produce works that are penetrated by current life, receive influences, intermingle, change their line of conduct, affirm or renew themselves. Each one follows the path dictated by his own authenticity, adapting them, as Machado said: “To follow the law of life/which is to live as one can”. This is why, in this first classification of the new poetry, we take the risk of being misunderstood, of being confronted with the sudden and abrupt gesture of those who do not want to understand. It doesn’t matter. Other workers will come later. After creation, classificatory order. Immersed myself in the new tendencies as a poet committed to his time (now 1966), having almost every day in my hands the most recently produced works, I understand perfectly that we lack insight for a definitive historical judgement: it is a question of exposing, presenting, communicating with an attentive public which is growing today as fast as we are growing.<sup>26</sup>

Campal’s engagement was reflected in his practice anchored in a reality in transformation, disrupted by the mutation of the forms of communication and the mediums on which they relied. Conscious that “the speed of life, the demands of technology and the speed of communications” required “to break out of the old moulds which prevent us from keeping pace with the historical rhythm of our times”,

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<sup>25</sup> This was one of the few (if not the only) occasions in which works of experimental poetry by Václav Havel were exhibited in Spain. On Havel’s poetry, see Tereza Dedínová, “Visual poetry in Václav Havel’s work/La poesía visual en la obra de Václav Havel/Vizualni poezie v díle Václava Havla”, *Eslavística Complutense*, vol. 13, 2013, 31-38.

<sup>26</sup> “Los poetas en particular, realizan obras penetradas de la vida actual, reciben influencias, se entremezclan, varían de línea de conducta, se afirman o se renuevan. Cada uno prosigue el camino que le dicta su propia autenticidad, adaptándose los, como decía Machado: “Seguir la ley de la vida/que es vivir como se pueda”. Por esto, en esta primera clasificación de la nueva poesía arriesgamos tropezar con la incomprensión, contra el gesto atropellado y brusco del que no quiere entender. No importa. Otros trabajadores vendrán después. Después de la creación, el orden clasificatorio. Sumergido yo mismo en las nuevas tendencias como poeta comprometido con su época (ahora 1966), teniendo casi al día entre las manos las obras producidas más recientemente, comprendo perfectamente que carecemos de perspectiva para un juicio histórico definitivo. Se trata de exponer, de presentar, de comunicarnos con un público atento que crece hoy día tan rápidamente como nosotros.” Julio Campal, untitled introduction in *Semana de poesía de vanguardia*, exh. cat. (Bilbao: Galería Barandiarán, 1966), unpaginated.

he nevertheless established a genealogy departing from pioneering initiatives like the Futurists and the Dadaists, but also the Chilean surrealist poet Vicente Huidobro and the French poet and sculptor Pierre-Albert Birot , before addressing contemporary creation.<sup>27</sup>

The South-American poet was strongly committed to communicate information in an accessible way and connect it with the current problems faced by the audience. Fernando Millán would later consider that Campal's "ability to lead" relied on his affirmation of the centrality of information not as a "private property but something public that had to be shared with all the interested persons".<sup>28</sup> Campal insisted in fact on the anti-magistral character of his public initiatives and on the necessity for the poet and the artist to participate in social processes:

The time of the divine poet, of the ivory tower, of the poet who possesses the magic word, who must be worshipped, has gone [...]. The poet, that is, the artist, is just another worker for society, and as such has a series of rights and a series of duties. One of the duties of the artist is to cooperate with the audience in the knowledge of the problems that concern him and that also concern the audience. Art today also depends on the audience. Art depends on all of us, never on isolated facts or persons.<sup>29</sup>

The social function Campal attributed to these new forms of art and his involvement in pedagogical activities were in line with his conception of avant-garde poetry as an

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<sup>27</sup> "[...] queremos contribuir con todo ello a una labor de creación, cultura e información cada día mas necesarias, en la medida en que la rapidez de la vida, las exigencias de la técnica, la velocidad de las comunicaciones exigen de nosotros romper viejos moldes que nos impiden marchar al ritmo histórico de nuestro tiempo." Campal, untitled introduction, unpaginated.

<sup>28</sup> "Su capacidad de liderazgo estaba basada en un discurso inédito en el mundo intelectual de los años sesenta: lo primero y más valioso para un poeta era la información. Y por eso la información none una propiedad privada, sinon algo público que se debía compartir con todas las personas interesadas." Fernando Millán, "Utopía, transgresión, neoavanguardia y radicalismo. La poesía experimental en el Estado español", in *Escrito está. Poesía experimental en España*, exh. cat. (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium; Valladolid: Museo Patio Herreriano, 2009), 20.

<sup>29</sup> "Ha pasado [...] la hora del poeta divino, de la torre de marfil, del poeta poseedor de la palabra mágica, al cual es necesario adorar. El poeta, esto es, el artista, es un trabajador más de la sociedad, y como tal tiene una serie de derechos u una serie de deberes. Uno de los deberes del artista es cooperar con el público en el conocimiento de los problemas que le preocupan y que preocupan también al público. El arte actual depende también del público. De todos nosotros depende el arte, nunca de hechos o personas aisladas.[...]" Conference of Julio Campal on "Problemas urgentes del arte más actual", Casa de Cultura, Cuenca, in occasion of the exhibition of the sculptor Elvira Afágame. Anonymous, "Reseñas de conferencias, Julio Campal", in *Escrito está. Poesía experimental en España*, exh. cat. (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium; Valladolid: Museo Patio Herreriano, 2009), 62-66 and 67-70.

engine of social transformation. Spanish “experimentalism” (“experimentalismo”) from the 1960s remained in fact strongly permeated with the idea of art as an avant-garde practice longing for rupture and change, inscribed in a teleological process. In this regard, Juan Albarrán and Rosa Benítez have emphasised the elusive nature of experimentalism, which, according to them, precisely overlapped two fields Spanish historiography still struggles to connect to one another: on the one hand, experimental writing and, on the other, the practices designated under the term “new behaviours” (“nuevos comportamientos”) by the Spanish art critic and theoretician Simón Marchán Fiz.<sup>30</sup> The practice of Jiří Valoch certainly fits within this hybrid field, straddling his fascination for writing and language and an interest in the production of images, particularly through photography.

### 1.3. A polarised scene, between integrated art and defolklorisation

At the end of the the 1960s, the scene of Spanish experimental poetry was characterized by the formation of groups of affinity that started to operate separately and, sometimes, competitively. These divergences must be taken into consideration, especially since, as Jesús Carrillo and Iñaki Estella have well observed, “the combination of creative and informative activities [...] has resulted in the very protagonists of these experiences becoming their most recurrent historians and critics, generating an accumulation of opposing readings and irreconcilable confrontations.”<sup>31</sup> On this respect, Fernando Millán and Ignacio Gómez de Liaño can be considered as two main figures who have generated distinct—and, to some extent, competing—

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<sup>30</sup> Pointing at the “volatility and indefiniteness” of Spanish experimentalism, they call for a “holistic” approach to this corpus of practices. Juan Albarrán Diego and Rosa Benítez Andrés, “Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960-1980): ensayos, diálogos y zonas de contacto para la redefinición de un contexto”, in Albarrán and Benítez Andrés, eds., *Ensayo/Error: Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960–1980)*, special issue of *Hispanic Issues On Line* no. 21, 2018, 1-29. The cycle “Nuevos comportamientos artísticos” was organised by Simón Marchán Fiz and the German Institute in Madrid and Barcelona in 1974. The same year, Marchán included a new section in his fundamental essay *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, published in 1972, to address these “new behaviours” and the “extension of art” they manifested. Simón Marchán Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, first ed. 1972 (Madrid: Akal, 2021), 153.

<sup>31</sup> “[...] la combinación de actividades creativas e informativas [...] ha provocado que los mismos protagonistas de estas experiencias se hayan convertido en sus historiadores y críticos mas recurrentes, generando un cúmulo de lecturas contrapuestas y enfrentamientos irreconciliables.” Jesús Carrillo and Iñaki Estella Noriega, “Redes poéticas I: Poesía visual (1962-...)”, in Jesús Carrillo and Iñaki Estella Noriega, eds., *Desacuerdos 3: sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado Español* (San Sebastián, Sevilla, Barcelona, Granada: Arteleku, UNIA arte y pensamiento, MACBA, Centro José Guerrero, 2005), 49.

readings since the premature death of Julio Campal in a domestic accident, in 1968.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore not surprising that after Campal's death, works from Czech poets and artists continued to appear through exhibitions and publications by Millán and Gómez de Liaño. Both initiated lines of artistic research that relied on the foundation of collective structures: Liaño, through the *Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana* and Millán with the *Grupo N. O.* None of these structures, however, lasted very long.<sup>33</sup>

A member of *Problemática 63*, Gómez de Liaño left the group in 1966—in part due to dissensions with Campal—and formed the *Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana* (Cooperative of Artistic and Handicraft Production, CPAA) along with Herminio Molero, Manuel Quejido, Fernando López-Vera, Francisco Pino and Francisco Salazar. The members of the CPAA embraced experimentation through multiple media as the only way to escape from art's recuperation by the capitalist art system. At the same time, they also sought to reaffirm the social function of the artistic avant-gardes:

The avant-gardes, far from being marginal, ephemeral, respond to new demands, to new conditions of life in society. With them, new significant systems are tested, new categories aware of time. With them, a reordering of significant values takes place. Because, we insist, while the expressive can occur on a desert island, signification needs to be continually in function, and these are aesthetic-social functions.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> One of the reasons for Fernando Millán and Ignacio Gómez de Liaño's disagreement has to do precisely with the figure of Campal. While Campal's crucial and visionary role in the emergence of a Spanish scene was constantly reaffirmed by Millán, Gómez de Liaño criticised his authoritarian personality and his unwillingness to share power. See Chema de Francisco Guinea, "La poesía experimental en España en una conversación con Fernando Millán", *Especulo. Revista de estudios literarios* no. 6, July-October 1997, <http://webs.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero6/millan.htm>; Gómez de Liaño cited in Albarrán and Benítez Andrés, "Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960-1980): ensayos, diálogos y zonas de contacto para la redefinición de un contexto", 5.

<sup>33</sup> The CPAA ceased its activity in July 1969; the *Grupo N. O.* in 1972. Sarmiento, *La otra escritura: la poesía experimental española, 1960-1973*, 22-30.

<sup>34</sup> "Las vanguardias lejos de ser lo marginal, lo efímero, responde [sic] a nuevas exigencias, a nuevas condiciones de vida en la sociedad. Con ellas se ensayan nuevos sistemas significativos, nuevas categorías alertas al tiempo. Con ellas se opera una reordenación de valores significativos. Porque, insistimos, mientras lo expresivo puede darse en una isla desierta la significación necesita estar continuamente en funciones, y estas lo son estético-sociales." *Cooperativa de producción artística y artesana*, "Declaración de principios. Estética y sociedad" (1967), reprinted in Carrillo and Estella Noriega, eds., *Desacuerdos 3: sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado Español*, 55; for a more complete analysis of the position of the CPAA in the context of Franco's dictatorship, Barreiro López, "Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista", 992-994.

The notion of “integrated art” (“arte integrado”) seemed to respond to this desire to combine the aesthetic dimension with collective social benefits.<sup>35</sup> In 1967, the CPAA organised the itinerant exhibition “Rotor internacional de Concordancia de las Artes” (a title hardly translatable into “International rotor of harmonisation”, or “conjunction of the arts”), on display in the cities of Valladolid, San Sebastian, Cuenca, Cordoba, Sevilla, Bilbao, Santander, Valencia, Barcelona and Madrid. “Rotor internacional” was elaborated around the idea of “integrated art” and claimed for integration as a concept that could bring artists and technicians together around a unitarian conception of arts for society.<sup>36</sup> In line with the multidisciplinary spirit of the CPAA, the exhibition combined visual poetry, painting, architecture and design. Many works reproduced in the catalogue had a kinetic and optical component and the whole initiative celebrated experiments on visuality and perception as a key element of modernity.<sup>37</sup> The publication also offered theoretical and historical keys to address the phenomenon, through the contributions of Carlos Areán, Rafael Leoz de la Fuente, Max Bense, Francisco Salazar and Ignacio Gómez de Liaño.<sup>38</sup> The catalogue also included short citations from poets and theoreticians who defined their practice under different terminologies: Eugen Gomringer (concrete poetry), Ernesto Manuel Galdes de Melo e Castro (experimental poetry), Pierre Garnier (visual poetry), Arthur Petronio (verbofonía), Stephen Bank (Kinetic poetry), Franz Mon (Texts in space), Mario Chamie (praxis-poetry), Noigandres (concrete poetry) and Julien Blaine, whose text highlighted the potentiality of books for experimental art and poetry. In the catalogue, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño situated the Czech artists whose

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<sup>35</sup> On the idea of integration in the arts, see Juan Carlos Fernández Serrato, “La rebelión de los lenguajes: interrelación de las artes y poética experimental”, *EU-topias* vol. 16, 2018, 30-32, <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:133732> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>36</sup> *Rotor internacional Concordancia de las Artes*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Publicaciones Españolas, Col. Cuadernos de Arte, 1967).

<sup>37</sup> This postulate strongly echoes the issues addressed in the “New Tendencies” exhibitions and their connected activities in Zagreb, as well as the interest of the groups who gravitated around them (GRAV, Gruppo N, Gruppo MID, to mention a few). It is worth recalling that the cycle of conferences organised by the Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana at the German Institute in Madrid in 1967 and 1968 was titled “Nuevas Tendencias” (“New Tendencies”). On the New Tendencies, see Armin Medosch, *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961 - 1978)* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> *Rotor internacional Concordancia de las Artes*, unpaginated.



work was on view in the sphere of influence of Pierre Garnier and his spatialism, the intention of which, he insisted, was to ““defolklorise” languages, put them at the level of the cosmos”. Gomez de Liaño named Jiří Kolář, Jiří Valoch and more specifically, Bohumila Grögerová and Joseph Hiršal’s book *Job-Boj*, first issued in 1960-61 and which title can be translated as “The struggle of the youth”. According to Liaño, this type of work produced “a distancing by the means of humour, satire and the grotesque” and Ladislav Novák’s phonetic poems followed the same “satirical tendency”.<sup>39</sup>

Defolklorisation thus appeared as a central issue, and was strongly connected with the idea of concrete poetry as a “supranational language”. This idea would be exposed a few months later by the poet Eugen Gomringer, in the framework of the cycle of conferences “Nuevas Tendencias” in Madrid, also organised by the CPAA.<sup>40</sup> It also resonated with Max Bense’s idea according to whom “concrete poetry does not divide the language, but unifies it, merges it”, through a defining principle that made it “an authentically international poetic trend.<sup>41</sup>” Both reproduced in the catalogue of “Rotor internacional”, Bense’s affirmation and Gomringer’s statement had been retrieved from the Italian magazine *Modulo*, which first issue was a monograph dedicated to concrete poetry. Quotes from other authors had been retrieved from Pierre Garnier’s

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<sup>39</sup> “Este movimiento en Checoslovaquia ha ejercido influencia sobre Jiří Kolář, Jiří Valoch, Joseph Hiršal y Bohumila Grögerová, estos dos últimos en su libro “Job-Boj” (la lucha de los jóvenes), crean en el poema un distanciamiento crítico por medio del humor, la sátira y lo grotesco; Ladislav Novák participa también de esta tendencia satírica en algún poema fonético.” Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, “La nueva poesía y el problema de la estética contemporánea”, in *Rotor internacional Concordancia de las Artes*, unpaginated.

<sup>40</sup> In December 1967, Gomringer gave the conference “La poesía concreta como lengua supranacional” (“Concrete poetry as a supranational language”) in the framework of the cycle “Nuevas Tendencias” (“New Tendencies”) promoted by the Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana at the German Institute in Madrid. Other speakers included Reinhardt Döhl the same year and, for “Nuevas Tendencias 2” on 1968, Max Bense and Gerhardt Ruhm. Javier Maderuelo, “Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983”, in *La poesía experimental en España, 1963-1983*, exh. cat. (Heras: Ediciones La Bahía, 2014), 67.

<sup>41</sup> “La poesía concreta no divide la lengua, si no que la unifica, la funde. Corresponde, pues, a su intención lingüística si la poesía concreta ha suscitado por primera vez una corriente poética auténticamente internacional.” Max Bense, in *Rotor internacional Concordancia de las Artes*, unpaginated.

magazine *Les Lettres*.<sup>42</sup> These examples illustrate how much the local scenes—and more particularly, in the cases we are interested in, the Spanish, Italian and French scenes—were interconnected. Artists’ publications and magazines played a central role here, contributing to the circulation of common set of references and materials. We should insist in fact on the dynamic of translation of artistic and theoretical texts at work within these movements, often carried out by the protagonists themselves. While concrete poetry and, more broadly, experimental poetry were promoted as a common and supranational language that did not require translation, the attention given to translation in the context of the dissemination of the significant critical and theoretical apparatus that accompanied this movement should be highlighted. It gives in fact an interesting point of analysis and differentiation between, on the one hand, the universalist ambition of the creative practice and, on the other, its field of diffusion and the intellectual framework for which “traditional” communication remained essential for the inscription of this trend in a precise historical and cultural genealogy.

The will to inhabit language beyond any topical identification did not prevent artists from playing on the sonorities and consonances proper to a specific language, or from introducing cultural and even geopolitical references. We find in the catalogue of “Rotor internacional” a work by Valoch that consisted in a visual grid formed by the repetition of the letter “V”, declined through a series of geometrical modules. In contrast with the abstract character of the piece, its title, *Hommage to Vietnam* (1966), suggested a gesture of anti-imperialist solidarity with the East Asian country in war. **[Fig. 1.4 and 1.5]** Quite significantly though, the black and white reproduction in the Spanish catalogue came without title, thus suppressing this geopolitical reference. This was not an isolated case, the same happened with all the works reproduced in the exhibition catalogue. On the one hand, the absence of titles undoubtedly served—

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<sup>42</sup> *Modulo* 1, “poesia concreta”, Arrigo Lora Totino, ed., Turin, 1966, 9 (Bense) and 14 (Gomringer). This issue contained contributions by Hiršal, Grögerová, Kolář, Novák, Valoch and Havel. It is probable that it Julio Campal had access to this publication before he organised “Semana de poesia de vanguardia” at the Galeria Barandiarán in Bilbao, in September 1966. *Les Lettres* (subtitled “Poésie nouvelle-revue du spatialisme”) was published by Pierre Garnier between 1945 and 1967. It focused on experimental poetry from the 1960s on. The extract by Stephen Bann reproduced in “Rotor” was retrieved from *Les Lettres* 34, 1964.

voluntarily or not—the purpose of “defolklorisation” claimed by Gómez de Liaño by emphasising the international and abstract character of poetry. On the other hand, the public character of the exhibition and its large circulation across the Spanish state let us think that the organisers could have opted for such semantic neutrality in order to prevent censorship. The initiative was supported in fact by the Ministry of Information and Tourism which, as its name does not indicate, was in charge of cultural affairs and censorship, and as such, it had an official dimension. This particular fact led some artists, among whom ancient members of the literary section of *Problemática 63*, to accuse the CPAA of collaborating with the Francoist regime.<sup>43</sup> Such critiques emanating from another group of poets illustrate, on the one hand, the internal dissensions that permeated this scene of Spanish experimental poetry, on the other, the difficulty of keeping art free of any kind of official intervention. For those agents or, to borrow a term used at that time, “operators” who wanted to give avant-garde art a public visibility on the national territory, the “tactical and opportunistic use of the Francoist state networks at disposal” seemed in fact an unavoidable path.<sup>44</sup>

Regarding the political engagement of Spanish artists and collectives involved in experimental poetry at the end of the 1960s, the multiplicity of accounts that sometimes contrast with the revolutionary tone of the declarations and manifestos produced at that time has not really facilitated the identification of a coherent position between all.<sup>45</sup> For exemple, concerning the CPAA, Gómez de Liaño recently insisted that the vanguard position he and his comrades adopted was not political, but tried to

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<sup>43</sup> Perdura, “Palabras con Ignacio Gómez de Liaño”, *Perdura* 15, 1979, 121-5, cited in Albarrán and Benítez, “Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960-1980): ensayos, diálogos y zonas de contacto para la redefinición de un contexto”, 5.

<sup>44</sup> “No hay que olvidar que, para parte de los artistas participantes, estas relaciones se entendieron dentro de un uso táctico o oportunista de las redes del Estado franquista a disposición.” Barreiro López, “Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista”, 993. Regarding the use of “operator”, Juan Carlos Fernández Serrato has observed its widespread use among experimental poets, who tried to “bring their aesthetic work in line with the technical work of the engineer or the architect, thereby claiming recognition of the same social functionality for their experimental poetic proposals.” (“[...] intentando que su trabajo estético se emparentara con el trabajo técnico del ingeniero o el arquitecto y reclamando con ello el reconocimiento de la misma funcionalidad social para sus propuestas poéticas experimentales”). Fernández Serrato, “La rebelión de los lenguajes: interrelación de las artes y poética experimental”, 30.

<sup>45</sup> Barreiro López, “Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista”, 993-995.

bring about “a socio-cultural transformation.<sup>46</sup>” Gómez de Liaño’s differentiation is certainly important, because it dissociates him from a certain type of political commitment, namely that of the Spanish communists who were more involved in direct anti-Francoist struggle:

We were weirdos, but what happened was that what we were doing didn’t have much political implication. Neither we nor the New Figuration artists were Marxists, Maoists or communists. On the other hand, you have to bear in mind that the communists didn’t like all this experimentalism of ours very much either, eh? [...] [W]hat we did had socio-cultural implications, not political ones.

[...] Since I was a child I always lived the idea of freedom as something very individualistic. If I was against a dictatorship like Franco’s, I was also against a communist dictatorship. It was as simple as that. That didn’t mean that I didn’t have very good friends in the PCE. In fact, we must recognise that the Marxists were the ones who fought Franco the most. But mine, as I said before, was more a socio-cultural struggle for freedom of expression.<sup>47</sup>

This separation of the experimental avant-garde from a resolutely anti-Francoist left embodied by Marxist art critics and artists would crystallise and become particularly visible in 1972, in the context of the Pamplona Encounters (Encuentros de Pamplona, discussed in Chapter four), which saw two generations of artists confronting each other in relation to Francoism and the ways they faced it: ideological resistance on one side, counter-cultural struggle on the other.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ignacio Gómez de Liaño “Nuestro vanguardismo tuvo sobre todo implicaciones socioculturales, no políticas”, interview with Fran G. Matute, *Jotdown*, February 2019, <https://www.jotdown.es/2019/02/ignacio-gomez-de-liano-nuestro-vanguardismo-tuvo-sobre-todo-implicaciones-socioculturales-no-politicas/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Éramos bichos raros, lo que ocurre es que lo que hacíamos no tenía mucha implicación política. Ni nosotros ni los artistas de la Nueva Figuración éramos marxistas, maoístas o comunistas. Hay que tener en cuenta, por otro lado, que todos estos experimentalismos nuestros tampoco gustaban demasiado a los comunistas, ¿eh? [risas]. [...] lo nuestro sobre todo tuvo implicaciones socioculturales, no políticas. [...] Desde niño viví siempre la idea de la libertad como algo muy individualista. Si yo estaba en contra de una dictadura como la de Franco también lo estaba de una dictadura comunista. Era así de sencillo. Eso no quitaba para que luego tuviera muy buenos amigos en el PCE. De hecho, hay que reconocer que los marxistas fueron los que más combatieron a Franco. Pero lo mío, como te decía antes, fue más un combate sociocultural de libertad de expresión.” Gómez de Liaño “Nuestro vanguardismo tuvo sobre todo implicaciones socioculturales, no políticas”.

<sup>48</sup> See José Díaz Cuyás, “Literalismo y carnavalización en la última vanguardia”, in *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972. Fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2009), 16-55; on Marxist art criticism, see Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*, chapter four.

The dilemma faced by part of the Spanish avant-garde regarding its collaboration with the official cultural system certainly resonated with the situation of artists and cultural agents in socialist Central Europe. On both the Spanish and the Czechoslovak side—regarding the latter, especially after August 1968—, independence and autonomy were both a naive ambition and an unattainable objective, given that the whole public—and, to some extent, private—sphere was under the authorities’ control. Under these circumstances, artists interested in making experimental art publicly available to a broader audience, like Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, Fernando Millán or Jiří Valoch, had no choice but operating from within official or semi-official structures of diffusion.

At the same time, the variation of national cultural policies combined with specific socio-political conditions made each context difficult to understand for external actors. The discussions and internal tensions proper to the Spanish context remained beyond the grasp of Jiří Valoch, above all interested in sharing information and international collaboration. In the early 1970s, Valoch took himself the initiative to contact the poet José María Montells, asking him to send copies of the magazine of experimental poetry *Poliedros*, issued by his publishing house Parnaso 70. *Poliedros*—subtitled “Cuadernos para el monólogo...poético” (Notebooks for a poetic monologue)—was published by Montells in collaboration with an association of students from the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Madrid. Valoch’s request to Montells demonstrates that he was not only interested in exhibiting his own work abroad, but also in getting to know better the production from abroad and the channels through which it was diffused, especially printed media.<sup>49</sup> In his answer, Montells enclosed several issues of *Poliedros* as well as books of experimental poetry like his *La cabellera de Berenice* (1970) and Fernando Millán’s *Textos y antitextos* (1970).<sup>50</sup> Ironically enough, Montells himself was suspected to be close to the fascist and ultra-catholic right wing, an issue that would generate discomfort among the members of the Grupo N. O. and contribute to its

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<sup>49</sup> Fernando Millán and Jiří Valoch maintained an extensive correspondence, today conserved in the Archive Lafuente (Santander/Madrid). Maderuelo, “Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983”, 68.

<sup>50</sup> José María Montells to Jiří Valoch, letter dated 4 February 1971. Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

dissolution, in 1972.<sup>51</sup>

Constituted in 1968 after Campal's death, the Grupo N. O. brought together a group of artists close to *Problemática 63*, including Fernando Millán, Juan Carlos Aberásturi, Jokin Diez, Jesús García Sánchez and Enrique Uribe. They explicitly manifested their intention to pursue Campal's research in the field of experimental poetry, with an emphasis on teamwork and the divulgation of experimental art. Millán, who was particularly close to Campal, constantly insisted on the singularity of the Uruguayan poet. For him, Campal was the one who introduced an avant-garde approach in Spain, in the sense of "an ethical commitment with the will to change the situation". "The avant-gardist", observed Millán, "does not only want to change literature, he also wants it to participate in the change of society. [...] Until then, everything that had been done in Spain had been intimate, a private approach among artists".<sup>52</sup>

Between 1969 and the early 1970s, the Grupo N. O. maintained Campal's legacy and organised exhibitions relying on the materials collected by the deceased poet, while it sought at the same time to give visibility to its members' own work and foster international communication and collaboration.<sup>53</sup> Among the various events including works of Czech experimental poetry were the "Jornadas de documentación sobre poesía de vanguardia" ("Documentation days on avant-garde poetry") in May 1969 in Zaragoza, and "Poesía internacional de vanguardia" ("International avant-garde poetry") in March-April 1970 in Madrid. The first, conceived as a homage to Campal in collaboration with the *Oficina Poética Internacional* and the *Sociedad Dante Alighieri*, put materials from his collection in display—including works by Jiří

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<sup>51</sup> The fact that the dissolution of the Grupo N.O. would be due to this paradoxical collaborations was evoked in Carrillo and Estela, "Redes poéticas I: Poesía visual (1962-...)", 50.

<sup>52</sup> "Sin Campal no hubiéramos tenido un planteamiento vanguardista en el sentido completo de la palabra, puesto que el planteamiento vanguardista supone un compromiso ético con la voluntad de cambiar la situación. El vanguardista no quiere cambiar sólo la literatura, también se propone que ésta participe en el cambio de la sociedad. La vanguardia es una forma de desmesura que, con unos medios ridículos, quiere nada menos que cambiar todo; la referencia es utópica. Hasta ese momento todo lo que se había hecho en España había sido íntimo, un planteamiento privado entre artistas." De Francisco Guinea, "La poesía experimental en España en una conversación con Fernando Millán".

<sup>53</sup> On the Grupo N.O., see Maderuelo, "Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983", 62; Sarmiento, *La otra escritura: la poesía experimental española, 1960-1973*, 26-30.

Valoch, Bohumila Grögerová, Josef Hiršal, Ladislav Novák, and Eduard Ovčáček.<sup>54</sup> The second, at the Galeria Danae in Madrid, pretended to be an “exhibition-spectacle” through which the organizers wanted to demonstrate the “total” character of art and the indistinctiveness between art and life. In the exhibition leaflet, Fernando Millán proposed “freedom as a method” to create an art “at the service of human progress”. He adopted a militant tone to advocate for “a progressive art form of/for a revolutionary ideology” and insisted on the search for authenticity through a language that reflected the multiplicity of the present.<sup>55</sup> In addition to works on paper by Valoch, Grogerová and Hiršal, a specific section featured sound and performative works. The public was thus able to listen to Ladislav Novák’s sound poem *Ceterum autem* (1969). In an obsessive, yet playful incantation, the audible piece declined Cato the Elder’s words on the destruction of Carthago pronounced in front of the Roman Senate (“Ceterum auto censeo Cartaginem esse delendam”) and explored their rhythms and sonorities.<sup>56</sup>

#### 1.4. Affinities and exchange between zaj and Valoch

In their anthology of experimental poetry *La escritura en libertad*, published in 1975, Fernando Millán and Jesús García Sánchez formulated a rare attempt to discern points of junction between experimental practices from Spain and Czechoslovakia. They observed in fact similarities between Novák’s “semantic poems of action” and the production of the group zaj, the first to introduce action art in Spain in the form of events that combined avant-garde poetry, action music and theatre.<sup>57</sup> The affinities with zaj described above were indeed relevant, not only for Novák but also, as we

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<sup>54</sup> Maderuelo, “Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983”, 62.

<sup>55</sup> “[U]na forma artística progresiva de/para una ideología progresista”, Fernando Millán, in *Poesía internacional de vanguardia*, exh. leaflet, Galeria Danae, Madrid, 1970. The exhibition and its program of events were on view from 14 March to April 1970.

<sup>56</sup> See Marie Langerová, “Mluvim, a tedy jsem”, *Slovo a Smysl/Word & Sense* vol. 13, no. 26, 2016, 13-25.

<sup>57</sup> “Muy interesante es la denominación utilizada por el checoslovaco Ladislav Novav [sic]: “poemas semánticos de acción”. En este terreno son de destacar las producciones del grupo zaj, que durante años ha trabajado en España.” [“A very interesting term is the one used by the Czechoslovak Ladislav Novav [sic]: “semantic poems of action”. In this field, the productions of the zaj group, which has been working in Spain for years, are noteworthy.”] Fernando Millán and Jesús García Sánchez, “De la poesía experimental a la escritura en libertad”, in *La escritura en libertad. Antología de poesía experimental* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1975), 23.

shall see, in the case of Jiří Valoch, whose contacts with the group will be retraced here.

The exhibition “Poesia internacional de vanguardia” at the Galeria Danae featured an *Acoustic drawing* (*Akustická kresba*) (1969) by the Prague-based artist Milan Grygar, whose work was exhibited for the first time in Spain. Grygar’s acoustic drawings reflected his explorations of the translation (and transposition) of drawing into an audible matter. [Fig. 1.6] In these works, the gestuality performed while executing the drawing, the visual outcome and the sound produced and recorded during this creative process cohabited in a totally non-hierarchical way. Just a few weeks before the event at the Galeria Danae, Grygar’s work was mentioned in an article published in the Spanish magazine *Sonda*, signed by Jiří Valoch. [Fig. 1.7] This time, Valoch assumed the role of art critic to promote the work of his peer, highlighting the fact that Grygar escaped “the main contradiction of graphic music”, i.e., “the limited determination of the sonorous in relation to the graphic.” In Grygar’s acoustic drawings, he explained, “[t]he graphic values are not given by the random sound or graphic structure, but above all by their opposite determination”.<sup>58</sup>

*Sonda* was the bulletin of the Juventudes Musicales de Madrid, coordinated by the composers Ramón Barce and Tomás Marco and distributed freely to the members of the association. Valoch’s contribution resulted from an invitation by Barce, who specified that the article, on a subject of his choice, could be written in English, French or German.<sup>59</sup> Focused on graphic music from Czechoslovakia, the article produced by Valoch started by affirming that this production was a typical example of what North American artist Dick Higgins had defined as *intermedia*.<sup>60</sup> Besides

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<sup>58</sup> “Así logra el autor esquivar la principal contradicción de la música gráfica; es decir, la exigua determinación de lo sonoro con respecto a lo gráfico. Los valores gráficos, il explique, no vienen dados por la estructura aleatoria sonora o gráfica, sino sobre todo por su opuesta determinación.” Jiří Valoch, “Algunas observaciones sobre la música gráfica”, *Sonda* no. 5, April 1969, 6. The text was translated from German by Ramón Barce.

<sup>59</sup> Ramon Barce to Jiří Valoch, letter dated 5 September 1968. Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

<sup>60</sup> The term “intermedia” was first used by Dick Higgins in the first issue of the newsletter distributed to the buyers and correspondents of the publishing house Something Else Press, he founded in 1963. “Intermedia” referred to those practices that blurred the traditional boundaries of artistic media and languages and it was rapidly popularized through international networks such as the mail art network and Fluxus. Dick Higgins, *Something Else Newsletter* vol. 1, no. 1, “Intermedia”, February 1966, unpaginated.



Grygar, the article presented experiments by the artist Richard Brun from Brno and, in conclusion and in modest terms, Valoch's own research with score-poems. At the end of the article, Valoch invited artists and musicians to send materials for an exhibition planned to take place at the House of the Arts in Brno during the International Janacek Festival, in September 1969. He specified that the event, titled "Music Graphics", would include "graphic music, electronic music, aleatory scores with a visual interest and musical happenings scores".<sup>61</sup> The exhibition was eventually held in Brno as "Partitury" ("Score") and was partially reconstituted at the City Gallery in Prague in 1970, under the title "Music Graphics".<sup>62</sup>

Valoch's contribution to *Sonda* let appreciate once again how much his activities as an artist, an art critic and theorist, and a curator were interconnected, and confirms that his interests at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s merged poetry, music and the visual arts. Despite the communication barrier that was overcome in that case using an intermediate language (in this case, German), the Czech artist undoubtedly found in the Spanish experimental scene a space for dialogue and collaboration that reflected and nurtured his multiform practice. On the Spanish side, the inclusion of Valoch's article in *Sonda* reflected a broader interest on the part of its coordinators for ideas and practices from Central Europe, not only in the field of art but also of marxist philosophy, as shown by Ramón Barce's text "Comentarios a la estética de Lukács" ("Comments on the Aesthetics of Lukács") in which the author proceeded to a sharp and critical reading of the Hungarian philosopher.<sup>63</sup>

Besides his individual career as a composer and his activities in the framework of the Juventudes Musicales, Ramón Barce was also, along with the Spanish and Italian composers Juan Hidalgo and Walter Marchetti, one of the co-founders of the group

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<sup>61</sup> Valoch, "Algunas observaciones sobre la música gráfica", 8.

<sup>62</sup> The event is reported in Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 76-80.

<sup>63</sup> Barce formulated a critical analysis of Lukács' aesthetic system, departing from a factor of "artistic objectivation", rhythm, that allowed him to establish an original basis for artistic creation. Ramón Barce, "Comentarios a la estética de Lukács", *Sonda* no. 5, April 1969, 9-18.

zaj, in 1964. He rapidly left the group, however, invoking economic reasons.<sup>64</sup> Hidalgo and Marchetti had met in 1956 in Milan, where they were trained in the electroacoustic music studio of the Italian composer Bruno Maderna.<sup>65</sup> Their encounter with John Cage at the Darmstadt International Summer Course for New Music (Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik) in 1958 and the friendship that arose were fundamental for their orientation towards a “music of action”. This experimental form relied on the spatial and temporal structure of music to introduce non conventional gestures and objects.<sup>66</sup> The duo Hidalgo-Marchetti moved back to Spain in 1960, where they met Ramón Barce.<sup>67</sup> The 19 November 1964, zaj performed its first collective action titled *Transfer of three objects by foot* (*Traslado a pie de tres objetos*) in the streets of Madrid. The invitation to the action provided a detailed information on its execution:

zaj invites you to the transfer on foot of three objects of complex shape, built in poplar wood and whose dimensions are 1,80x0,70, 1,80x0,70 and 2x1,80 (two of them can be considered as complementary), by the following itinerary [...] with a total distance of 6300 m carried out by Juan Hidalgo Walter Marchetti Ramón

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<sup>64</sup> When Ramón Barce invited Jiří Valoch to contribute to *Sonda* in 1968, the composer was not part of zaj anymore. His reasons for leaving the group in 1965 were mostly economical. In a letter to Juan Hidalgo, Barce explained that he was forced to abandon his zaj activities because some people he was financially dependent on were scandalised and wouldn't have renewed his work contract. Juan Hidalgo, “Zaj”, in *Revista de Letras* n°3, Universidad de Puerto Rico in Mayagüez, September 1969, 432-433, cited in Rosa María Rodríguez Hernández, “La creación Zaj de Ramón Barce formulada desde la memoria (1ª parte)”, *Itamar. Revista de investigación musical: territorios para el arte*, no. 2, 2009, 239.

<sup>65</sup> Henar Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, *Hispanic Issues On Line* no. 21, Fall 2018, 139. On zaj's trajectory, see also *Zaj*, José Antonio Sarmiento, ed., exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1996); Julio Pérez Manzanares, *Juan Hidalgo y Zaj: arte subversivo durante el franquismo* (Madrid: Huerga y Fierro editores, S.L.U., 2018); Diego Luna, *Zaj: arte y política en la estética de lo cotidiano* (Sevilla: Athenaica Ediciones Universitarias, 2015).

<sup>66</sup> Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, 140; see also José Antonio Sarmiento, “El recorrido Zaj”, in *Zaj*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1996), 14-24.

<sup>67</sup> Both as a group and through their individual production, the members of zaj were open to collaboration with other artists from the field of intermedia practices. After Barce left zaj at the end of 1965, the group was joined in 1966 by the poet and diplomat José-Luis Castillejos (who left “zaj” at the end of 1969) and, in 1967, by the artist and performer Esther Ferrer. Hidalgo, Marchetti and Ferrer remained the core members of the group and decided to dissolve it in 1996, on the occasion of its retrospective at the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid. Sarmiento, “El recorrido Zaj”, 14-24.

Barce.<sup>68</sup>”

Its distinctive feature, however, was that the invitation reached its recipients one week after the action took place, thus making impossible any public participation. The action’s delayed acknowledgement raised the question of the relationship between artistic practice and a non-specialist sphere of reception, assuming, in Mayayo and Marzo’s words, the “discomfort of the art audience”.<sup>69</sup> As Hénar Rivière well observed, the group’s beginnings with an “impossible” invitation and an “anonymous route” would mark its constant desire to displace and alter the rules of the game, in a context of cultural repression imposed by the Francoist regime:

By sending the invitation to the *Traslado* once it was over, zaj anticipated the marginality to which it knew it was condemned in Franco’s Spain and chose it as its alternative, demonstrating that it did not need the attention of a public that was aware of being so. In this way it declared a stateless war on the status quo; a war without a desire for conquest, which consisted of accepting the margin, settling in it and dilating it until a new space was opened up in it.<sup>70</sup>

Evolving in the realm of the nonsensical without expecting any recognition, zaj created and occupied a space of independence from the institutions, but also from the public; this self-attributed marginality didn’t prevent their actions, however, to be seen as a threat to the regime, leading to censorship and, finally, to zaj’s decision to perform exclusively out of Spain after 1972 and, for some members, to go into exile.

Valoch and zaj shared the same interest in visual creations and artefacts that established a playful relation to language and orality. The Czech artist was in possession of books from members of zaj that followed the principles of non semantic

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<sup>68</sup> “zaj invitad a vd. al traslado a pie de tres objetos de forma compleja, construidos en madera de chopo y cuyas dimensiones son 1,80x0,70, 1,80x0,70 y 2x1,80 (pudiendo ser considerados dos de ellos como complementarios), por el itinerario siguiente [...] con un recorrido total de 6300 m realizado por Juan Hidalgo Walter Marchetti Ramón Barcelona.” zaj, invitation card, 1964.

<sup>69</sup> Marzo and Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939-2015): ideas, prácticas, políticas*, 246.

<sup>70</sup> “Al enviar la invitación al Traslado una vez concluido, zaj se anticipaba a la marginalidad a la que se sabía condenado en la España de Franco y la escogía como su alternativa, demostrando que no le resultaba imprescindible la atención de un público consciente de serlo. Le declaraba así una guerra apátrida al statu quo; una guerra sin afán de conquista, que consistía en aceptar el margen, instalarse en él y dilatarlo hasta abrir en él un nuevo espacio.” Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, 142.

poetry and language: José Luis Castillejos' *La caída del avión en el terreno baldío* (1966) and Juan Hidalgo's *Viaje a Argel* (1967), two important pieces in the context of Spanish experimental literature.<sup>71</sup> An autobiographical fiction, Castillejos' book was "a set of loose, unbound pages, collected in a cardboard box, which question the Western idea of order and which question the syntax and prosody of narrative discourse."<sup>72</sup> It was produced in Algiers where the poet, who was also a diplomat, was residing as a consul. Invited by him to spend the summer of 1966, Juan Hidalgo created *Viaje a Algiers*, characterized by a cyclic composition of texts, signs and images printed in green (a colour closely linked to Islam and the Arab world) on white paper. Posterior pieces created collectively or individually by members of *zaj* further explored the possibilities on non semantic poetry and language, in relation with sound and gesture. For Valoch, "[t]he poem became [...] more and more an aesthetic structure whereas the semantic dimension was increasingly relegated to the background. Non-semantic typewriter poems and visual poems with extremely reduced semantic material evolved at the same time."<sup>73</sup>

There is evidence of direct contact and dialogue between Valoch and *zaj* in Valoch's piece *3 texts to Juan Hidalgo & all Zaj Friends* (1968) [Fig. 1.8]. It consisted in a vertical cardboard paper folded in three with an inscription on each part: "Zaj but not Zaj..."; "Make Zaj not war"; "Zaj is also much better than Zaj". On the other side, the inscription "brno, checoslovaquia (Czechoslovakia in Spanish language) figured with the title, name of the artist and date. Valoch was playing with the composition and sonority of the word "zaj", adopted by the founders of the group precisely for its absence of meaning in Spanish language and for its inclusion of the typical sounds "z" and "j", foreigners usually find difficult to pronounce.<sup>74</sup> While

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<sup>71</sup> Maderuelo, "Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983", 75.

<sup>72</sup> "[...] un conjunto de paginas sueltas, sin encuadernar, recogidas en una caja de cartón, que ponen en crisis la idea occidental de orden y que cuestionan la sintaxis y la prosodia propias del discurso narrativo." Maderuelo, "Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983", 75. On both books, see also Marzo and Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939-2015): ideas, prácticas, políticas*, 325; Rivière, "La escritura performativa del grupo *zaj*: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras", 149-151 and 152-155.

<sup>73</sup> Valoch, statement for the anthology of Czech visual poetry of the sixties "Der Würfelwurf", 118.

<sup>74</sup> Juan Hidalgo, "Zaj y Fluxus", interview by Octavio Zaya, *Arena internacional del arte* 2, 1989, 68-75, cited in Rivière, "La escritura performativa del grupo *zaj*: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras", 164.

refusing any identification with a Spanish national context, zaj was at the same time inscribing itself in it and recalling its belonging to that context through the use of idiosyncratic sounds and signs, starting with its proper name. For Ramón Barce, who was at the origin of the name,

[...] it is a well-known fact that when we listen to a conversation or a monologue in our own language, the “meaning” takes up all our attention, so much so that it is practically impossible for us to “hear” the phonetics, the pure sonority, (“the music”) of the words. Conversely, if the language being spoken is unknown to us, we understand very little or nothing, so that semantic attention almost disappears, and we can fully attend to the “sonority” of that language.<sup>75</sup>

In this process of discovering an unknown word, Valoch’s attention had been captured by the visual and acoustic properties of the word “zaj” and its incidental resonance with Central European languages. In fact, “zaj” means noise in Hungarian, busy in Polish, and composes the word “tomorrow” in Czech and Slovak (zajtra), while “ja” means “I”. The plasticity and versatility of the word “zaj” recalled certain poems by Valoch (*Two interlinguistic poems*, 1966), Bohumila Grögerová and Josef Hiršal (*Job Boj*) and Eduard Ovčáček in which the poets manipulated letters and sounds.<sup>76</sup>

Playing with the word’s sonority and its inscription in short aphorisms that conveyed an apparently meaningless message, *3 texts to Juan Hidalgo & all Zaj Friends* seemed to establish a dialogue with a piece titled *ZUJ (Three elements)* (1968) attributed to the Spanish group, of which Valoch had received an exemplary by mail.

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<sup>75</sup> “Es de todos conocido el hecho de que, cuando oímos una conversación o un monólogo cualquiera en nuestro propio idioma, el “significado” acapara toda nuestra atención, hasta el punto de que nos es prácticamente imposible “escuchar” la fonética, la sonoridad pura, (“la música”) de las palabras. Por el contrario, si el idioma en que se habla nos es desconocido, entendemos muy poco o nada, con lo que la atención semántica casi desaparece, y podemos atender plenamente a la “sonoridad” de ese idioma”. Ramón Barce cited in Rodríguez Hernández, “La creación Zaj de Ramón Barce formulada desde la memoria (1ª parte)”, 270.

<sup>76</sup> In her anthology of concrete poetry published in 1968, U.S. poet Mary Ellen Solt observed that ““Boj” means “fight” or “action.” “Job” is not a Czech word, but it mirrors “boj” by printing it backwards as if it had been blotted by folding the paper. [...] Each poem in JOB BOJ employs a completely different method. Some are of graphic as well as of semantic-linguistic interest. Their overall intent is to reveal the world as mixed up and chaotic. In “sobectvi” (“egoism”) the meaning is brought out by breaking a rule of capitalization. In Czech “ja” (“I”) is never capitalized. “Ty” (“thou” or “you”) would be capitalized in a letter if someone were being spoken to directly.” Mary Ellen Solt, “Czechoslovakia”, in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), retrieved from <https://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/czech.html> (Accessed May 2020).

In addition to action music and performance, zaj was in fact also actively engaged in the production of multiple printed works that circulated through the international mail art and Fluxus networks. While being close to Fluxus in its methods and its inscription of art in the ordinary life, zaj has always refused to be exclusively associated with it and to integrate Georges Maciunas' sphere of influence.<sup>77</sup> As for Valoch, he never defined himself as a Fluxus artist either and was seen by certain artists as a “para-Fluxus” artist, who remained on the margins of the network while using its contacts to diffuse his own work.<sup>78</sup>

The pieces produced by zaj, called “cartones” (“cardboards”), were intended to inform about an action that had taken place or was about to take place, or to spread a poetic-linguistic message. *ZUJ (Three elements)* [Fig. 1.9] consisted in three-piece puzzle formed by one central rectangular piece with the top side pointed, and two triangles interlocking on each sides in a way that formed a larger triangle. Each element was cut from a brightly coloured cardboard (pink or light green) and carried a black print letter to form the word, or rather the onomatopoeia “Zuj”, once the three pieces were assembled. Each part of the puzzle also indicated “R.Cortes zaj Madrid, 1968”, referring to the artist Ramiro Cortés who, at that time, collaborated with zaj and used the group's framework to produce and diffuse multiple works on paper—as part of the network of the “friends of zaj” evoked in Valoch's piece.

### 1.5. Poor materials, “cartones” and backwardness

In its first years of activity, the concerts and musical actions performed by zaj were characterized by a “poor materialization” based on simple and inexpensive objects and materials: an apple, rope, metal buckets, pipes...<sup>79</sup> As José Antonio Sarmiento noted, such actions “do not require a great deployment of means. The elements used

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<sup>77</sup> In a letter to Juan Hidalgo, Maciunas proposed him to join Fluxus and merge into the movement—and abandon the name “zaj”, which the group was not interested in. Juan Hidalgo, “Zaj y Fluxus”, cited in Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, 164.

<sup>78</sup> Valoch's designation as a “para-Fluxus” artist was attributed by Ben Vautier. Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 50.

<sup>79</sup> The term “poor materialization” was used by Juan Albarrán to refer to Spanish conceptualism, as a feature that distinguishes it from the “tautological radicalism of analytical and linguistic proposals.” Juan Albarrán, *Del fotoconceptualismo al fototableau: fotografía, performance y escenificación en España (1970-2000)* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2012), 106.

are of extreme poverty. As in their lives, poverty dominates their actions. What is significant are the objects exhibited and the atmosphere created.<sup>80</sup> If we consider the work of Central European artists of that period, it is not unusual to detect a similar tendency towards an economy of means in what Pavlina Morganová have designated as “demonstrations of things”.<sup>81</sup> Poets like Ladislav Novák and Jiří Kolář, visual and action artists like Milan Knížák, Július Koller, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch or also, in Hungary, Tamás Szentjóby, to mention a few, were also developing at that time works and actions that used simple elements borrowed from everyday life and their own body. They sometimes included absurd and humorous elements. We can also relate to this trend Tadeusz Kantor and his interest for “poor reality”, as well as Jerzy Grotowski’s idea of “poor theatre”, as essential protagonists of such exploration of insignificant, cheap and even invisible means in the field of experimental theatre.<sup>82</sup> The fact that Grotowski was invited to the Pamplona Encounters in 1972 (he didn’t attend the event but was represented by Ludwik Flaszen) points at the interest of the Spanish experimental scene for a theatrical language that privileged an economy of means. It resonated with activities carried out by zaj (whose members performed in Pamplona) and artists like Nacho Criado or Jordi Benito.<sup>83</sup>

We have already signaled that the pieces realized by zaj and put into circulation through the mail art network were designated as “cartones” (“cardboards”). The group often used materials discarded by printing companies due to their inappropriate

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<sup>80</sup> “En su desarrollo, estas acciones no necesitan de un gran despliegue de medios. Los elementos utilizados son de una pobreza extrema. Al igual que en sus vidas, la pobreza domina sus actos. Lo que es significativo son los objetos exhibidos y el ambiente creado.” Sarmiento, “El recorrido Zaj”, 14-24.

<sup>81</sup> Morganová used the expression to refer to Milan Knížák’s early installations in the street, consisting of everyday objects on the road that confronted “the random viewer with an unexpected experience directly within his everyday space.” She also specifies that a human figure could appear in these “short-terms exhibitions” in public spaces. Pavlina Morganová, *Czech action art* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2014), 50.

<sup>82</sup> This aspect of Kantor’s work has been analysed in Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989* (London: IB Tauris, 2014), 19-22 and 29.

<sup>83</sup> Valoch also participated in the Pamplona Encounters. However, his presence at one of the most important events for the visibility and consolidation of new artistic languages in Spain happened through the intermediation of a cultural agent from Argentina—and probably without his own knowledge. This issue is addressed in Chapter 4. Regarding Nacho Criado, Jordi Benito and zaj’s interventions in Pamplona, see the exhibition catalogue *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972. Fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, 260-61; 280-83 and 204-209.

format or color.<sup>84</sup> At the same period, the Yugoslav artist Mladen Stilinović used the expression “cardboard design” to refer to his conceptual work. For Stilinović, the “messiness” of his art and that of other artists were in contrast with the “Western way”:

And I don't mean only the artists from ex-Yugoslavia, but also from Eastern Europe at the time. This certainly had to do with the lack of adequate technology and the fact that artists had to do everything themselves. It was also clear that the works weren't going to sell.<sup>85</sup>

Stilinović also talked of “dirty minimalism” regarding his books, specifying that they “included no technology and no geometry aesthetics”.<sup>86</sup> Creators from socialist Eastern Europe—and through the example of Stilinović, this is extended to non-aligned Yugoslavia—and Spain showed little interest in tautological and linguistic inquiries at a time when Anglo-American artists were reflecting on these issue.<sup>87</sup> While particular emphasis has been placed on the influence of Fluxus on practices that claimed the inclusion of life—including its daily and trivial materials—into art and vice-versa, we should also distinguish in the examples we have just mentioned a more prosaic reflection of artists' particular economic condition and its correlated relationship to consumption.<sup>88</sup> Although Francoist Spain and socialist Eastern Europe had entered a

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<sup>84</sup> zaj relied particularly on the generosity of the printer “Artes Gráficas Pérez”, from Madrid, who let the group use its structures and materials. Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, 143-144.

<sup>85</sup> Mladen Stilinović, “Living Means Never Having to Attend Court”, interview with Branka Stipančić, in *Mladen Stilinović—Umetnik na delu 1973-1983/Artist at Work 1973-1983*, exh.cat., Branka Stipančić, Alenka Gregorič ed. (Galerija ŠKUC, Ljubljana, 2005), 35.

<sup>86</sup> Stilinović, “Living Means Never Having to Attend Court”, 29.

<sup>87</sup> Among the representatives of this trend were Lawrence Weiner, Edward Ruscha, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry and Art & Language. See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972* (1st ed. 1973) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>88</sup> On the reception of Fluxus by Central and Eastern European artists, see Petra Stegmann, *Fluxus East: Fluxus-Netzwerke in Mitteleuropa*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007); Petra Stegmann, “Fluxus in Prague: The Koncert Fluxu of 1966”, in Jerome Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski ed., *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 241-254; Tomáš Pospiszyl, “Fluxus in the Czech Lands and Czechs in Flux: Communication Networks, Information Services, and the Art World Hierarchy”, in Tomáš Pospiszyl, *An Associative Art History: Comparative Studies of Neo-Avant-Gardes in a Bipolar World* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier; Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2018), 146-179; Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, 158-161.



phase of industrial expansion that resulted to a greater access to consumer goods in the 1960s and early 1970s, this situation, as already evoked in our introduction, was not comparable with that of Western capitalist societies. In addition to this, the weight of authoritarian regimes could function in both cases as inhibitors and induce artists to avoid any kind of “brightness” that would bring attention to them.

Helena Musilová has reported a significant episode in which the “poor” character of artworks produced in Czechoslovakia was subject to discussion, involving Jiří Valoch and the Slovak art historian and critic Tomáš Štrauss. The triggering factor of this discussion was the series of exhibitions organised by the Club of Concretists in different locations in Czechoslovakia between 1968 and 1970, with the participation of a large number of local and foreign artists—part of them also exhibited in the “New Tendencies” exhibitions in Zagreb. These initiatives emanating were criticised for the versatility of the exhibited works (spanning from constructivist pieces, visual and concrete poetry, kinetic art, action art and conceptual art) and their “occasional uneven quality”.<sup>89</sup> Musilová’s account on this respect is clear enough:

It is rather paradoxical that the most serious question was not the authentic of “false” Constructivism and the desired scope of such an exhibition [...], but the way of processing the individual works. Eva Šefčáková in her would-be humorous review criticized it for cheapness and low-quality materials, and for its “grasping” and “squeaking breaks”, opining that the Slovak and Czech works were poor and ungraspable copies as compared to the precise, brilliant works from abroad.<sup>90</sup>

Reactions to this interpretation, which minimised the importance of local contributions in favour of a supposedly more advanced and better-made foreign model, were not long in coming. While Jiří Valoch “blamed Šefčáková for failing to understand the concept and claimed that exactly the “failures” could stand for the

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<sup>89</sup> Musilová stressed that in contrast, the international exhibition “New Sensitivity” (“Nová citlivost”) organised by Valoch in Spring 1967 at the House of Arts in Brno, then in Karlovy Vary and Prague, had been well perceived. Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 64-65.

<sup>90</sup> Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 65-66. This aspect can be also connected with other notions important in this dissertation, like the possibility of “failure” claimed by contextual and sociological artists (see Chapter two) and the heated debates regarding the “mediocrity” of non Western art in the context of the international exhibitions (like the Venice Biennale, see Chapter six).

intention”, Tomáš Štrauss insisted that ““technical perfectionism” did not necessarily mean artistic value”.<sup>91</sup>

This debate makes apparent a question that keeps coming up when studying Eastern European art, especially in the context of its circulation and exhibition: that of the differentiated judgement between a production from East of the Iron Curtain considered as necessarily backward and provincial, and a model from Western capitals with all the attributes of modernity: novelty, originality, radicalism, and technical perfection. In this particular case, it is significant that the critiques did not emanate from a Western observer but from a local art critic, showing to what extent binary views involving quality on the one hand and mediocrity and approximation on the other had been integrated and normalized in discourses on art.

Despite the density of contacts and the regular presence of Czechoslovak artists on the Spanish scene from 1966 onwards, one may be surprised not to detect more reciprocity in the exchanges. In fact, among the numerous exhibitions organised by Jiří Valoch, especially in Brno, not a single one was devoted to Spanish artists, and no Spanish artist’s name appeared in collective shows. A rare evidence of direct dialogue between Valoch and artists from Spain, the piece *3 texts to Juan Hidalgo and Zaj friends* shows at the same time how much the Czech artist and the members of *zaj* were close in terms of exploration of the non-semantic properties of language and incursion in the universe of contemporary music—for Valoch, as an enlightened “amateur” and for Hidalgo, Marchetti and Barce, as professional composers. The normalisation period in Czechoslovakia certainly frustrated any intention to establish closer collaborations with artists from this part of Southern Europe. At the same time, the orientation of Valoch’s practice towards a greater presence of visual elements and photographic records in his work over the 1970s may also have influenced this progressive shift. This change, reflected in the whole field of experimental poetry, was pointed at by Fernando Millán and Jesús García Sánchez in 1975 as a “new way of perceiving—and living—poetry and art”.<sup>92</sup> In fact, their attempt of compiling an

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<sup>91</sup> Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 66.

<sup>92</sup> “[...] una nueva forma de percibir—y vivir—la poesía y el arte.” Millán and García Sánchez, “De la poesía experimental a la escritura en libertad”, 12.

anthology of concrete poetry in 1975 turned into a survey on intermedia productions:

[...] from day to day and in an increasingly striking manner, numerous operators, with already considerable work and experience in experimental poetry, have been entering fields and works that are difficult to typify. At the same time, our verification of the results achieved by the most advanced tendencies in other fields (music, plastic arts, etc.), the—sometimes apparent, sometimes profound—coincidences that in numerous cases have occurred between authors considered poets and other musicians or painters, and in short the intrinsic value of these new contributions to the living art of our time, confirmed to us the interest of a publication that would take into account these new realities.<sup>93</sup>

The substantial number of artists from Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia included in the book illustrated the editors' increasing contacts and access to information on creators who mixed poetry with action, plastic intervention and photography.<sup>94</sup> The relationship with poetry, on the other hand, was becoming increasingly tenuous in the mid-1970s.

## **2. Italian connections. A multidirectional exchange (1969-1977)**

### **2.1. Ugo Carrega's Central-European network**

If the relations between Jiří Valoch and his Spanish correspondents did not result in a greater visibility of the latter in Czechoslovakia, nor in monographic initiatives dedicated to Czech artists in Spain, his exchanges with Italian operators resulted in several events and publications in Czechoslovakia and Italy.

In the 1960s, Italy was experiencing a great effervescence in the cultural field with the emergence of various literary and artistic groups that sought to address the radical

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<sup>93</sup> “[...] de día en día y de una manera cada vez mas llamativa, numerosos operadores, con una ya considerable obra y experiencia en poesía experimental, se habían ido introduciendo en unos campos y en unos trabajos difícilmente tipificables. Al mismo tiempo, la comprobación de los resultados ofrecidos por las más avanzadas tendencias en otros campos (música, plástica, etc.), las coincidencias —aparentes unas veces, profundas otras— que en numerosos casos se han dado entre autores considerados poetas y otros músicos o pintores, y en definitiva el valor intrínseco de estas nuevas aportaciones al arte vivo de nuestro tiempo, nos confirmaron el interés de una publicación que tuviera en cuenta estas nuevas realidades.” Millán and García Sánchez, “De la poesía experimental a la escritura en libertad”, 13.

<sup>94</sup> *La escritura en libertad. Antología de poesía experimental* documented works by the Polish, Czech and Yugoslav artists Wanda Gołkowska, Ewa Partum, Petr Štembera, Jiří Kolář, Jiří Valoch, Miroljub Todorović, Franci Zagornicnik and Katalin Ladik.

changes introduced by socioeconomic transformations. They criticised the model of consumption and access to media images these transformations entailed, both in the field of contemporary artistic production and in the social field. Initiated in 1963 in Florence by Lamberto Pignotti and Eugenio Miccini, the Gruppo 70 was joined by poets, writers, critics, painters and musicians whose activities explored the relationship between literature, image and society, with particular attention to language and new themes related to technological and scientific development.<sup>95</sup> Operative until 1968, the Gruppo 70 was at the origin of conferences, exhibitions and publications in which creators explored the universe of mass communication from a critical perspective—according to Eugenio Miccini, visual poetry could operate as a “Trojan horse” or a guerrilla weapon against art’s recuperation and fetishisation by the capitalist system.<sup>96</sup> The members of the group also collaborated with individuals and experimental spaces from other Italian regions. In parallel to the Gruppo 70 and with numerous points of contact, the Gruppo 63 was created in Palermo in 1963 and brought together an important number of writers and intellectuals from the whole peninsula. Often in connection with Marxist ideas and not without polemics, the members of the group advocated a break with traditional writing and demanded literary freedom.<sup>97</sup> Until its dissolution in 1969, the group disseminated its ideas in publications such as *Il Verri*, *Marcatré*, *Malebolge*, *Grammatica* and *Quindici*. Around 1967, *Quindici* opened a space where the intentions of the avant-garde

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<sup>95</sup> The origin of the group is attributed to the symposium *Arte y Comunicazione* organised in May 1963 in Florence by Lamberto Pignotti, Eugenio Miccini, Sergio Salvi and Silvio Ramat. Giuseppe Chiari, Lucia Marcucci, Ketty La Rocca, Luciano Ori. For a detailed account of the group’s constitution and activities, see Teresa Spignoli, “Gruppo 70”, biographical note in *Le Culture del Dissenso*, project led by the Università degli Studi di Firenze, <https://www.culturedeldissenso.com/gruppo-70/> (Accessed May 2020); *La poesia in immagine/l’immagine in poesia. Gruppo 70. Firenze 1963-2013*, Teresa Spignoli, Marco Corsi, Federico Fastelli and Maria Carla Papini ed. (Pisano di Prato: Campanotto, 2014).

<sup>96</sup> Eugenio Miccini, *Poesia e/o poesia. Situazione della poesia visiva italiana*, Eugenio Miccini ed., (Brescia-Florence: Edizioni Sarmic, 1972), cited in Spignoli, “Gruppo 70”.

<sup>97</sup> The main promoters of the group were Nanni Balestrini, Renato Barilli, Fausto Curi, Umberto Eco, Alfredo Giuliani, Angelo Guglielmi, Elio Pagliarani, Antonio Porta and Edoardo Sanguineti, while others participated. For more details on the participants and the story of the group, see Renato Barilli, *La neoavanguardia italiana. Dalla nascita del “Verri” alla fine di “Quindici”* (Lecce: Manni, 2006), and Francesco Muzzioli, *Il Gruppo 63: istruzioni per la lettura* (Roma: Odradek, 2013); Umberto Eco, “Il Gruppo 63, quarant’anni dopo”, lecture given for the fortieth anniversary of Gruppo 63, Bologna, 8 May 2003, retrieved from <http://www.umbertoeco.it/CV/Il%20Gruppo%2063,%20quarant'annin%20dopo.pdf> (Accessed May 2020). See also Giovanna Lo Monaco, “Gruppo 63”, biographical note in *Le Culture del Dissenso*, <https://www.culturedeldissenso.com/gruppo-63/> (Accessed May 2020).

movement met (and shocked) with the oppositional dimension of the students and autonomist movements, leading to the dissolution of the Gruppo 63. From the 1960s onwards, the Italian context was increasingly marked by debates in which the question of new artistic expressions was linked to radical political thoughts, often in dialogue with other realities.<sup>98</sup> In parallel with the ramified activities of the Gruppo 70 and the Gruppo 63, numerous self-managed initiatives created and disseminated experimental writing and visual poetry throughout the country. Due to the great dynamism of artistic research in the field of visual and concrete poetry, Italy became an important space of convergence for artists from different origins, East and West of the Iron Curtain.<sup>99</sup>

Among the artists who had early contacts with Central Europe was Ugo Carrega, an artist and poet actively involved in international networks.<sup>100</sup> Aged thirty-five in 1970, Genoa-born Carrega had started to write poetry in the 1950s, introducing visual components in his works at the end of the decade. He was at the origin of several publications dedicated to visual poetry: after the magazine *Ana Eccetera* in 1963, Carrega founded the magazine *Tool* in 1965, through which he diffused his ideas on “symbiotic writing”, a new expression in which verbal and graphical signs composed a joint expression he called “Nuova scrittura” (“New Writing”). For Carrega, “symbiotic writing refers to all poetic operations that take into account the interaction

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<sup>98</sup> These questions led to a meeting with Spanish critics and writers organised in 1967 at the Escola EINA in Barcelona; on this issue see Paula Barreiro López, “Apuntes sobre los “Diálogos de Eina”: transferencias culturales y circulaciones en los territorios cruzados del arte y la literatura”, unpublished paper, presented in the context of the conference *Cien años de transferencias culturales: Barcelona 1888-1992/One Hundred Years of Cultural Transfer: Barcelona 1888-1992* (Universidad Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, 24-26 November 2016); also Paula Barreiro López, “El giro sociológico de la crítica de arte durante el tardofranquismo”, in Jesus Carrillo and Jaime Vindel ed., *Desacuerdos 8. Sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado español* (Granada/Barcelona/Madrid/Sevilla: Centro José Guerrero, MACBA, MNCARS and UNIA, 2014), 16-36.

<sup>99</sup> On this respect, see the important research realized in the framework of the already mentioned project *Le Culture del Dissenso* at the Università degli Studi di Firenze, dedicated to the definition of a European identity between Italy, France and the Soviet Union (1956-1991) <https://www.culturedeldissenso.com> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>100</sup> Carrega participated in several artistic events in Spain, jus as Valoch. His works were exhibited in the “Semana de poesia de vanguardia” organised by Julio Campal at the Galeria Barandiarán in Bilbao, 1966; in “Poesia internacional de vanguardia” at the Galeria Danae in Madrid and “Odologia 2000” at the Casa de Cultura in Burgos, both organised by Fernando Millán in 1970. Millán was among Carrega’s main contacts from Spain and the work of the Spanish artist circulated in numerous publications and exhibitions in Italy.

between verbal and graphic signs. ART AS THE SCIENCE OF ART. CULT OF JOY AND RHYTHM".<sup>101</sup> He shared his ideas with a group of artists composed by Rodolfo Vitone, Lino Matti, Vincenzo Accame, Rolando Mignani and Liliana Landi, who published their works in *Tool*. In 1966, Carrega moved to Milan and went on developing his artistic activity at the same time he carried out an significant work of promotion and diffusion of visual poetry from other authors.<sup>102</sup> In 1968, *Tool* started to include a news bulletin, *Bollettino Tool*, that provided information related to visual poetry in Italy and abroad, thus contributing to shape a community of international creators aware of each other's work. This model recalled Dick Higgins' *Something Else Newsletter* and anticipated newsletters associated with mail art, which diffusion would increase in the 1970s.<sup>103</sup> In the 1970s, Carrega created several spaces to improve knowledge and research on contemporary experimental poetry: the Centro Suolo, opened in Genova in 1969 for a few months only; the Centro Tool in Milan, inaugurated in January 1971 for one year and reopened between October 1972 and June 1973. Finally, the Mercato del Sale which opened in April 1974 and became a central space for the diffusion of Italian new writing and similar practices from abroad. Carrega also exhibited personally in different spaces and collaborated in the early 1970s with the Galleria Arturo Schwarz in Milan. The gallery was among the few commercial spaces in Italy that exhibited artists from socialist Central Europe and in particular Czechoslovakia, in particular thanks to Arturo Schwarz's collaboration with the Czech art critic and historian Jindřich Chaloupecký (see Chapter three).

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<sup>101</sup>“Con scrittura simbiotica si intendono tutte le operazioni poetiche che tengono presente l'interazione fra segni verbali e segni grafici. ARTE COME SCIENZA DELL'ARTE. CULTO DELLA GIOIA E DEL RITMO”. This definition was printed at the foot of the *Tool* letter paper used by Carrega. Ugo Carrega to Jiří Valoch, letter date 1 November 1967, Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

<sup>102</sup> Publications about Carrega include *Ugo Carrega*, Aldo Rossi and Teresa Balboni ed. (Roma: Carucci, 1976); *Poesia visiva 1963-1988. 5 maestri: Ugo Carrega, Stelio Maria Martini, Eugenio Miccini, Lamberto Pignotti, Sarenco*, Eugenio Miccini and Sarenco ed. (Verona, Edizioni Cooperativa “La Favorita”, 1988); Giorgio Zanchetti, ed., *Emorragia dell'io: l'esperimento di poesia di Ugo Carrega* (Milano: Archivio di Nuova Scrittura, 1995). See also the biography published by Teresa Spignoli in the framework of the research project “Verba Picta. Interrelazione tra testo e immagine nel patrimonio artistico e letterario della seconda metà del Novecento” at the Università degli Studi di Firenze, <http://www.verbapicta.it/dati/autori/ugo-carrega> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>103</sup> Among many examples, Klaus Groh launched from Cologne the collaborative newsletter International Artists Cooperation (IAC) in February 1972 and in Budapest, György and Júlia Gálantai started diffusing *Poolwindow / Pool-Letter* and then *Artpool Letter* at the beginning of the 1980s.

Since the late 1960s, Ugo Carrega was involved in a constellation of events and initiatives emanating from or involving Central European artists, which existence confirms the multidirectional character of exchanges between Italy and Central Europe. Due to his involvement in visual poetry networks and probably also to his early collaboration with Jiří Valoch for an exhibition in Jihlava—I will address in the next section—, Carrega rapidly became a figure of reference for artists who not only focused on experimental poetry, but also embraced mail art, action art, new media and conceptual inquiries. Already in the early 1970s, the Italian poet was receiving a significant amount of correspondence and documentation from the region, addressed to him or to the Centro Tool and then, the Mercato del Sale.

Among these items, we find an invitation to take part in a collaborative piece, *Perform this gesture!* (1971), sent by the Czech artist Petr Štembera. Through the injunction “Perform this gesture! Photo of your performance and this picture’s copy send back to me!”, Štembera proposed his interlocutor to reinterpret in his or her manner the figurative painting a reproduction of which was enclosed in the letter, and send the photographic documentation of this reenactment back to him.<sup>104</sup> If this project reflected the rapid popularisation of transnational collaboration through the mail art network, in the case of Štembera, it remains a unique example of that sort. In fact, while other artists went on exploring the potential of collaborative work relying on distance communication, Štembera rapidly focused on his individual practice. In fact, after some experiments with objects or natural elements under specific time and weather conditions in the early 1970s, concretised in pieces such as *Transposition of 2 Stones* (1971), *Handpieces: Sewing machine’s work* (1971-1972) or *Meteorological Informations* (1971-1972), he rapidly centered on actions involving his own body and individual resistance. Štembera remained involved in long distance communication, however, it was principally to circulate documentation on his work and that of his

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<sup>104</sup> Despite the invitation, Carrega did not participate in *Perform this gesture!* Among the artists who answered Štembera were H. W. Kalkmann, Janos Urban, Peter Kennedy, Július Koller, Rudolf Sikora, J. H. Kocman, Gábor Attalai, Tamás Szentjóby, Julien Blaine, Eric Andersen, Bogdanka Poznanović, Udo Breger. See Hana Buddeus, “Infiltrating the Art World through Photography. Petr Štembera’s 1970s Networks”, *Third Text*, 32:4, 2018, 475. Photographic documentation of this piece can be found in Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2019), 107.

Czech and Slovak peers.<sup>105</sup>

Štembera was among the few artists from socialist Eastern Europe cited in Lucy Lippard's famous book *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972*. Lippard translated and reproduced an article published by Štembera in the magazine *Revista de Arte*, supported by the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez.<sup>106</sup> While this triangular connection has been signaled on various occasions, the transit of Štembera's article through Spain has remained unnoticed.<sup>107</sup> *Revista de Art* was in fact edited by the exiled Spanish art critic Ángel Crespo in collaboration with Pilar Gómez Bedate. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Crespo and Gómez Bedate were among the first to give public diffusion to concrete poetry in Spain, before they left the country in 1967 for Brazil and, then, Puerto Rico. While in Mayagüez, the couple maintained contacts with the Spanish scene, as evidenced by their collaboration with the artist José María Iglesias, who was in charge of the technical production of *Revista de Arte*. Iglesias was also a correspondent in Spain for the magazine, just as the art critic Germano Celant from Italy.<sup>108</sup> The magazine was printed in Madrid, which means that Štembera's text and its related images transited through Spain before they were reproduced in the magazine and sent across the

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<sup>105</sup> The international reach of Štembera's practice through different networks has been addressed in several studies, including Buddeus, "Infiltrating the Art World through Photography. Petr Štembera's 1970s Networks", 468-484 and Juliane Debeusscher, "Traveling images and words: Czech action art through the lens of exhibitions and art criticism in Western Europe", in "Photo-Performance, Performance Photography in Real Existing Socialisms", Katalin Cseh ed., *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* vol. 27, 1, 2019, 29-46.

<sup>106</sup> Lippard, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972*, 170. Petr Štembera, "Events, Happenings and Land-Art in Czechoslovakia: A Short Information," in *Revista de Arte*, Universidad de Puerto Rico in Mayagüez, no. 7, December 1970, 35-39.

<sup>107</sup> See Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015), 204-205; Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, 6-8; Buddeus, "Infiltrating the Art World through Photography. Petr Štembera's 1970s Networks", 477.

<sup>108</sup> This information is retrieved from the archive's description published on the website of the MNCARS, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/biblioteca-centro-documentacion/archivo-revista-arte-mayaguez> (Accessed May 2020).



Atlantic.<sup>109</sup>

Coming back to *Perform this gesture!* and its international diffusion, we can suggest that the NET probably contributed to Štembera's brief incursion into collaborative mail art projects.<sup>110</sup> Launched in early 1971 by Polish artist Jarosław Kozłowski and art critic Andrzej Kostołowski in the form of a manifest sent to a first list of contacts, NET pretended to operate as an open, non-commercial and self-managed network open to everyone. Its promoters did not claim originality but allowed instead each "user" or "co-creator" to reappropriate the method in his or her own way and benefit from the already existing network. NET became an important catalyst for early exchanges and circulations of artefacts and information between the Eastern bloc and other regions in Europe and beyond. It prompted artists to enthusiastically design projects that required the participation of others creators. In this particular context of distance communication, it was not uncommon for the participants to mention their acquaintances abroad, both to situate themselves on a map of international exchanges and to expand it by exchanging names and addresses with their peers. In a letter to Kozłowski dated June 1972, the Hungarian art critic and cultural operator László Beke thus mentioned Ugo Carrega among his contacts abroad, along with Angelo de Aquino, Klaus Groh, Hans-Werner Kalkmann and Jean-Marc Poinot, known at that time for having conceived the "Section des Envois" at the seventh Paris Biennale, in 1971.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> The archive of the *Revista de Arte* was donated to the Documentation Centre of the Museo Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid) by Pilar Gómez Bedate in 2010. Documentation for issue no. 7 includes Petr Štembera's article, along with images of works from Czech and Slovak artists that were reproduced in the magazine (members of the Actuel group Milan Knížák, Soňa Švecová and Robert Wittmann, as well as Rudolf Němec). It also included comments from the editors of *Revista de arte* regarding their position and size in the magazine; interestingly, one of the editors (unidentified) suggested that it could be interesting to keep the character of "photo of photos" of the illustrations. Štembera had indeed sent in images that seemed photographs of reproductions in magazines or catalogues. *Revista de Arte*. CDB 179503 REV IIA 539 MNCARS Library, Madrid.

<sup>110</sup> On NET, see Piotr Piotrowski, "The Global NETwork: An approach to comparative art history", in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel eds., *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 149-165; Klara Kemp-Welch, "Autonomy, Solidarity and the Antipolitics of NET", in Bożena Czubak, ed., *NET. The Art of Dialogue/NET. Sztuka Dialogu* (Warsaw: Fundacja Profil, 2013) 34-56, Klara Kemp-Welch, "Net: An Open Proposition", *e-flux journal* #98 March 2019; "NET, Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation with Klara Kemp-Welch", *ARTMargins* 1 (2-3), 2012, 14-35. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM\\_a\\_00016](https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00016).

<sup>111</sup> Beke's letter to Kozłowski was quoted in Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, endnote 44, 442.

Beke and Carrega thus already knew each other in 1973, when Carrega participated in the first international exhibition of experimental poetry taking place in Hungary. Maurizio Nannucci and himself were the only Italians involved in “Szövegek/Texts”, organized by the artist Dóra Maurer with the help of Gabor Toth. The exhibition was on view from 19 to 25 August at the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio, an ancient chapel renovated by the artist György Galántai in a small village near the Lake Balaton to host avant-garde activities.<sup>112</sup> “Szövegek/Texts” was actually the last exhibition held at the Balatonboglár Chapel before its definitive closing by the Hungarian authorities, after four years of summer activities. According to Galántai, the list of artists on the exhibition poster was wrongly interpreted by the authorities as a subversive reference, and the international dimension of the activity bringing together artists from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, France and Italy was considered potentially problematic:

Returning on several occasions, they kept trying to prove with almost hysterical excitement that the poster constituted proof of conspiracy: they found the 56 names (which was just a coincidence) an obvious reference to 1956, and they ‘noticed’ the word alliance hidden in the text: szö-ve-/ts/-gek = szövetség [alliance]; hence, a secret alliance... and it’s being international only made the event even more dangerous!!<sup>113</sup>

We could compare the reactions of the Hungarian authorities described by Galántai with the controversies that surrounded exhibitions subsidised by the Spanish state, like “Rotor Internacional” (1967), whose organisers were accused of collaborating with the Francoist regime. Although the Hungarian and the Spanish examples show two opposite phenomena and their consequences—in state socialist Hungary, the regime of permanent suspicion and paranoid scrutinising of unofficial art leading to

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<sup>112</sup> The Balatonboglár Chapel represents a crucial episode in the history of unofficial avant-garde art from the 1970s in Eastern Europe. The chronology of events that took place from 1970 to 1973 is very well documented on the website of Artpool, the archive György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay started in 1979. See “Balatonboglár Chapel Studio” in [https://www.artpool.hu/boglar/default\\_e.html](https://www.artpool.hu/boglar/default_e.html) (Accessed September 2019); also Júlia Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári, eds., *Törvénytelen avantgárd. Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnaműterme 1970–1973* (Budapest: Artpool-Balassi, 2003).

<sup>113</sup> György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, eds., *ARTPOOL-The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe* (Budapest: Artpool, 2013), 31. The exhibition was also presented at the Pécsi Műhely in Pécs from 9 to 28 December 1973.

ensorship; in Francoist Spain, the problem of artists' fear to compromise themselves with the regime, leading to paralysis or internal divisions—both highlight the interconnectedness of official and unofficial realms, and the difficulty for voluntarily marginal or independent initiatives to keep their autonomy in front of the logics of surveillance and the problem of art's compromise with official policies.

One decade later, Carrega was also among the artists who hosted György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay during their journey across Italy, in the summer 1979.<sup>114</sup> For the couple, who had created Artpool earlier that year with the aim of building an avant-garde archive on the basis of real time relationships and creations, this trip aimed at meeting artists, publishers and cultural organizers, as well as bringing publications and documents back to Budapest.<sup>115</sup> At that time, the conditions for traveling West remained highly restrictive for Hungarian citizens and in particular for Galántai, whose initiatives were not well perceived by the authorities since the episode of the Chapel studio. The trip was possible thanks to Klaniczay's father, who was teaching in Rome at that time and sent an official invitation to the couple.<sup>116</sup> While in Milan, Galántai and Klaniczay spent long hours with Carrega, who acted as an intermediary between them and other artists and cultural agents:

The most interesting place in Milan was Ugo Carrega's poetry gallery called Mercato del Sale, where we accidentally met Peter Frank, an American expert on the artistamp. Thanks to Carrega, we were introduced to Giancarlo Politi (Flash Art) among others, as a result of which Artpool refreshed its 1980 Art Diary address book. Although the galleries were not open, gallerists kindly gave us catalogues for

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<sup>114</sup> Galántai and Klaniczay's trip took place from 21 June to 2 August 1979. They met Carrega again in 1982 during a second, longer journey across Western Europe. Carrega participated in two projects organised by Artpool in the successive decades: the commemorative exhibition for the 100 years of Marcel Duchamp, in 1987 (<https://www.artpool.hu/Duchamp/MDspirit/exhib/Carrega.html>) and to the Flux Flags exhibition in Budapest (1992) and Marseille (1993) (<https://www.artpool.hu/Fluxus/flag/carrega.html>) (Accessed May 2020). Júlia Klaniczay, in an email to the author, 24 August 2019.

<sup>115</sup> "Prior to the journey we had written letters to all the Italian addresses we had at our disposal, asking the addressees to specify what we must definitely see of contemporary Italian art. The answers determined the route and content of the tour. Those who answered were: Vittore Baroni, Ugo Carrega, G.A. Cavellini, Betty Danon, Gillo Dorfles, Marco Pachetti, Romano Peli, Michele Perfetti, Studio Santandrea, Adriano Spatola. We paid a visit to those who recommended themselves." Galántai and Klaniczay, eds., *ARTPOOL-The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, 41.

<sup>116</sup> Alina Șerban and Ștefania Ferchedău, "We Are Always Working on the Roots...", Interview with György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, Artpool, July 2017, online publication by the Institute of the Present, [https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2017/09/16/artpool/#\\_ftn4](https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2017/09/16/artpool/#_ftn4) (Accessed May 2020).

Artpool's archive.<sup>117</sup>

Back in Hungary, the Artpool founders organised “Pacco dall’Italia/Italian package”, an exhibition of works collected during their trip to Italy and additionally with a call for participation. It was planned as the second manifestation of “Artpool Periodical Space” (APS), an itinerant program of exhibitions and activities inspired by Robert Filliou and his Eternal Network.<sup>118</sup> However, the exhibition composed of “mainly visual and sound poetry pieces and the material received by Artpool for its mail art invitation” never materialised. The invitation didn’t reach the Italian addressees due to censorship from the Hungarian postal services, and furthermore, the Budapest Fine Arts Directorate didn’t allow the exhibition. According to a state security report cited by Galántai, Italian art was still perceived by the Hungarian authorities as “fascist in nature”.<sup>119</sup> This project, Artpool’s increasing number of international contacts and the couple’s trip to the West eventually influenced the decision of the Hungarian State Security to open a file on Galántai and place him under surveillance.<sup>120</sup>

The fourth issue of “APS” in 1980 eventually included collected artworks from abroad after a change in the sending method: in order to circumvent censorship, invitations were dispatched “in small portions every day, at different post offices” and this strategy apparently worked. The project, which was no longer exclusively dedicated to Italy, materialised into a mail art exhibition visible in the framework of a

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<sup>117</sup> Galántai and Klaniczay, *ARTPOOL-The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, 41. Also Klaniczay, 24 August 2019. The reference to Politi and the Art Diary is significant in that for many artists and cultural producers (whether from the East or the West), the inclusion in Politi’s yearly publication represented a form of recognition and an efficient way to become contactable by a larger range of people. The importance of the Art Diary was mentioned by Hungarian artist Szabolcs Kisspál in a survey realized in the framework of Zsuzsa László, ed., *Parallel Chronologies: How Art Becomes Public—“Other” Revolutionary Traditions, an exhibition in newspaper format* (Budapest: Tranzit.hu, 2011), 9. It also appears in the exhibition “Sitting Together-Parallel Chronologies of Coincidences in Eastern Europe” curated by Zsuzsa László and Petra Feriancová, transit.sk, Bratislava, from 13 December 2016 to 25 February 2017. A comprehensive study of *Flash Art’s* contribution to the diffusion of Eastern European art was provided in Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, 380-382.

<sup>118</sup> Robert Filliou was the protagonist of the first Artpool Periodical Space (APS) in August 1979 and inspired the Galántais to continue this unlocated project.

<sup>119</sup> Galántai and Klaniczay, *ARTPOOL-The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, 42.

<sup>120</sup> The decision to open a dossier dedicated to Galántai under the pseudonym of Festö (Painter) was communicated the 16 October 1979 by József Horváth, official of the Ministry of Interior. English transcription of this document as well as the Hungarian version of Galántai’s dossier are available on <https://www.Galántai.hu/festo/index.html> (Accessed May 2020).

conference on the Culture of the Seventies, held in the cellar of the Young Artists Club (Fiatal Művészek Klubja) in Budapest. Titled “Küldött Művészet/Sent Art”, it included pieces (postcards, rubberstamps, postage stamps) from a broad range of origins, confirming both the elevated number of contacts acquired by Artpool and the success of mail art initiatives at the turn of the 1980s. The effectiveness of alternative networks of distribution and communication no longer required to be demonstrated.

While the name of Ugo Carrega appeared among a substantial group of Italian artists, the presence of Spanish contributors confirmed that the network had also successfully spread across the Spanish state. Sendings from Madrid, Mallorca, Valencia and Barcelona confirmed that mail art activity was not limited to the state’s artistic capitals but was largely spread across the territory, thus contributing to decentralise the national scene.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, the profile of an artist like Francesc Abad, a former member of the Group de Treball whose practice was connected to conceptual art with a critical dimension, showed that while the field of experimental poetry and music remained active, research linked to the dematerialisation of the art object and questions of a sociological nature had also significantly developed during the decade.

## 2.2. “Tool etc. Poesia visita italiana” in Jihlava (1969)

We should now go back in time to address Jiří Valoch and Ugo Carrega’s first collaboration. In 1967, Valoch and Carrega started to work at the distance on a project of exhibition of Italian visual poetry in Czechoslovakia.<sup>122</sup> [Fig. 1.10] “Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana” (“Tool etc. Italian visual poetry”) was on view in early 1969 at

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<sup>121</sup> The exhibition took place from 10 to 22 May 1980. The poster and the list of artists can be consulted on Artpool’s website [https://www.artpool.hu/events/APS\\_4.html](https://www.artpool.hu/events/APS_4.html) (Accessed September 2019). Four contributors from Spain were included: Ricardo Cristóbal, who was the editor of *Orgón*, a magazine dedicated to experimental poetry published in Madrid, the former member of the Group de Treball Francesc Abad, who was involved in the Catalan conceptual art scene, the Mallorca-based poet and artist Joan Palou and the group Texto Poético (Bartolomé Ferrando and David Pérez) from Valencia, who edited the eponymous magazine. *Artpool’s Periodical Space 4* was published on the occasion of the exhibition, held from 10 to 20 April 1980.

<sup>122</sup> Jiří Valoch, “Tool etc”, in Ugo Carrega and Jiří Valoch, eds., *Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana*, exh. cat. (Jihlava: Oblastní Galerie Vysočiny, 1969). Valoch indicated in the exhibition catalogue that Carrega proposed him to do the exhibition. However, it can be assumed that the proposal came from Valoch, since Carrega in a letter to him wrote: “Dear Jiří, Valoch, [...] I agree with you: I’d like too an exhibition Tool etc, Italy.” Ugo Carrega to Jiří Valoch, letter dated 5 July 1967, Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

the Vysocina Regional Gallery in Jihlava.<sup>123</sup> The first part of the exhibition title referred to the core group of poets gathered around the magazine *Tool* published by Carrega, while “Etc.” designated other Italian artists Carrega had suggested to include in the exhibition, in order to give a larger view of Italian experimental production.<sup>124</sup> [Fig. 1.11] While Valoch was in charge of contacting the artists and organising the exhibition, Carrega provided the contacts—in a letter to Valoch, he specified that the invitation should come from both of them—and offered to translate the invitation letters into Italian.<sup>125</sup> The exhibition in Jihlava was accompanied by a catalogue, the typography of which, interestingly, echoed the “cartones” created by zaj.<sup>126</sup> It included reproductions of works from each participants and two inedited texts from Valoch and Carrega, in Czech only. [Fig. 1.12] Valoch’s text signaled that “Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana” had the ambition to give an overview of Italian new poetry and recalled that the visual dimension was in fact predominant in these practices. He remarked the influence of pop art in the exhibited works (Vaccari, Viccinelli, Vitone) through the presence of fragments of press, torn up texts, as well as pictures and slogans from everyday life. At the same time, he observed that the reliance on such elements did not prevent their authors from keeping their “social or political responsibility”, since their work actually “counter-balance[d] the technical character of the present world”.<sup>127</sup> Such reference to consumer society and new forms of mass

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<sup>123</sup> Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 70.

<sup>124</sup> The artists associated with *Tool* were Vincenzo Accame, Ugo Carrega, Liliana Landi (as a woman, her name was appeared as “Landiová” in the catalogue), Lino Matti, Rolando Mignani, Mussio, Rodolfo Vitone. The others (“etc.”) were Luigi Ferro, Marco Gerra, Emilio Isgró, Maurizio Nannucci, Achille Bonito Oliva, Corrado D’Ottavi, Claudio Parmiggiani, Renato Pedio, Adriano Spatola, Maurizio Spatola, Arrigo Lora Totino, Franco Vaccari, Franco Verdi, Patrizia Viccinelli (Vicinelliová). Carrega and Valoch, eds., *Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana*, exh. cat. (Jihlava: Oblastní Galerie Vysočiny, 1969). The exhibition was held from the 26 January to 23 February 1969.

<sup>125</sup> Carrega to Valoch, 5 July 1967, Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

<sup>126</sup> Interestingly, although there is no proven correlation between these two uses, the “etc.” in the exhibition title recalled the extensive use of this linguistic sign by zaj. In 1965, a “cartón” of the group announced an action at the Galeria Edurne in Cuenca in these terms “Zaj / presenta 2 etcéteras / hmc2 1965 [ ] un etc. de / walter marchetti / y después, en bandeja [ ] un etc. de / juan hidalgo”. The etc. or etcétera was envisaged by Juan Hidalgo as a “public document” or “kôan which seeks to precipitate enlightenment in the receiver”. Henar Rivière, “Papeles para la historia de Fluxus y Zaj: entre el documento y la práctica artística”, *Anales De Historia Del Arte*, (Extra) 2011, 435-436. [https://doi.org/10.5209/rev\\_ANHA.2011.3747](https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_ANHA.2011.3747). See also Hidalgo, “Zaj”, 431.

<sup>127</sup> Valoch, “Tool etc”, unpaginated. This quotation and the others come from the English translation from the Czech original kindly provided by Viola Borková.

communication echoed the experiments of Mec Art that had emerged in 1963 in the wake of New Realism and whose main representatives were Italian and French artists.<sup>128</sup> It was also connected with the concerns of Spanish experimental poets, especially members of the Grupo N. O. and Fernando Millán, who also investigated the potential of photography for the reproduction and montage of images.<sup>129</sup> On the other hand, Valoch also noted another tendency in the exhibited works, the use of “free words” in continuity with concrete poetry and the exploration of a “rational aesthetic organisation of a text”, semantic or not (in Carrega, Matti, Landi). Also included were optical poems (Totino) and works realized as object-books (Sarenco and Pedrotti), although Valoch regretted he had not been able to give more space to this last tendency in the exhibition.

Carrega could only superficially approach the complexities of socialist cultural bureaucracy. He evoked it in rare occasions, however and it is likely that his reference to Czechoslovakia was influenced by the fact that at the same time, he and Jiří Valoch were organizing the exhibition of Italian visual poetry in Jihlava. In February 1969, Carrega participated in the Karnhoval or “Carnevale internazionale degli Artisti”, a six-days festive event organised in the city of Rieti, in the Latium region.<sup>130</sup> **[Fig. 1.13]** For this manifestation orchestrated by Alberto Tessore with the complicity of Adriano Spatola, John Hopkins, Emilio Villa and Wolf Vostell, Carrega produced *Per il Karnhoval in Villa*, a four-pages booklet in cyclostyle he described as a “poem

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<sup>128</sup> The Mec Art was described by Pierre Restany as an attempt to use photographic processes with the aim of a mechanical elaboration of a new image of synthesis. Its main representatives were Serge Béguier, Gianni Bertini, Pol Bury, Alain Jacquet, Nikos and Mimmo Rotella. Pierre Restany, “La Mec-art: una pittura meccanica alla ricerca d'una iconografia moderna,” *Essere* no. 4, November 1967. Retrieved from <https://www.associazionegiannibertini.com/la-mec-art/> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>129</sup> Fernando Millán, *Fotografismos n.o.*, exh.cat. (Madrid: Librería Antonio Machado, 1971).

<sup>130</sup> It should be noted that the characteristics of the Karnhoval held in Rieti from 13 to 18 February 1969 (an interdisciplinary avant-garde festival in a provincial town, placing art in the public space) are reminiscent of the Pamplona Encounters, discussed in Chapter four. Secondary sources concerning the event have been mostly produced in occasion of the exhibition organised in 2019 by the Archivio di Stato in Rieti to commemorate the event's fiftieth anniversary. See Roberto Lorenzetti, “Il Karnhoval e l'abolizione del buon senso nella Rieti del 1969”, *Didattica luce in sabina*, online publication dated 22 March 2018, <https://didatticaluceinsabina.com/2018/03/22/il-karnhoval-e-labolizione-del-buonsenso-nella-rieti-del-1969/>; Elisabette Tarsia, “Le fonti del Karnhoval”, *Didattica luce in sabina*, online publication dated 28 May 2019. <https://didatticaluceinsabina.com/2019/05/28/le-fonti-del-karnhoval/> (both Accessed May 2020).



made of fragments in the form of stories”.<sup>131</sup> [Fig. 1.14] The second page included the reproduction of a headline from the London newspaper *Sunday times* titled “Czech artists in mass plea for help from West”. The article dated 3 September 1967 retranscribed a manifest from more than three hundred Czech and Slovak writers, calling for international support against the regime’s censorship and oppression. This international claim eventually turned out to be a fake, produced by a Czech historian.<sup>132</sup> The following pages of Carrega’s booklet contained poetic fragments composed by him that indirectly referred to a situation of struggle and violence and to the dilemma of having to take a stand. One of these fragments was structured around the idea of “rising up” (“alzarsi”):

could have (would have) not risen up  
 could have (would have) not tried to risen up  
 could have (would have) decided not to risen up  
 could have (would have) decided not to risen up  
 [...]
   
 could have (could have) decided not to risen up  
 could have (could have) decided not to risen up  
 could have (could have) not tried to risen up  
 resolve that it is better not to  
 that in the end it is not worthwhile to  
 ROSE UP  
 because in the end [...]<sup>133</sup>

Carrega dedicated *Per il Karnhoval in Villa* to Aldo Braibanti, an Italian intellectual well known for having been in 1968 judged for “plagio”—in this case, an equivalent to

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<sup>131</sup> “[...] poema per frammenti sotto forma di racconti”. Ugo Carrega, *Per il Karnhoval in Villa*, cyclostyled booklet, 1969.

<sup>132</sup> “This document was the work of a young historian, Ivan Pfaff, who was arrested but not tried before the change of regime in January 1968. He later admitted publicly that the declaration has been his own and had not been signed by others. Although he regretted the form of his action, he defended the content of the document as an expression of his belief in “absolute freedom of expression”. H. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia’s Interrupted Revolution* (1976) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 71.

<sup>133</sup> “potuto (avrebbe) non alzarsi / potuto (avrebbe) non cercare di alzarsi / potuto (avrebbe) non volversi alzare / potuto (avrebbe) decidere di non alzarsi [...] avrebbe (potuto) non alzarsi / avrebbe (potuto) non decidere di alzarsi / avrebbe (potuto) non cercare di alzarsi / risolvere che e meglio non / che in fin dei conti non vale la pena di / SI ALZÓ / perche in fin dei conti [...]” Carrega, *Per il Karnhoval in Villa*, unpaginated.



“brainwashing”—on a young male friend and collaborator, after which he was sentenced to nine years in prison (the sentence was reduced afterwards). Braibanti was a declared homosexual but also a former partisan and a communist who was critical to the Italian Communist Party’s orthodox line—especially after 1956. For a large majority of Italian left-wing intellectuals who sided with him, it was clear that he had been incriminated for his sexual orientation and his critical political position.<sup>134</sup> Carrega’s dedicatory note to Braibanti and the reproduction of the *Sunday Times* article on Czechoslovakia in *Per il Karnhoval in Villa* constitute a rare allusion to current events in his artistic production, generally centered on articulating language and visual games with no concrete historical or political references. The reference to Czechoslovakia in early 1969, while the country was undergoing the consequences of the repression of the Prague Spring, nevertheless captures the impact of international politics on Carrega and the way he connected them with the Italian context. Using a methodology of assemblage of fragments to build an elusive narrative, Carrega proposed a red thread to suggest rather than impose possible parallelisms and analogies between Italy and Czechoslovakia: state censorship, repression and violence.

### **2.3. *Lotta Poetica*. Visual poetry in struggle**

In the catalogue of “Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana”, Valoch observed that Italian artists were interested in establishing connections with science and studies on perception, as well as in exploring art’s integration in a social environment. Attention to the audience was a relevant aspect to him and he highlighted the existence of activities organised by “North-Italian cities under the patronage of left-wing progressive municipal direction.<sup>135</sup>” The evocation of such local cultural initiatives by Valoch in his text was certainly not accidental: it shows his level of awareness of the importance of maintaining his public activities in a context of orthodox socialism. This comment also confirms why official or semi-official collaboration was easier to

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<sup>134</sup> Gabriele Ferluga, *Il processo Braibanti* (Torino: Silvio Zamorani editore, 2003).

<sup>135</sup> Valoch, “Tool etc”, unpaginated.

envisage with Italian artists than with Spanish creators.<sup>136</sup> It could use indeed local left-wing politics as an argument to collaborate and exchange.

In 1971, Valoch's *Poem for love/for Miroslava* (1969) published in the second issue of the magazine *MEC*—which title referred to Mec Art—coordinated by the Italian artist Gianni Bertini. **[Fig. 1.15]** While Valoch shared his page with Fernando Millán's graphic composition with geometrical figures and letters extracted from his book *Textos y antitextos*, additional works from Jochen Gerz, Henri Chopin, Clemente Padín, Maurizio Spatola or Shimizu Toshihiko confirmed the international reach of Bertini's project.<sup>137</sup> However, what retains our attention is the presence in the publication of a communiqué that strongly contrasted with the artistic tone of the publication. The text was attributed to a Brescia-based "Gruppo di Artisti aderenti alla Lega Marxista-Leninista d'Italia" ("Group of Artists adhering to the Marxist-Leninist League of Italy"). **[Fig. 1.16]** In a vindictive tone, its authors denounced two institutional exhibitions held in the previous year in Montepulciano and Rome. These events had, according to them, consecrated a number of individuals and artistic tendencies (in particular Roman and Turin representatives of "arte povera" as well as the Milanese objectual avant-garde) as "artists of the regime" who contributed to the consolidation of an official culture that supported what the authors designated as a "social-fascism". The Italian Minister of Education Riccardo Misasi and, more particularly, the then President of the Republic Giuseppe Saragat (a socialist who had supported the Christians Democrats) were accused of settling an "American-type presidential Republic" with the complicity of "false left-wing artists". They blocked those who were instead truly committed to build a new visual language and were at the same time involved in the struggle "against capitalism and revisionism", alongside the workers, peasants and students. The authors of this polemic text displayed their adherence to maoism and criticised the Italian Communist Party (PCI), expressing their contempt for the communist painter Renato Guttuso, in their eyes an artist of the

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<sup>136</sup> We will see that this vision of Italy as a left-wing and progressive society in socialist Central Europe had its limits and changed according to the periods and the countries, as shown by the case (further discussed) of the exhibition organised by Galántai and censored by the Hungarian authorities on the pretext of the "fascist" resonances of Italian art.

<sup>137</sup> *MEC* 2, April 1971, unpaginated. Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

regime and a “Pciist gangster” (“bandito pciista”).<sup>138</sup> The virulence of the statement strongly contrasted with the visual and textual games reproduced on the other pages of *MEC*, deprived of any political reference. Its presence in the magazine, however, reflected the concerns of a branch of Italian visual poetry and prefigured developments towards a more direct expression of political views.

The same year in June, the first issue of the magazine *Lotta Poetica* was published in Brescia. A significant example of transnational collaboration at the confluence of visual and verbal experiments and politically engaged cultural theory, *Lotta Poetica* was created by the Italian poet Sarenco (Isaia Marbellini)—certainly one of the authors of the political manifesto published in *MEC*—and the Belgian poet and publisher Paul de Vree. They affirmed that the magazine’s title was “an affirmation of our commitment as poets and artists in general to wage an ongoing battle.”<sup>139</sup> Sarenco, who had started to experiment with visual poetry in 1964, had been involved in the activities of the Gruppo 70 and was close to Eugenio Miccini and Lamberto Pignotti, and also to Luciano Ori, Lucia Marcucci, Giusi Coppini and Michele Perfetti. After the group’s dissolution in 1968, these artists would find in *Lotta Poetica* a significant tribune for exposing their works and ideas, involving other artists whose research and position was close to their own. *Lotta Poetica* was internationally orientated with its three languages (Italian, French and Flemish) and if we compared it with the often ephemeral life of artists’ publications or journals based on artistic collaboration, it had a significant longevity with fifty issues published monthly between 1971 and 1975 (sometimes coupled in a unique edition), and, successively, two reactivations (1982-1984 and 1987). In the second issue, Sarenco and De Vree exposed their vision of visual poetry as a transforming practice:

there are three valid positions before a poetry of the visual:

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<sup>138</sup> Gruppo di Artisti aderenti alla Lega Marxista-Leninista d’Italia, “Denunciamo fino in fondo il tentativo fascista di creare gli artisti del regime!”, *MEC* 2, April 1971, unpaginated. Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

<sup>139</sup> “Il titolo “Lotta poetica” è l’affermazione del nostro impegno, come poeti ed artisti in generale ad impostare una battaglia continua.” *Lotta Poetica* 1, June 1971. See *Lotta poetica. Il messaggio politico nella poesia visiva 1965-1978*, Benedetta Carpi De Resmini, ed. (Roma: Iacobelli Editore 2017); Giorgio Bacci, “Ingaggiare le immagini: Il caso di “Lotta Poetica””, *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* serie 5, 8/2, 2016, 589-613.

- 1) to be simply the conscience of crisis (of the world, of culture and of society in general);
- 2) to be the pre-alternative of a new world;
- 3) to be the alternative of this world.

In the light of the preceding, a poetry of the visual can be neither social-christian, nor social-democrat, nor social-realist. in the first two cases it would imply direct agreement with exploitation by the bourgeoisie. in the third case it would imply a definition of the intellectual as engineer of the soul, that is as a passive recorder of historical development. a poetry of the visual enters the scene as a means of active transformation of society, either at the level of language and of paralinguistic media, or at the level of support for the world classe struggle (the exploited against the exploiting).<sup>140</sup>

Valoch's relations with Sarenco were certainly initiated with the exhibition in Jihlava and consolidated with the publication of Valoch's *Optical Book* (1970) by Amodulo, the publishing house founded by Sarenco and Enrico Pedrotta. The book consisted of a minimal, square publication in which a thin vertical red line appeared at different points on each page. Following this, the Czech artist had his works published in *Lotta Poetica's* first issues and his name appeared among the foreign editors of the magazine.<sup>141</sup> The pieces Valoch published in *Lotta Poetica* were particularly representative of the evolution of his practice from a concrete or visual poetry that remained attached to printed letters and signs on paper, towards the introduction of photography and documented actions that, often, also included texts or words. The artistic and intellectual environment of *Lotta Poetica* seemed in fact favourable to the development of this angle of Valoch's work, which could in fact, as we shall see, dialogue with other contributions.

*Lotta Poetica's* third issue from August 1971 included two *Mini poems* by Valoch, based on the photographic medium. **[Fig. 1.17]** "Mini" in this case could stand for "minimal" or "mini", small. The word "air" and the letter "R" made of distinct

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<sup>140</sup> Sarenco and Paul de Vree, "editoriali/editorials/editoriaux/editrialen", *Lotta Poetica* 2, January 1971, 6 (english version). In Spain at the same period, Fernando Millán affirmed that "Experimental poetry is the only weapon loaded with future" ("La poesia experimental es la única arma cargada de futuro"). Fernando Millán, in the leaflet of the exhibition "Poesia experimental en España" organised by Fernando Millán and Antonio Molina at the Galerie L'ull de vidre in Palma de Mallorca, May 1971.

<sup>141</sup> Valoch was *Lotta Poetica's* first collaborator from a socialist country, he was then joined by the Yugoslav Miroљub Todorović and the East German Carlfriedrich Claus.

materials were photographed in a natural setting, from which they stood out for their incongruous character.<sup>142</sup> As Pavlina Morganová has reported in *Czech Action Art*, this kind of experiment with textual interventions in non-urban environments had been initially carried out by Valoch with the Young Friends of Art club (Mladí přátelé výtvarného umění) connected with the House of Art in Brno and then with the Group m., in the framework of which he organised actions in the early 1970s.<sup>143</sup> Morganová has observed regarding the actions of the Young Friends that “the most important process during these actions was clearly the very act of undertaking them”. In the case of Valoch’s *Mini poems*, it seems however that the action was staged with the idea of producing a photographic image. The same process took place when Valoch requisitioned the human body to accommodate his artificial words, suggesting that the resulting image had been previously composed.

Also documented in the same issue of *Lotta Poetica*, other works relied on the same process of extraction of the written word from its usual support to reproject it in a public space. Realized in a busy street in the centre of Madrid, Alain Arias Misson’s action *Public poem* (1971) exposed the words “Palabras fragiles” (“Fragile words”), written on polyethylene (transparent plastic) sheets and placed in the middle of a street to be subject to the destruction of circulating vehicles. **[Fig. 1.18]** Arias Misson explained: “the poetic “genre” which has been destroyed, sold-out (fetishized) by the urban industrial processes is reinstated by this ritual destruction”, adding though that this new status could be reached only “through the real destruction of any text & recreation of poetry by corporal, physical presences, physical bodies which by their violence (or self-induced violence) erupt into the modern stream of awareness as new signifiers”.<sup>144</sup> The critical intention explicitly present in the poetic intervention of the French poet who was then resident in Spain, both with regard to the recuperation of poetry by a capitalist system and to the traditional use of language, was not perceptible in Valoch’s *Mini poems*. The proposal was rather focused on the semantic and visual game provoked by artificially-made words or letters in a non urban

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<sup>142</sup> *Lotta Poetica* 3, August 1971, 7.

<sup>143</sup> The Group m. was composed by Dušan Klimeš, J.H. Kocman, Jitka Kocmanová and Jiří Valoch. Morganová, *Czech action art*, 112-113.

<sup>144</sup> *Lotta Poetica* 3, August 1971, 8-9.

environment and their consonances—air/R produced the same sound. In this respect, it is clear that the significance and impact of the public poems produced by Valoch, Arias Misson and others was in part conditioned by the modality through which they became visible and the location where this happened; the artists’ decision to operate in a rural or a urban environment, a domestic or a public space, influenced the interpretative framework for the their pieces, in straight relation with the sociopolitical context of their time.

In Valoch’s pieces, the human intervention with words was subject to entropic or mechanical alteration through the action of nature or other human beings. A few years later, *Memory* (1974) illustrated this specific interaction and introduced a narrative dimension. **[Fig. 1.19]** The piece consisted in six photographs to read in a specific order. The first showed a piece of wood with the English word “Memory” placed in balance between two easels, probably located in a garden. The second image was a close-up view of the piece of wood being sawn by two individuals whose body was only partly visible. The same action was pursued on the next photographs until the last one, in which the split wooden piece was left on the ground, next to the saw, while the two sawyers had abandoned the work field.

Regarding Valoch’s pieces consisting of written words on natural objects or elements, Piotr Piotrowski has observed that “[a]ll of these events were of course a sort of reaction to the “normalization” after the repression of the Prague Spring, rather than a direct political involvement; they simply tried to escape from politics.”<sup>145</sup> It is tempting indeed to associate the use of generic and abstract terms, removed from any historical or political context, with a desire not to address reality directly and to retreat into an abstract universe to escape all current concerns. On the other hand, we can suggest that the choice of a term such as memory indirectly raised questions about the fragility and mutability of individual and collective reports in front of great imposed narratives. The “tearing down” of memory performed in Valoch’s sequence of photographs indirectly recalls the process of assembly and sequencing through which historical accounts are built. Such reading of Valoch’s work can bring us closer to the vision of Italian visual poets like Nanni Balestrini and their use of montage as a

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<sup>145</sup> Piotrowski, “The Global NETwork: An approach to comparative art history”, 158.

strategy to thwart the systems of recuperation of avant-garde art by the consumer society and its capitalist system. From a perspective of critique of the mass media and the consuming society, Valoch's visual and linguistic exploration highlighted the dismantling-reassembling of imposed discourses and meanings. This may also explain why despite its apparent neutrality and its absence of reference to politics, Valoch's work was appreciated by a politicised branch of Italian poetry included in its publications.

Besides Valoch's *Mini poems* and Arias Misson's *Public poem*, *Lotta Poetica*'s third issue included another public poem, which relied on similar principles: the "placing" of words in an environment and its photographic documentation. Like Valoch's *Memory* (1974), Sarenco and Paul de Vree's *Les poètes à la mer (The poets to the sea)* (1971) consisted in a sequence of photographs.<sup>146</sup> [Fig. 1.20] They portrayed—separately, as the other one was taking the photo—the two editors of *Lotta Poetica* while sitting or lying on a small embankment. They appeared without their shirts and apparently in good spirit. On the grass (or rather, the earth dotted with tufts of grass), letters in volume composed the word "MER" ("Sea"). With a deliberately humorous tone, this "public poem" showed Sarenco and De Vree's attempt to transpose the sea in a rather inauspicious environment, according to the idea that if they could not reach it, the sea could be brought to them through its linguistic materialisation and be enjoyed as if it really existed. Even when conceived as an instrument of struggle and social criticism, visual poetry could manifest itself in a playful and humorous way.

#### 2.4. "Relations". Valoch at the Mercato del Sale (1977)

Despite his great activity and the intensive circulation of his visual work, Valoch only had three personal exhibitions outside the socialist bloc, two of them in Northern Italy. "Relations" took place at the Mercato del Sale in 1977 and "In, Oltre" at a cultural center in Monza, near Milan, in 1979.<sup>147</sup> Valoch was the only artist from a socialist country to exhibit personally at the Mercato del Sale. [Fig. 1.21]

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<sup>146</sup> *Lotta Poetica* 3, August 1971, 10-11.

<sup>147</sup> The third one took place in 1972 at the Informationszentrale für Ereignisse (Information centre for events) in Bielefeld, West Germany.

In 1977, Ugo Carrega organised a series of exhibitions that explored art making in relation to the practice of experimental writing. As a kind of preamble to this cycle of events, he had published in 1976 the book *Lettere-Documento di artisti sulla condizione attuale del fare arte* (*Letters-documents by artists on the current state of art making*), in which he collected the impressions of fifty artists concerning their own praxis. The publication reflected the extent of Carrega's contacts in Italy and abroad.<sup>148</sup> Collective exhibitions such as “La Nuova scrittura” (1977) and, two years later, “Scrittura attiva” (1979), as well as monographic initiatives including Jiří Valoch's exhibition “Relations” in December 1977 were motivated by Carrega's intention to go deeper into the mechanisms of creation at the crossroads of writing, poetry and the visual arts.

While the absence of an exhibition catalogue makes the task of reconstructing the exact contents of “Relations” difficult, we can cross information on works produced by Valoch in 1976 and 1977, their presence in Italian collections and their title referring to Ugo Carrega or the exhibition in Milan.<sup>149</sup> Interestingly, while Valoch's photographic works had been circulating in *Lotta Poetica* and represented an important part of his practice in the 1970s, most of the pieces presumably exhibited at the Mercato del Sale were works on paper involving rather simple compositions with words and geometrical figures. This distinction seems to reflect the ultimately fragmented nature of the Italian poetry scene and the way in which the expressions were chosen in function of the medium and the channel for which they were produced.

Despite these stylistic differences, however, there were recurring elements in Valoch's work, such as his use of simple words and concepts set in environments (in this case, within the framework of the sheet of paper). The series *Untitled* (1977) was

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<sup>148</sup> Ugo Carrega, *Lettere-Documento di artisti sulla condizione attuale del fare arte* (Milan: Mercato del Sale, 1976). The book included contributions from Gianfranco Baruchello, Robin Crozier, Angelo de Aquino, Pablo Echaurren, Klaus Groh, Ugo La Pietra, Plinio Mesciulam, Luciano Ori, Clemente Padin, Michele Perfetti, Janos Urban, Wolf Vostell. From Czechoslovakia, Karel Adamus, J.H. Kocman, Ladislav Novák and Jiří Valoch were solicited. The connection between *Lettere-Documento di artisti sulla condizione attuale del fare arte* and the successive exhibitions was pointed at by the artist Armando Marrocco in his biography, <https://www.gestaltgallery.it/artist/armando-marrocco> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>149</sup> The works by Valoch that are related here to his exhibition “Relations” are all conserved in the Archivio di Nuova Scrittura (ANS), founded by the collector Paolo Delle Grazie. <http://www.verbovisualevirtuale.org/> (Accessed May 2020).



based on a simple associative or relational game: groups of geometrical forms (for example, triangles) with a typewritten word inside. These modules induced a narrative that “jumped” from an abstract notion, to a natural or atmospheric phenomena, to an action. For example, a piece proposed the sequence “star, time, way, waiting, silence, idea, clouds, memory”; another one “star, memory, wind, time, space, waiting”; a third one “silence, dream, voice, heaven, walk; dream, cloud, breaking, trace, horizon, view.” Elementary shapes and words produced an evocative mobile landscape. Another drawing from 1977 titled *Relations-ART LOVE* represented one straight line (Art) and another, curved one (Love), which at some point came to intersect the former. In the series *Relations exercise* (1976-1977), English words were located on a graph paper, the one usually used for plotting or drawing graphs and curves. [Fig. 1.22] Concepts or actions such as “Art”, “waiting”, “moment”; “love” and “time”, “now”, “space” were situated on the grid, as they were the points of intersection of specific coordinates. A minimal piece dedicated to Carrega highlighted again Valoch’s predilection for exercise. *Exercise for Ugo Carrega* (1976) consisted in three dactylographed words, “water, water, rock”, composing an associative portrait of the Italian poet and artist and also, maybe, an invitation to permuting words and playing with their implications, letters and sounds.

We should insist on the recurrent term “exercise” and its significance for Valoch, as a counterpart to the term “poem”. It reflected the artist’s interest for experimental practice and research, and for a sequential approach to reality through modules constituted by language, forms and ideas. Exercises are serial by nature; they can be repeated over and over and through this repetition, be subject to small variations and changes. Valoch’s *Exercices* insisted on the combinatory aspect of verbal and visual forms rather than their rigid framework. The conception and declination of artistic exercises also implied a pedagogical dimension. On this respect, it is worth recalling that issues of non-conventional education and self-education, as well as new pedagogies were of particular interest of Valoch in his activities of cultural organiser in Brno. He shared this interest with other Central European artists, who carried out at that time pedagogical experiments—often with the support of public organisations or within the structures. In the mid-1970s in Budapest, the organiser of the previously-

mentioned exhibition “Szövegek/Texts” Dóra Maurer conducted along with Miklós Erdély a series of drawing courses called “Creativity exercises”, aimed at amateurs from a workers’ cultural club.<sup>150</sup> Such interest in exercise as a form of open and non-definitive experiment came along with the interest for unconventional pedagogies as well as amateur and dilettantish practices in a socialist environment, as a field through which emancipatory politics could be implemented from inside.<sup>151</sup>

Through the figure of Jiří Valoch and his activities at the crossroads of various disciplines and geographies, as well as the resonances between this and the practices of other Spanish, Italian, Czech, Hungarian or Polish artists and poets, we have slowly begun to draw a map of the circulations of Central European art, marked by the highlighting of relationships that are often ignored or little explored, and by the desire to undo the unidirectional dimension often attached to these transnational exchanges between socialist and non-socialist territories.

On the register of languages and techniques, this chapter has also sought to show the importance of the experiences arising from the field of experimental poetry for the development of an artistic scene that was open not only to disciplinary cross-fertilisation, but also to a questioning of the social function of art and its possibilities of action in a given cultural and intellectual field. These questions, as we shall see, have permeated most of the practices that will be discussed in the following chapters.

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<sup>150</sup> Published as summary in *Kreativitási gyakorlatok, FAFEJ, INDIGO. Erdély Miklós művészetpedagógiai tevékenysége 1975–1986*, Sándor Hornyik and Annamária Szőke ed. (Budapest: MTA Művészettörténeti Kutatóintézet/Gondolat Kiadó, 2007). Erdély and Maurer’s initiative was situated in a broader context and dialogue with other practices in Dóra Hegyi, Zsuzsa László and Franciska Zólyom, eds., *Creativity Exercises. Emancipatory Pedagogies in Art and Beyond* (Sternberg Press: Berlin, 2020).

<sup>151</sup> See Daniel Grúň, “The Politics of Art Education in the Work of Milan Adamčiak, Július Koller and Jiří Valoch”, *Third Text* 32 (“Actually existing Art World of Socialism”), no. 4, 2018, 434-449; Hegyi, László and Zólyom, eds., *Creativity Exercises. Emancipatory Pedagogies in Art and Beyond*.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Experimental poetry as an expanded field of exchange. Connections between Czechoslovakia, Spain and Italy (1965-1979)**

Avant-garde poetry and its abundant variations and nuances operated in the 1960s and early 1970s as a privileged field of contamination of different disciplines and expressions. Concrete poetry, visual poetry, experimentalism, spatial poetry, action music, new writing, public poetry and even poetic struggle (to borrow the title of the Italian magazine *Lotta poetica*, addressed further), just to mention the different modulations that appear in this chapter, were adopted and practiced by a wide range of artists without any concern for establishing an orthodox line or attracting exclusive adhesions. They formed an expanded field of confluence of the arts, which protagonists did not limit themselves to the production of literary artifacts but also endorsed the role of organisers, art critics, theorists, and even historians of the movement in which they were involved.

Observing the central role played by the New York correspondence school launched by Dick Higgins in the development of mail art in Latin America, Zanna Gilbert has observed that “the absolutism of this history leaves little room for alternative genealogies and topologies of the rise of this complex network with hundreds of participants that spanned continents.”<sup>1</sup> To counter such narratives, she has reaffirmed the importance of concrete and visual poetry as a space of linguistic exploration (semiotic and non semiotic) the representatives of which were actively involved in the production of circulating publications and artifacts relying on long-distance communication. Gilbert’s reflections on the highly imbricated spheres of experimental poetry, mail art and conceptualist networks in Latin America can be transposed and used to analyse artistic connections between Central and Southern Europe. Of particular interest in her analysis is the appearance of the notion of

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<sup>1</sup> Zanna Gilbert, “Genealogical Diversions: Experimental Poetry Networks, Mail Art and Conceptualisms”, *caiana. Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)* no. 4, 2014, 1.

“system” as a catalyst of interest and convergence among artists and poets from Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay and Brazil in the 1960s. According to Gilbert, different aesthetic inquiries had in common the concern for “the notion of systems of all kinds—postal, linguistic, epistemological, bureaucratic, political—” and she suggests that “these artists’ interest in semiotic systems led them to concerns that overlap with the language experiments of conceptual art, which then merged easily with the internationalizing mail art networks that developed related aesthetic investigations”.<sup>2</sup> Far from dissolving with the 1970s, the interest in the notion of system would become even more pronounced and explicit in that decade.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than separate branches influenced by iconic figures or manifestos, poetic, musical, postal and conceptual practices developed between the mid-1960s and the end of the 1970s are envisaged in this chapter as communicating vessels. The activities, works and ideas produced by artists like Jiří Valoch, Bohumila Grögerová and Josef Hiršal, Ladislav Novák, Milan Grygar, Julio Campal, Fernando Millán, zaj, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, Ugo Carrega or Sarenco can help us to capture these particular dynamics and their intertwining with social and political processes at stake in Spain, Czechoslovakia and Italy.

## **1. Jiří Valoch in dialogue with Spanish experimentalism**

### **1.1 Contexts: Spain and Czechoslovakia**

Experimental poetry and the networks operating within or in relation to this sphere played a central role in the establishing of artistic networks between Central Europe and Southern Europe from the mid-1960s onwards. Exploring this idea further will allow us to nuance the idea according to which the “networking habit” was adopted by artists under the exclusive influence of Fluxus-like activities and mail art initiatives inspired in the New York correspondence school. On this respect, Jiří Valoch is a significant example of overlapping disciplines and roles. The activity of the Czech artist reflects in fact the flourishing in Europe of international collaboration relying on

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, “Genealogical Diversions: Experimental Poetry Networks, Mail Art and Conceptualisms”, 1.

<sup>3</sup> To give an example, the concept of “arte de sistemas” (“art systems”) was popularised and widely disseminated by the Buenos Aires-based Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) through exhibitions across Europe in the early 1970s, including contributions by Central European artists (see Chapter 4).

distance communication, at the intersection of avant-garde poetry, experimental music and the visual arts. Valoch, who spent most of his life in city of Brno, capital of the region of Moravia, was in fact actively involved in international networks not only as an artist, but also as a theorist, and a cultural worker.

Valoch studied Czech, German and aesthetics at the Faculty of Philosophy in his hometown and graduated with a thesis focused on visual and phonic poetry. He became involved in visual poetry in the mid-1960s under the influence of the older generation of Czech and Slovak poets that comprised Jiří Kolář, Bohumila Grögerová, Josef Hiršal and Ladislav Novák. From May 1967 until its dissolution in 1971, Valoch was a member of the Club of Concretists (Klub Konkretistu), founded in Prague by the theoretician Arseny Pohrebny and the artists Radek Kratina, Jiří Hilmar and Tomas Rajlich, and including participants from the fields of visual arts, industrial design poetry, music and film. In 1972, at the age of twenty-six, Valoch was appointed curator at the House of Arts in Brno (Dům umění města Brna), a function he occupied until 2001. In this particular context, he carried out a programming that introduced Czech and Slovak, as well as international avant-garde art to a local audience.

Among the existing studies dedicated to Valoch and his multifaceted career, Helena Musilová's monograph published in 2018 provides valuable information on the artist's broad range of activities, their geographical extension and crossing with different disciplines.<sup>4</sup> While Musilová's study relies on a wide variety of primary sources and archival documents, her monograph doesn't address however the relations between the artist and his Spanish and Italian pairs—except, regarding the latter, through a very brief mention to the exhibition of Italian visual poetry Valoch organised in 1969 in Jihlava in collaboration with Ugo Carrega (addressed in the second part of this chapter). Since Valoch's exchanges and collaborations with Spanish and Italian artists between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s were nevertheless frequent and resulted in his participation in various exhibitions and publications in both countries, we may explain the absence of studies on this topic by

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<sup>4</sup> Helena Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980* (Prague: National Gallery Prague, 2018). Regarding Valoch's circulation and collaborations with another national scene (in this case from a socialist non-aligned country), see Ivana Janković, "Here/There and Somewhere Else: The Artistic Connections of Jiří Valoch with Former Yugoslav Territory during the 1960s and 70s", *MIEJSCE* no. 5, 2019. <https://www.doi.org/10.48285/8kaewzco3p> (Accessed May 2020).

the extent of the artist's personal archive and collection of artworks, important parts of which have not been catalogued yet, and also by the fact that the Spanish art scene as a space of reception and interlocution has so far remained beyond the scope of Eastern and Central European art history. The first part of this chapter seeks to fill this gap by paying attention to unpublished material from the Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno, as well as exhibition catalogues and publications from Spain in which the artist's works have been presented.<sup>5</sup> While this chapter focuses on the figure and trajectory of Valoch, we should specify however that his presence in the context of artistic events in Spain from the year 1966 on often coincided with that of small group of poets from Czechoslovakia, including Vladimír Burda, Jiří Kolář, Ladislav Novák, Bohumila Grögerová, Josef Hiršal and Eduard Ovčáček. All of them were involved at that time in networks of concrete and visual poetry, through which their work circulated, was exhibited and published, mostly in Europe and Latin America.

The rise of concrete and visual poetry in Spain reflected the interest of local artists and intellectuals for participating in an expanded movement, the most important ramifications of which were located in Brasil, Switzerland and Germany. Such engagement opened new international perspectives and inspirational sources precisely at a moment in which Francoist Spain was experiencing transformations in the economic, social and cultural sector, as a consequence of the so-called "developmentalism" ("desarrollismo").<sup>6</sup> In 1959, the Francoist regime introduced a plan of stabilisation and liberalization ("Plan de Estabilización y Liberalización") based on series of measures designed to promote economic growth and reverse Spain's position as the poorest country in Western Europe, along with Portugal. The

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<sup>5</sup> The Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch have been acquired by the Moravian Gallery in Brno, where a small part is on display in the framework of the permanent exhibition "Art is here: New Art after 1945", opened in 2015 and curated by Ondřej Chrobák, Petr Ingerle and Jana Písaříková. The curator Jana Písaříková and the archivist Viola Borková are in charge of its organisation and diffusion of the Jiří Valoch Archive. I am thankful to Viola Borková for her precious collaboration in identifying and sending numerous documents from the Archive.

<sup>6</sup> This aspect has been addressed by Paula Barreiro López in her study of the relationship between concrete poetry and painting between the 1960s and 1970s. See Paula Barreiro López, "Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista", *Bulletin of Hispanic studies* Vol. 95, no. 9, 2018, 983.

country entered a process of industrialisation that had a direct effect both on populations' mobility (generating a massive rural exodus) and on the economy, with a new access to consumer goods. This phase of intensive development that would end up in 1968 relied on three main factors: the rise of foreign inversions and of the industry of tourism in Spain, and the arrival of foreign currencies sent to their families by Spanish émigrés workers abroad.<sup>7</sup> In the field of art and architecture, the Francoist regime had adopted in 1951 on a policy aimed at modernising its image abroad and showing the country's participation in the artistic processes of its time.<sup>8</sup> It thus strategically promoted informal art as an example both international and typically Spanish, with references to the Golden Age.<sup>9</sup>

While artistic exchanges between Spain and Western Europe were already commonplace, especially with the neighboring France and Italy, official collaboration with socialist states in matter on culture was almost inexistent due to political divergences and, also, a lack of interest from the Spanish side. Initiatives to establish closer relations came mainly from the socialist countries, in particular Poland and Hungary.<sup>10</sup> As late as in 1972, the Spanish Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) confessed its lack of knowledge about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and in 1973, an official report on cultural relations between Spain and the countries situated beyond the Iron Curtain specified that “despite attempts to establish specific exchange programmes by the countries of the socialist bloc, there

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<sup>7</sup> Jorge-Luis Marzo and Patricia Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939-2015): ideas, prácticas, políticas* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2015), 250; Mónica Núñez Laiseca, *Arte y política en la España del desarrollismo (1962-1968)* (Madrid: CSIC, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> See Julián Díaz Sánchez, *La idea de arte abstracto en la España de Franco* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2013); Julián Díaz Sánchez, “Al calor de la Guerra Fría. Opciones del arte español en la posguerra europea”, in ed. Serge Guilbaut, *Bajo la bomba. El jazz de la guerra de imágenes transatlántica: 1946-1956*, exh. cat. (Barcelona, Madrid: MACBA, MNCARS, 2007), 169-179; Genoveva Tusell, “The Internationalisation of Spanish Abstract Art (1950-62)”, *Third Text* vol. 20 no. 2, 2006, 241-249; Jorge Luis Marzo, *¿Puedo hablarle con libertad, excelencia?: Arte y poder en España desde 1950* (Murcia: CENDEAC, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the reference to the Golden Age, see Paula Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), 2017, 74-78; Paula Barreiro López, “Reinterpreting the Past: The Baroque Phantom during Francoism”, *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, vol. 91 no. 5, 715-734, [10.1080/14753820.2014.908566](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2014.908566) (Accessed May 2020); Marzo and Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939-2015): ideas, prácticas, políticas*, 167-180.

<sup>10</sup> See María Magdalena Garrido Caballero, *Las relaciones entre España y la Unión Soviética a través de las Asociaciones de Amistad en el siglo XX*, PhD Dissertation, Universidad de Murcia, 2006, unpaginated. <http://hdl.handle.net/10803/10891> (Accessed May 2020).

were no standard conditions for the implementation of international agreements.”<sup>11</sup> Despite this categorical statement, the report exposed some early attempts from the Polish General Director of Cultural Relations, Jan Druto, to establish official collaboration in the fields of science, theatre and the visual arts.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the obvious ideological motives that made communication difficult at an institutional level, geographical and linguistic factors can also explain the intermittent character of interpersonal relationships, if compared with exchanges between socialist Eastern Europe and other Western countries.<sup>13</sup> Unlike France and Italy which, despite their location West of the Iron Curtain, remained geographically close to the socialist bloc and traditionally hosted an important community of Central European emigrés, Spain still appeared in the 1960s and 1970s as a remote country and its language implied a substantial barrier to artists who were used instead to communicate in English, French or German—Valoch, for instance, had an excellent knowledge of German.

## 1.2. Czech presence in early poetic events

One of the figures who played a crucial role for the introduction and promotion of concrete poetry in Spain was the poet Julio Campal. Born in Uruguay, Campal was the son of Spanish emigrés from the Asturias region. He moved to Buenos Aires at a very young age and in 1962, he left Argentina for Spain where he remained until his

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<sup>11</sup> The report is cited in Garrido Caballero, *Las relaciones entre España y la Unión Soviética a través de las Asociaciones de Amistad en el siglo XX*, unpaginated (footnote 180).

<sup>12</sup> Garrido Caballero, *Las relaciones entre España y la Unión Soviética a través de las Asociaciones de Amistad en el siglo XX*, unpaginated.

<sup>13</sup> A remarkable exception regarding official exchange between Spain and socialist Eastern Europe in the visual arts field is the Premi Dibuix Joan Miró (Joan Miró Drawing Prize) held since 1962 in Barcelona. It included, from 1967 onwards, a significant number of artists from socialist Eastern Europe—also among the winners of the prize—and art critics who contributed to the catalogue. To give an example, the ninth edition of the Premi Dibuix in 1970 included representatives from Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland, Romania and the Soviet Union (*IX Premi Internacional Dibuix Joan Miró*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Secretariat del Premi internacional de dibuix Joan Miró, 1970)). Bulgaria was also regularly represented. As far as socialist countries are concerned, the selection of participating artists relied on official channels and was mostly mediated by the national Artists Unions. This annual event, many aspects of which remain to be investigated, can be related to the rise of print and graphics exhibitions as important vectors of cultural diplomacy and national representation abroad (like the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts since 1955, the International Biennial of Graphic Design in Brno since 1964, or the International Print Biennial in Krakow since 1966, to mention few of them), which, at the same time, enabled artists to circulate their works and exchange across the Iron Curtain. On the particular function of the prints and graphics biennials, see Wiktor Komorowski, “Hard Ground-Soft Politics: The Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana and Biting of the Iron Curtain”, *Humanities* vol 7, no. 4, 97, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7040097>.



prematured death at the age of thirty-five, in 1968. Over his six years of activity in Spain, Campal became a central promoter of avant-garde poetry, organising exhibitions and conferences that introduced prewar movements such as futurism and dadaism to a public of non specialists. In 1963, he founded the literary section of the group Problemática 63, established in the headquarters of the organisation Juventudes Musicales (“Musical Youth”) in Madrid. Juventudes Musicales was the national section of the international organisation Jeunesse Musicales International; it was created in 1952 as an instrument of international diplomacy with the aim of facilitating the acceptance of Spain in the UNESCO—this would happen in January 1953.<sup>14</sup> On this respect, it is worth observing that while the diffusion and interest for concrete poetry occurred on the margins of the regime’s cultural policy, its public presentation might paradoxically take place through official organisations, the avant-garde character of which resulted useful to the regime’s image of modernity abroad, like the Juventudes Musicales. Regardless of its link to the regime, the association enjoyed a high degree of independence and became across the 1960s and the early 1970s the site of important initiatives that promoted new artistic expressions and favoured disciplinary crossings. Focusing on contemporary creation, Problemática 63 had the ambition in fact to offer a “join vision of arts and sciences” and the members of its literary section actively contributed to this purpose.<sup>15</sup> This paradoxical relation between institutions or organisations sponsored by a non-democratic state and their contribution to the diffusion of progressive art could resonate, albeit in an opposite environment, with what Central European artists could experience in the late Cold War period in relation to the ambiguous and complex relationship with state-

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<sup>14</sup> See Juan José Martínez Espina, “Música y Poder: Juventudes Musicales de España como instrumento de política exterior para el reconocimiento internacional del Régimen de Franco: Florentino Pérez-Embid”, *Investigaciones Históricas, época moderna y contemporánea*, no. 40, 2020, 645-676. <https://doi.org/10.24197/ihemc.40.2020.645-676> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>15</sup> The main founders of Problemática 63 were Tomás Marco, Ricardo Bellés and Manuel Andrade. The first members of the literary section were the young authors Carlos Oroza, Carlos Álvarez, Julian Marcos, Fernando Millán, Manuel Andrade, Antonio Hernández, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño and Enrique Uribe. See Iñaki Estella, “Problemática 63 y la revista Aulas: educación y cultura. Estrategias del experimentalismo tras el silencio”, in Juan Albarrán Diego and Rosa Benítez Andrés, eds., “Ensayo/Error. Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960–1980)”, *Hispanic Issues On Line* no. 21, 2018, 74-97; Juan José Lanz Rivera, “La Poesía Experimental en España: Historia y Reflexión Teórica”, *Iberoamericana (1977-2000)* vol. 16, no. 1, 1992, 53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41671295> (Accessed May 2020); José Antonio Sarmiento, *La otra escritura: la poesía experimental española, 1960-1973*, (Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 1990), 11; Alfonso López Gradolí, *La escritura mirada: una aproximación a la poesía experimental española* (Barcelona: Calembur, 2008), 113-114 and 119.

sponsored institutions that allowed the exhibition of avant-garde cultural and artistic expressions.

Along with the Basque artist Enrique Uribe and with the collaboration of painters Isabel Krutiwig and Ignacio Urrutia, Julio Campal organised the first exhibition of concrete poetry in Spain. “Poesía concreta” (“Concrete poetry”) was inaugurated the 27 January 1965 at the gallery Grises in Bilbao and lasted one week.<sup>16</sup> In a definitely international perspective, the event brought together artists from Germany, Brasil, Spain, Scotland, France, Holland, England, Japan and Czechoslovakia—the only representative from the latter being the poet Vladimir Burda. In November the same year, Campal presented “Poesía visual, fónica, espacial y concreta” (“Visual, phonic, spatial and concrete poetry”, 18 to 24 November 1965), including works of twenty-four artists—from Czechoslovakia, Burda and Ladislav Novák participated. The exhibition was hosted by the Sociedad Dante Alighieri in Zaragoza with the support of the Oficina de Poesía Internacional (International Poetry), a group of artists and poets from the Aragon region (of which Zaragoza was the capital) who regularly organised discussions and debates about avant-garde art. **[Fig. 1.1]**

Campal saw avant-garde poetry as a liminal discipline that “work[ed] in border zones with the other arts”, in a combination that produced an expression differing from the “articulated phonetic and written language”.<sup>17</sup> Concretism was, for him, “[a] poetry to see or feel, [a poetry that] uses the blank space in its plastic and rhythmic value, using the tensions and vibrations played by the words in that space”. In contrast to traditional poetry, concrete poetry sought “an essential communication that transcends national linguistic peculiarities”.<sup>18</sup> The same concerns were expressed by

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<sup>16</sup> José Luis Campal, “Noticia de Julio Campal en el XXX aniversario de su muerte”, communication at the Fifth International Meeting of Independent Publishers (Punta Umbría (Huelva), 7-9 May 1998). Reported in the online platform MerzMail, publication by the mail artist Pere Sousa, <http://www.merzmail.net/jucampal.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> “La poesía experimental y de vanguardia trabaja en zonas fronterizas con las otras artes, pero éstas (pintura o música) no son más que elementos de lo literario, medios de expresión diferentes al del articulado lenguaje fonético y escrito.” Quoted in José Luis Campal, “Noticia de Julio Campal en el XXX aniversario de su muerte”.

<sup>18</sup> “El concretismo era, para Campal, “poesía para ver o sentir, [una poesía que] utiliza el espacio en blanco en su valor plástico y rítmico empleando las tensiones y las vibraciones que las palabras juegan en ese espacio”, y que, frente a la poesía tradicional, buscaba “una comunicación esencial que [rebasara] las peculiaridades lingüísticas nacionales.” José Luis Campal, “Noticia de Julio Campal en el XXX aniversario de su muerte.”

Jiří Valoch who was exploring at that time non-semantic poetry and looked for interactions between the poetic, visual and musical dimensions of his work:

In 1964 I began (after several years, after having tried traditional literature) to deal systematically with the possibilities of showing the visual features of a text. There were a number of reasons—the awareness of the devaluation of language and its manipulability as well as the awareness of my own incapacity to come close to the quality of what great writers I admire have produced but also an intrinsic desire to seek and find new forms and characteristics of poetry. Extremely important for this work was also my strong interest in visual art and new music, including my own experimentation with untraditional visual processors. I was aware that rational, controllable forms of composition were common in music and in the visual arts, that their content/statement had long done away with literary content and references. It didn't seem just natural but also imperative to try something similar with the material of language.<sup>19</sup>

By 1966, Valoch started to receive information from Julio Campal: invitation cards to conferences, seminars and exhibitions in the Basque country and in Madrid. If the origin of the artists' first contact remains unclear, we can formulate at least two hypotheses. On the one hand, Helena Musilová has noted that Valoch's large correspondence network was initially facilitated by Jiří Kolář and Ladislav Novák, as well as by the Fluxus-related mailing lists he had access to.<sup>20</sup> The French poet Pierre Garnier, known for being at the origin of the idea of spatialism in poetry along with his wife Ilse Garnier, was one of Valoch's early contacts and since 1964, he had been publishing Czech experimental poetry in his magazine *Les Lettres*, printed in France. In 1966, Garnier was already in touch with Campal—Campal and Uribe had met through him—and it might be by his intermediary and that of *Les Lettres* that Campal became aware of the Czech poetry scene and started to include its protagonists in his

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<sup>19</sup> Jiří Valoch, statement for the anthology of Czech visual poetry of the sixties “Der Würfelwurf” prepared for printing by Odeon, Prague, and banned in 1969. Reproduced in *Détente*, exh. cat. (Wien : Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1993), 118.

<sup>20</sup> Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 41.

projects.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Valoch's participation in the exhibition "Poesia concreta internacional" ("International concrete poetry") organised by Mathias Goeritz in 1966 in Mexico City certainly opened another front for collaborations and could have contributed to give his work greater visibility across the Atlantic and in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>22</sup> Even without knowing its origin with certainty, we can affirm that the long-distance relationship Campal-Valoch captures the sprawling nature of the experimental poetry network and the importance of word of mouth and the disinterested sharing of artists' lists for its expansion beyond the blocs divisions.<sup>23</sup>

Valoch's work eventually made its first appearance in Spain through the "Exposición internacional de poesía de vanguardia" ("International exhibition of avantgarde poetry") organised by Campal at the Galería Juana Mordó in Madrid in June 1966. **[Fig. 1.2]** The gallery Mordó, opened in 1964, played a significant role in the promotion of Spanish and international painting and the consolidation of an emerging art market. In the exhibitions, Jiří Valoch and Jiří Kolář figured among a group of creators who represented concrete, spatial, cinetic, semiotic and experimental art.<sup>24</sup> In September the same year, contributions from both artists and also from the poets Václav Havel, Eduard Ovčáček and Vladimír Burda were presented in Campal's week of avant-garde poetry at the Galería Barandiarán in San Sebastián, in which "poster-

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<sup>21</sup> In 1964, the issue 33 of *Les Lettres* published by Pierre Garnier included for the first time experimental poetries from Czechoslovakia. The same year, no. 34 included poems and texts by Jiří Valoch, Eduard Ovčáček, Ladislav Novák, Josef Hiršal, Bohumila Grögerová and Enrique Uribe, among others. No. 35 from 1966 dedicated to Spatialist theatre included a text by Ladislav Novák, "identification", and another one from Zdeněk Barbroka.

<sup>22</sup> The exhibition opened from March to May 1966 at the Galería Universitaria Aristor in Mexico-City, and was accompanied by a catalogue with texts by Max Bense, Ernst Jandl, Jasia Richard and Ida Rodríguez. Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> Besides Campal, others agents played a key role in the dissemination of concrete poetry in Spain, such as art critics Ángel Crespo and Pilar Gómez Bedate through the *Revista Cultural Brasileña* (both left Spain in 1967 to Brazil and then, Puerto Rico, where they became involved in the Department of Hispanic Studies of the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez), as well as artists Julio Plaza and José María Iglesias, to mention just a few. Since they did not have a direct relationship with Central European artists at that time, however, our focus remains on Campal's activities and their continuity in the work of other artists. For a detailed account of this other branch of the Spanish concrete scene, see Barreiro López, "Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista", 95-97; Ángel Crespo and Pilar Gómez Bédate, "Situación de la poesía concreta", *Revista de Cultura Brasileña* no. 5, June 1963, 89-130.

<sup>24</sup> The artists exhibited on this occasion at the Galería Juana Mordó included Julien Blaine, Adriano Spatola, Henri Chopin, Kurt Schwitters and the Spanish Enrique Uribe, Fernando Millan, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño and Blanca Calparsoro.

poems, openings, phonetic poems, poetic objects, mobiles” reflected the aesthetic research and first achievements of “cinetic, semiotic, experimental, visual and independent vanguardist tendencies”.<sup>25</sup> [Fig. 1.3] Campal’s words in the exhibition booklet expressed his feeling of being on the threshold of a new art, that was still subject to misunderstanding but needed to be relentlessly promoted by engaged cultural workers like himself:

Poets in particular, produce works that are penetrated by current life, receive influences, intermingle, change their line of conduct, affirm or renew themselves. Each one follows the path dictated by his own authenticity, adapting them, as Machado said: “To follow the law of life/which is to live as one can”. This is why, in this first classification of the new poetry, we take the risk of being misunderstood, of being confronted with the sudden and abrupt gesture of those who do not want to understand. It doesn’t matter. Other workers will come later. After creation, classificatory order. Immersed myself in the new tendencies as a poet committed to his time (now 1966), having almost every day in my hands the most recently produced works, I understand perfectly that we lack insight for a definitive historical judgement: it is a question of exposing, presenting, communicating with an attentive public which is growing today as fast as we are growing.<sup>26</sup>

Campal’s engagement was reflected in his practice anchored in a reality in transformation, disrupted by the mutation of the forms of communication and the mediums on which they relied. Conscious that “the speed of life, the demands of technology and the speed of communications” required “to break out of the old moulds which prevent us from keeping pace with the historical rhythm of our times”,

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<sup>25</sup> This was one of the few (if not the only) occasions in which works of experimental poetry by Václav Havel were exhibited in Spain. On Havel’s poetry, see Tereza Dedinova, “Visual poetry in Václav Havel’s work/La poesía visual en la obra de Václav Havel/Vizualni poezie v díle Václava Havla”, *Eslavística Complutense*, vol. 13, 2013, 31-38.

<sup>26</sup> “Los poetas en particular, realizan obras penetradas de la vida actual, reciben influencias, se entremezclan, varían de línea de conducta, se afirman o se renuevan. Cada uno prosigue el camino que le dicta su propia autenticidad, adaptándose los, como decía Machado: “Seguir la ley de la vida/que es vivir como se pueda”. Por esto, en esta primera clasificación de la nueva poesía arriesgamos tropezar con la incomprensión, contra el gesto atropellado y brusco del que no quiere entender. No importa. Otros trabajadores vendrán después. Después de la creación, el orden clasificatorio. Sumergido yo mismo en las nuevas tendencias como poeta comprometido con su época (ahora 1966), teniendo casi al día entre las manos las obras producidas más recientemente, comprendo perfectamente que carecemos de perspectiva para un juicio histórico definitivo. Se trata de exponer, de presentar, de comunicarnos con un público atento que crece hoy día tan rápidamente como nosotros.” Julio Campal, untitled introduction in *Semana de poesía de vanguardia*, exh. cat. (Bilbao: Galería Barandiarán, 1966), unpaginated.

he nevertheless established a genealogy departing from pioneering initiatives like the Futurists and the Dadaists, but also the Chilean surrealist poet Vicente Huidobro and the French poet and sculptor Pierre-Albert Birot , before addressing contemporary creation.<sup>27</sup>

The South-American poet was strongly committed to communicate information in an accessible way and connect it with the current problems faced by the audience. Fernando Millán would later consider that Campal's "ability to lead" relied on his affirmation of the centrality of information not as a "private property but something public that had to be shared with all the interested persons".<sup>28</sup> Campal insisted in fact on the anti-magistral character of his public initiatives and on the necessity for the poet and the artist to participate in social processes:

The time of the divine poet, of the ivory tower, of the poet who possesses the magic word, who must be worshipped, has gone [...]. The poet, that is, the artist, is just another worker for society, and as such has a series of rights and a series of duties. One of the duties of the artist is to cooperate with the audience in the knowledge of the problems that concern him and that also concern the audience. Art today also depends on the audience. Art depends on all of us, never on isolated facts or persons.<sup>29</sup>

The social function Campal attributed to these new forms of art and his involvement in pedagogical activities were in line with his conception of avant-garde poetry as an

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<sup>27</sup> "[...] queremos contribuir con todo ello a una labor de creación, cultura e información cada día mas necesarias, en la medida en que la rapidez de la vida, las exigencias de la técnica, la velocidad de las comunicaciones exigen de nosotros romper viejos moldes que nos impiden marchar al ritmo histórico de nuestro tiempo." Campal, untitled introduction, unpaginated.

<sup>28</sup> "Su capacidad de liderazgo estaba basada en un discurso inédito en el mundo intelectual de los años sesenta: lo primero y más valioso para un poeta era la información. Y por eso la información none una propiedad privada, sinon algo público que se debía compartir con todas las personas interesadas." Fernando Millán, "Utopía, transgresión, neoavanguardia y radicalismo. La poesía experimental en el Estado español", in *Escrito está. Poesía experimental en España*, exh. cat. (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium; Valladolid: Museo Patio Herreriano, 2009), 20.

<sup>29</sup> "Ha pasado [...] la hora del poeta divino, de la torre de marfil, del poeta poseedor de la palabra mágica, al cual es necesario adorar. El poeta, esto es, el artista, es un trabajador más de la sociedad, y como tal tiene una serie de derechos u una serie de deberes. Uno de los deberes del artista es cooperar con el público en el conocimiento de los problemas que le preocupan y que preocupan también al público. El arte actual depende también del público. De todos nosotros depende el arte, nunca de hechos o personas aisladas.[...]" Conference of Julio Campal on "Problemas urgentes del arte más actual", Casa de Cultura, Cuenca, in occasion of the exhibition of the sculptor Elvira Afágame. Anonymous, "Reseñas de conferencias, Julio Campal", in *Escrito está. Poesía experimental en España*, exh. cat. (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium; Valladolid: Museo Patio Herreriano, 2009), 62-66 and 67-70.

engine of social transformation. Spanish “experimentalism” (“experimentalismo”) from the 1960s remained in fact strongly permeated with the idea of art as an avant-garde practice longing for rupture and change, inscribed in a teleological process. In this regard, Juan Albarrán and Rosa Benítez have emphasised the elusive nature of experimentalism, which, according to them, precisely overlapped two fields Spanish historiography still struggles to connect to one another: on the one hand, experimental writing and, on the other, the practices designated under the term “new behaviours” (“nuevos comportamientos”) by the Spanish art critic and theoretician Simón Marchán Fiz.<sup>30</sup> The practice of Jiří Valoch certainly fits within this hybrid field, straddling his fascination for writing and language and an interest in the production of images, particularly through photography.

### 1.3. A polarised scene, between integrated art and defolklorisation

At the end of the the 1960s, the scene of Spanish experimental poetry was characterized by the formation of groups of affinity that started to operate separately and, sometimes, competitively. These divergences must be taken into consideration, especially since, as Jesús Carrillo and Iñaki Estella have well observed, “the combination of creative and informative activities [...] has resulted in the very protagonists of these experiences becoming their most recurrent historians and critics, generating an accumulation of opposing readings and irreconcilable confrontations.”<sup>31</sup> On this respect, Fernando Millán and Ignacio Gómez de Liaño can be considered as two main figures who have generated distinct—and, to some extent, competing—

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<sup>30</sup> Pointing at the “volatility and indefiniteness” of Spanish experimentalism, they call for a “holistic” approach to this corpus of practices. Juan Albarrán Diego and Rosa Benítez Andrés, “Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960-1980): ensayos, diálogos y zonas de contacto para la redefinición de un contexto”, in Albarrán and Benítez Andrés, eds., *Ensayo/Error: Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960–1980)*, special issue of *Hispanic Issues On Line* no. 21, 2018, 1-29. The cycle “Nuevos comportamientos artísticos” was organised by Simón Marchán Fiz and the German Institute in Madrid and Barcelona in 1974. The same year, Marchán included a new section in his fundamental essay *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, published in 1972, to address these “new behaviours” and the “extension of art” they manifested. Simón Marchán Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, first ed. 1972 (Madrid: Akal, 2021), 153.

<sup>31</sup> “[...] la combinación de actividades creativas e informativas [...] ha provocado que los mismos protagonistas de estas experiencias se hayan convertido en sus historiadores y críticos mas recurrentes, generando un cúmulo de lecturas contrapuestas y enfrentamientos irreconciliables.” Jesús Carrillo and Iñaki Estella Noriega, “Redes poéticas I: Poesía visual (1962-...)”, in Jesús Carrillo and Iñaki Estella Noriega, eds., *Desacuerdos 3: sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado Español* (San Sebastián, Sevilla, Barcelona, Granada: Arteleku, UNIA arte y pensamiento, MACBA, Centro José Guerrero, 2005), 49.

readings since the premature death of Julio Campal in a domestic accident, in 1968.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore not surprising that after Campal's death, works from Czech poets and artists continued to appear through exhibitions and publications by Millán and Gómez de Liaño. Both initiated lines of artistic research that relied on the foundation of collective structures: Liaño, through the *Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana* and Millán with the *Grupo N. O.* None of these structures, however, lasted very long.<sup>33</sup>

A member of *Problemática 63*, Gómez de Liaño left the group in 1966—in part due to dissensions with Campal—and formed the *Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana* (Cooperative of Artistic and Handicraft Production, CPAA) along with Herminio Molero, Manuel Quejido, Fernando López-Vera, Francisco Pino and Francisco Salazar. The members of the CPAA embraced experimentation through multiple media as the only way to escape from art's recuperation by the capitalist art system. At the same time, they also sought to reaffirm the social function of the artistic avant-gardes:

The avant-gardes, far from being marginal, ephemeral, respond to new demands, to new conditions of life in society. With them, new significant systems are tested, new categories aware of time. With them, a reordering of significant values takes place. Because, we insist, while the expressive can occur on a desert island, signification needs to be continually in function, and these are aesthetic-social functions.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> One of the reasons for Fernando Millán and Ignacio Gómez de Liaño's disagreement has to do precisely with the figure of Campal. While Campal's crucial and visionary role in the emergence of a Spanish scene was constantly reaffirmed by Millán, Gómez de Liaño criticised his authoritarian personality and his unwillingness to share power. See Chema de Francisco Guinea, "La poesía experimental en España en una conversación con Fernando Millán", *Especulo. Revista de estudios literarios* no. 6, July-October 1997, <http://webs.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero6/millan.htm>; Gómez de Liaño cited in Albarrán and Benítez Andrés, "Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960-1980): ensayos, diálogos y zonas de contacto para la redefinición de un contexto", 5.

<sup>33</sup> The CPAA ceased its activity in July 1969; the *Grupo N. O.* in 1972. Sarmiento, *La otra escritura: la poesía experimental española, 1960-1973*, 22-30.

<sup>34</sup> "Las vanguardias lejos de ser lo marginal, lo efímero, responde [sic] a nuevas exigencias, a nuevas condiciones de vida en la sociedad. Con ellas se ensayan nuevos sistemas significativos, nuevas categorías alertas al tiempo. Con ellas se opera una reordenación de valores significativos. Porque, insistimos, mientras lo expresivo puede darse en una isla desierta la significación necesita estar continuamente en funciones, y estas lo son estético-sociales." *Cooperativa de producción artística y artesana*, "Declaración de principios. Estética y sociedad" (1967), reprinted in Carrillo and Estella Noriega, eds., *Desacuerdos 3: sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado Español*, 55; for a more complete analysis of the position of the CPAA in the context of Franco's dictatorship, Barreiro López, "Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista", 992-994.



The notion of “integrated art” (“arte integrado”) seemed to respond to this desire to combine the aesthetic dimension with collective social benefits.<sup>35</sup> In 1967, the CPAA organised the itinerant exhibition “Rotor internacional de Concordancia de las Artes” (a title hardly translatable into “International rotor of harmonisation”, or “conjunction of the arts”), on display in the cities of Valladolid, San Sebastian, Cuenca, Cordoba, Sevilla, Bilbao, Santander, Valencia, Barcelona and Madrid. “Rotor internacional” was elaborated around the idea of “integrated art” and claimed for integration as a concept that could bring artists and technicians together around a unitarian conception of arts for society.<sup>36</sup> In line with the multidisciplinary spirit of the CPAA, the exhibition combined visual poetry, painting, architecture and design. Many works reproduced in the catalogue had a kinetic and optical component and the whole initiative celebrated experiments on visuality and perception as a key element of modernity.<sup>37</sup> The publication also offered theoretical and historical keys to address the phenomenon, through the contributions of Carlos Areán, Rafael Leoz de la Fuente, Max Bense, Francisco Salazar and Ignacio Gómez de Liaño.<sup>38</sup> The catalogue also included short citations from poets and theoreticians who defined their practice under different terminologies: Eugen Gomringer (concrete poetry), Ernesto Manuel Galdes de Melo e Castro (experimental poetry), Pierre Garnier (visual poetry), Arthur Petronio (verbofonía), Stephen Bank (Kinetic poetry), Franz Mon (Texts in space), Mario Chamie (praxis-poetry), Noigandres (concrete poetry) and Julien Blaine, whose text highlighted the potentiality of books for experimental art and poetry. In the catalogue, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño situated the Czech artists whose

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<sup>35</sup> On the idea of integration in the arts, see Juan Carlos Fernández Serrato, “La rebelión de los lenguajes: interrelación de las artes y poética experimental”, *EU-topias* vol. 16, 2018, 30-32, <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:133732> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>36</sup> *Rotor internacional Concordancia de las Artes*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Publicaciones Españolas, Col. Cuadernos de Arte, 1967).

<sup>37</sup> This postulate strongly echoes the issues addressed in the “New Tendencies” exhibitions and their connected activities in Zagreb, as well as the interest of the groups who gravitated around them (GRAV, Gruppo N, Gruppo MID, to mention a few). It is worth recalling that the cycle of conferences organised by the Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana at the German Institute in Madrid in 1967 and 1968 was titled “Nuevas Tendencias” (“New Tendencies”). On the New Tendencies, see Armin Medosch, *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961 - 1978)* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> *Rotor internacional Concordancia de las Artes*, unpaginated.

work was on view in the sphere of influence of Pierre Garnier and his spatialism, the intention of which, he insisted, was to ““defolklorise” languages, put them at the level of the cosmos”. Gomez de Liaño named Jiří Kolář, Jiří Valoch and more specifically, Bohumila Grögerová and Joseph Hiršal’s book *Job-Boj*, first issued in 1960-61 and which title can be translated as “The struggle of the youth”. According to Liaño, this type of work produced “a distancing by the means of humour, satire and the grotesque” and Ladislav Novák’s phonetic poems followed the same “satirical tendency”.<sup>39</sup>

Defolklorisation thus appeared as a central issue, and was strongly connected with the idea of concrete poetry as a “supranational language”. This idea would be exposed a few months later by the poet Eugen Gomringer, in the framework of the cycle of conferences “Nuevas Tendencias” in Madrid, also organised by the CPAA.<sup>40</sup> It also resonated with Max Bense’s idea according to whom “concrete poetry does not divide the language, but unifies it, merges it”, through a defining principle that made it “an authentically international poetic trend.<sup>41</sup>” Both reproduced in the catalogue of “Rotor internacional”, Bense’s affirmation and Gomringer’s statement had been retrieved from the Italian magazine *Modulo*, which first issue was a monograph dedicated to concrete poetry. Quotes from other authors had been retrieved from Pierre Garnier’s

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<sup>39</sup> “Este movimiento en Checoslovaquia ha ejercido influencia sobre Jiří Kolář, Jiří Valoch, Joseph Hiršal y Bohumila Grögerová, estos dos últimos en su libro “Job-Boj” (la lucha de los jóvenes), crean en el poema un distanciamiento crítico por medio del humor, la sátira y lo grotesco; Ladislav Novák participa también de esta tendencia satírica en algún poema fonético.” Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, “La nueva poesía y el problema de la estética contemporánea”, in *Rotor internacional Concordancia de las Artes*, unpaginated.

<sup>40</sup> In December 1967, Gomringer gave the conference “La poesía concreta como lengua supranacional” (“Concrete poetry as a supranational language”) in the framework of the cycle “Nuevas Tendencias” (“New Tendencies”) promoted by the Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana at the German Institute in Madrid. Other speakers included Reinhardt Döhl the same year and, for “Nuevas Tendencias 2” on 1968, Max Bense and Gerhardt Ruhm. Javier Maderuelo, “Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983”, in *La poesía experimental en España, 1963-1983*, exh. cat. (Heras: Ediciones La Bahía, 2014), 67.

<sup>41</sup> “La poesía concreta no divide la lengua, si no que la unifica, la funde. Corresponde, pues, a su intención lingüística si la poesía concreta ha suscitado por primera vez una corriente poética auténticamente internacional.” Max Bense, in *Rotor internacional Concordancia de las Artes*, unpaginated.

magazine *Les Lettres*.<sup>42</sup> These examples illustrate how much the local scenes—and more particularly, in the cases we are interested in, the Spanish, Italian and French scenes—were interconnected. Artists’ publications and magazines played a central role here, contributing to the circulation of common set of references and materials. We should insist in fact on the dynamic of translation of artistic and theoretical texts at work within these movements, often carried out by the protagonists themselves. While concrete poetry and, more broadly, experimental poetry were promoted as a common and supranational language that did not require translation, the attention given to translation in the context of the dissemination of the significant critical and theoretical apparatus that accompanied this movement should be highlighted. It gives in fact an interesting point of analysis and differentiation between, on the one hand, the universalist ambition of the creative practice and, on the other, its field of diffusion and the intellectual framework for which “traditional” communication remained essential for the inscription of this trend in a precise historical and cultural genealogy.

The will to inhabit language beyond any topical identification did not prevent artists from playing on the sonorities and consonances proper to a specific language, or from introducing cultural and even geopolitical references. We find in the catalogue of “Rotor internacional” a work by Valoch that consisted in a visual grid formed by the repetition of the letter “V”, declined through a series of geometrical modules. In contrast with the abstract character of the piece, its title, *Hommage to Vietnam* (1966), suggested a gesture of anti-imperialist solidarity with the East Asian country in war. **[Fig. 1.4 and 1.5]** Quite significantly though, the black and white reproduction in the Spanish catalogue came without title, thus suppressing this geopolitical reference. This was not an isolated case, the same happened with all the works reproduced in the exhibition catalogue. On the one hand, the absence of titles undoubtedly served—

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<sup>42</sup> *Modulo* 1, “poesia concreta”, Arrigo Lora Totino, ed., Turin, 1966, 9 (Bense) and 14 (Gomringer). This issue contained contributions by Hiršal, Grögerová, Kolář, Novák, Valoch and Havel. It is probable that it Julio Campal had access to this publication before he organised “Semana de poesia de vanguardia” at the Galeria Barandiarán in Bilbao, in September 1966. *Les Lettres* (subtitled “Poésie nouvelle-revue du spatialisme”) was published by Pierre Garnier between 1945 and 1967. It focused on experimental poetry from the 1960s on. The extract by Stephen Bann reproduced in “Rotor” was retrieved from *Les Lettres* 34, 1964.

voluntarily or not—the purpose of “defolklorisation” claimed by Gómez de Liaño by emphasising the international and abstract character of poetry. On the other hand, the public character of the exhibition and its large circulation across the Spanish state let us think that the organisers could have opted for such semantic neutrality in order to prevent censorship. The initiative was supported in fact by the Ministry of Information and Tourism which, as its name does not indicate, was in charge of cultural affairs and censorship, and as such, it had an official dimension. This particular fact led some artists, among whom ancient members of the literary section of *Problemática 63*, to accuse the CPAA of collaborating with the Francoist regime.<sup>43</sup> Such critiques emanating from another group of poets illustrate, on the one hand, the internal dissensions that permeated this scene of Spanish experimental poetry, on the other, the difficulty of keeping art free of any kind of official intervention. For those agents or, to borrow a term used at that time, “operators” who wanted to give avant-garde art a public visibility on the national territory, the “tactical and opportunistic use of the Francoist state networks at disposal” seemed in fact an unavoidable path.<sup>44</sup>

Regarding the political engagement of Spanish artists and collectives involved in experimental poetry at the end of the 1960s, the multiplicity of accounts that sometimes contrast with the revolutionary tone of the declarations and manifestos produced at that time has not really facilitated the identification of a coherent position between all.<sup>45</sup> For exemple, concerning the CPAA, Gómez de Liaño recently insisted that the vanguard position he and his comrades adopted was not political, but tried to

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<sup>43</sup> Perdura, “Palabras con Ignacio Gómez de Liaño”, *Perdura* 15, 1979, 121-5, cited in Albarrán and Benítez, “Arte y escritura experimentales en España (1960-1980): ensayos, diálogos y zonas de contacto para la redefinición de un contexto”, 5.

<sup>44</sup> “No hay que olvidar que, para parte de los artistas participantes, estas relaciones se entendieron dentro de un uso táctico o oportunista de las redes del Estado franquista a disposición.” Barreiro López, “Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista”, 993. Regarding the use of “operator”, Juan Carlos Fernández Serrato has observed its widespread use among experimental poets, who tried to “bring their aesthetic work in line with the technical work of the engineer or the architect, thereby claiming recognition of the same social functionality for their experimental poetic proposals.” (“[...] intentando que su trabajo estético se emparentara con el trabajo técnico del ingeniero o el arquitecto y reclamando con ello el reconocimiento de la misma funcionalidad social para sus propuestas poéticas experimentales”). Fernández Serrato, “La rebelión de los lenguajes: interrelación de las artes y poética experimental”, 30.

<sup>45</sup> Barreiro López, “Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista”, 993-995.

bring about “a socio-cultural transformation.<sup>46</sup>” Gómez de Liaño’s differentiation is certainly important, because it dissociates him from a certain type of political commitment, namely that of the Spanish communists who were more involved in direct anti-Francoist struggle:

We were weirdos, but what happened was that what we were doing didn’t have much political implication. Neither we nor the New Figuration artists were Marxists, Maoists or communists. On the other hand, you have to bear in mind that the communists didn’t like all this experimentalism of ours very much either, eh? [...] [W]hat we did had socio-cultural implications, not political ones.

[...] Since I was a child I always lived the idea of freedom as something very individualistic. If I was against a dictatorship like Franco’s, I was also against a communist dictatorship. It was as simple as that. That didn’t mean that I didn’t have very good friends in the PCE. In fact, we must recognise that the Marxists were the ones who fought Franco the most. But mine, as I said before, was more a socio-cultural struggle for freedom of expression.<sup>47</sup>

This separation of the experimental avant-garde from a resolutely anti-Francoist left embodied by Marxist art critics and artists would crystallise and become particularly visible in 1972, in the context of the Pamplona Encounters (Encuentros de Pamplona, discussed in Chapter four), which saw two generations of artists confronting each other in relation to Francoism and the ways they faced it: ideological resistance on one side, counter-cultural struggle on the other.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ignacio Gómez de Liaño “Nuestro vanguardismo tuvo sobre todo implicaciones socioculturales, no políticas”, interview with Fran G. Matute, *Jotdown*, February 2019, <https://www.jotdown.es/2019/02/ignacio-gomez-de-liano-nuestro-vanguardismo-tuvo-sobre-todo-implicaciones-socioculturales-no-politicas/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Éramos bichos raros, lo que ocurre es que lo que hacíamos no tenía mucha implicación política. Ni nosotros ni los artistas de la Nueva Figuración éramos marxistas, maoístas o comunistas. Hay que tener en cuenta, por otro lado, que todos estos experimentalismos nuestros tampoco gustaban demasiado a los comunistas, ¿eh? [risas]. [...] lo nuestro sobre todo tuvo implicaciones socioculturales, no políticas. [...] Desde niño viví siempre la idea de la libertad como algo muy individualista. Si yo estaba en contra de una dictadura como la de Franco también lo estaba de una dictadura comunista. Era así de sencillo. Eso no quitaba para que luego tuviera muy buenos amigos en el PCE. De hecho, hay que reconocer que los marxistas fueron los que más combatieron a Franco. Pero lo mío, como te decía antes, fue más un combate sociocultural de libertad de expresión.” Gómez de Liaño “Nuestro vanguardismo tuvo sobre todo implicaciones socioculturales, no políticas”.

<sup>48</sup> See José Díaz Cuyás, “Literalismo y carnavalización en la última vanguardia”, in *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972. Fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2009), 16-55; on Marxist art criticism, see Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*, chapter four.

The dilemma faced by part of the Spanish avant-garde regarding its collaboration with the official cultural system certainly resonated with the situation of artists and cultural agents in socialist Central Europe. On both the Spanish and the Czechoslovak side—regarding the latter, especially after August 1968—, independence and autonomy were both a naive ambition and an unattainable objective, given that the whole public—and, to some extent, private—sphere was under the authorities’ control. Under these circumstances, artists interested in making experimental art publicly available to a broader audience, like Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, Fernando Millán or Jiří Valoch, had no choice but operating from within official or semi-official structures of diffusion.

At the same time, the variation of national cultural policies combined with specific socio-political conditions made each context difficult to understand for external actors. The discussions and internal tensions proper to the Spanish context remained beyond the grasp of Jiří Valoch, above all interested in sharing information and international collaboration. In the early 1970s, Valoch took himself the initiative to contact the poet José María Montells, asking him to send copies of the magazine of experimental poetry *Poliedros*, issued by his publishing house Parnaso 70. *Poliedros*—subtitled “Cuadernos para el monólogo...poético” (Notebooks for a poetic monologue)—was published by Montells in collaboration with an association of students from the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Madrid. Valoch’s request to Montells demonstrates that he was not only interested in exhibiting his own work abroad, but also in getting to know better the production from abroad and the channels through which it was diffused, especially printed media.<sup>49</sup> In his answer, Montells enclosed several issues of *Poliedros* as well as books of experimental poetry like his *La cabellera de Berenice* (1970) and Fernando Millán’s *Textos y antitextos* (1970).<sup>50</sup> Ironically enough, Montells himself was suspected to be close to the fascist and ultra-catholic right wing, an issue that would generate discomfort among the members of the Grupo N. O. and contribute to its

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<sup>49</sup> Fernando Millán and Jiří Valoch maintained an extensive correspondence, today conserved in the Archive Lafuente (Santander/Madrid). Maderuelo, “Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983”, 68.

<sup>50</sup> José María Montells to Jiří Valoch, letter dated 4 February 1971. Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

dissolution, in 1972.<sup>51</sup>

Constituted in 1968 after Campal's death, the Grupo N. O. brought together a group of artists close to *Problemática 63*, including Fernando Millán, Juan Carlos Aberásturi, Jokin Diez, Jesús García Sánchez and Enrique Uribe. They explicitly manifested their intention to pursue Campal's research in the field of experimental poetry, with an emphasis on teamwork and the divulgation of experimental art. Millán, who was particularly close to Campal, constantly insisted on the singularity of the Uruguayan poet. For him, Campal was the one who introduced an avant-garde approach in Spain, in the sense of "an ethical commitment with the will to change the situation". "The avant-gardist", observed Millán, "does not only want to change literature, he also wants it to participate in the change of society. [...] Until then, everything that had been done in Spain had been intimate, a private approach among artists".<sup>52</sup>

Between 1969 and the early 1970s, the Grupo N. O. maintained Campal's legacy and organised exhibitions relying on the materials collected by the deceased poet, while it sought at the same time to give visibility to its members' own work and foster international communication and collaboration.<sup>53</sup> Among the various events including works of Czech experimental poetry were the "Jornadas de documentación sobre poesía de vanguardia" ("Documentation days on avant-garde poetry") in May 1969 in Zaragoza, and "Poesía internacional de vanguardia" ("International avant-garde poetry") in March-April 1970 in Madrid. The first, conceived as a homage to Campal in collaboration with the *Oficina Poética Internacional* and the *Sociedad Dante Alighieri*, put materials from his collection in display—including works by Jiří

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<sup>51</sup> The fact that the dissolution of the Grupo N.O. would be due to this paradoxical collaborations was evoked in Carrillo and Estela, "Redes poéticas I: Poesía visual (1962-...)", 50.

<sup>52</sup> "Sin Campal no hubiéramos tenido un planteamiento vanguardista en el sentido completo de la palabra, puesto que el planteamiento vanguardista supone un compromiso ético con la voluntad de cambiar la situación. El vanguardista no quiere cambiar sólo la literatura, también se propone que ésta participe en el cambio de la sociedad. La vanguardia es una forma de desmesura que, con unos medios ridículos, quiere nada menos que cambiar todo; la referencia es utópica. Hasta ese momento todo lo que se había hecho en España había sido íntimo, un planteamiento privado entre artistas." De Francisco Guinea, "La poesía experimental en España en una conversación con Fernando Millán".

<sup>53</sup> On the Grupo N.O., see Maderuelo, "Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983", 62; Sarmiento, *La otra escritura: la poesía experimental española, 1960-1973*, 26-30.

Valoch, Bohumila Grögerová, Josef Hiršal, Ladislav Novák, and Eduard Ovčáček.<sup>54</sup> The second, at the Galeria Danae in Madrid, pretended to be an “exhibition-spectacle” through which the organizers wanted to demonstrate the “total” character of art and the indistinctiveness between art and life. In the exhibition leaflet, Fernando Millán proposed “freedom as a method” to create an art “at the service of human progress”. He adopted a militant tone to advocate for “a progressive art form of/for a revolutionary ideology” and insisted on the search for authenticity through a language that reflected the multiplicity of the present.<sup>55</sup> In addition to works on paper by Valoch, Grogerová and Hiršal, a specific section featured sound and performative works. The public was thus able to listen to Ladislav Novák’s sound poem *Ceterum autem* (1969). In an obsessive, yet playful incantation, the audible piece declined Cato the Elder’s words on the destruction of Carthago pronounced in front of the Roman Senate (“Ceterum auto censeo Cartaginem esse delendam”) and explored their rhythms and sonorities.<sup>56</sup>

#### 1.4. Affinities and exchange between zaj and Valoch

In their anthology of experimental poetry *La escritura en libertad*, published in 1975, Fernando Millán and Jesús García Sánchez formulated a rare attempt to discern points of junction between experimental practices from Spain and Czechoslovakia. They observed in fact similarities between Novák’s “semantic poems of action” and the production of the group zaj, the first to introduce action art in Spain in the form of events that combined avant-garde poetry, action music and theatre.<sup>57</sup> The affinities with zaj described above were indeed relevant, not only for Novák but also, as we

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<sup>54</sup> Maderuelo, “Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983”, 62.

<sup>55</sup> “[U]na forma artística progresiva de/para una ideología progresista”, Fernando Millán, in *Poesía internacional de vanguardia*, exh. leaflet, Galeria Danae, Madrid, 1970. The exhibition and its program of events were on view from 14 March to April 1970.

<sup>56</sup> See Marie Langerová, “Mluvim, a tedy jsem”, *Slovo a Smysl/Word & Sense* vol. 13, no. 26, 2016, 13-25.

<sup>57</sup> “Muy interesante es la denominación utilizada por el checoslovaco Ladislav Novav [sic]: “poemas semánticos de acción”. En este terreno son de destacar las producciones del grupo zaj, que durante años ha trabajado en España.” [“A very interesting term is the one used by the Czechoslovak Ladislav Novav [sic]: “semantic poems of action”. In this field, the productions of the zaj group, which has been working in Spain for years, are noteworthy.”] Fernando Millán and Jesús García Sánchez, “De la poesía experimental a la escritura en libertad”, in *La escritura en libertad. Antología de poesía experimental* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1975), 23.



shall see, in the case of Jiří Valoch, whose contacts with the group will be retraced here.

The exhibition “Poesia internacional de vanguardia” at the Galeria Danae featured an *Acoustic drawing* (*Akustická kresba*) (1969) by the Prague-based artist Milan Grygar, whose work was exhibited for the first time in Spain. Grygar’s acoustic drawings reflected his explorations of the translation (and transposition) of drawing into an audible matter. [Fig. 1.6] In these works, the gestuality performed while executing the drawing, the visual outcome and the sound produced and recorded during this creative process cohabited in a totally non-hierarchical way. Just a few weeks before the event at the Galeria Danae, Grygar’s work was mentioned in an article published in the Spanish magazine *Sonda*, signed by Jiří Valoch. [Fig. 1.7] This time, Valoch assumed the role of art critic to promote the work of his peer, highlighting the fact that Grygar escaped “the main contradiction of graphic music”, i.e., “the limited determination of the sonorous in relation to the graphic.” In Grygar’s acoustic drawings, he explained, “[t]he graphic values are not given by the random sound or graphic structure, but above all by their opposite determination”.<sup>58</sup>

*Sonda* was the bulletin of the Juventudes Musicales de Madrid, coordinated by the composers Ramón Barce and Tomás Marco and distributed freely to the members of the association. Valoch’s contribution resulted from an invitation by Barce, who specified that the article, on a subject of his choice, could be written in English, French or German.<sup>59</sup> Focused on graphic music from Czechoslovakia, the article produced by Valoch started by affirming that this production was a typical example of what North American artist Dick Higgins had defined as *intermedia*.<sup>60</sup> Besides

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<sup>58</sup> “Así logra el autor esquivar la principal contradicción de la música gráfica; es decir, la exigua determinación de lo sonoro con respecto a lo gráfico. Los valores gráficos, il explique, no vienen dados por la estructura aleatoria sonora o gráfica, sino sobre todo por su opuesta determinación.” Jiří Valoch, “Algunas observaciones sobre la música gráfica”, *Sonda* no. 5, April 1969, 6. The text was translated from German by Ramón Barce.

<sup>59</sup> Ramon Barce to Jiří Valoch, letter dated 5 September 1968. Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

<sup>60</sup> The term “intermedia” was first used by Dick Higgins in the first issue of the newsletter distributed to the buyers and correspondents of the publishing house Something Else Press, he founded in 1963. “Intermedia” referred to those practices that blurred the traditional boundaries of artistic media and languages and it was rapidly popularized through international networks such as the mail art network and Fluxus. Dick Higgins, *Something Else Newsletter* vol. 1, no. 1, “Intermedia”, February 1966, unpaginated.

Grygar, the article presented experiments by the artist Richard Brun from Brno and, in conclusion and in modest terms, Valoch's own research with score-poems. At the end of the article, Valoch invited artists and musicians to send materials for an exhibition planned to take place at the House of the Arts in Brno during the International Janacek Festival, in September 1969. He specified that the event, titled "Music Graphics", would include "graphic music, electronic music, aleatory scores with a visual interest and musical happenings scores".<sup>61</sup> The exhibition was eventually held in Brno as "Partitury" ("Score") and was partially reconstituted at the City Gallery in Prague in 1970, under the title "Music Graphics".<sup>62</sup>

Valoch's contribution to *Sonda* let appreciate once again how much his activities as an artist, an art critic and theorist, and a curator were interconnected, and confirms that his interests at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s merged poetry, music and the visual arts. Despite the communication barrier that was overcome in that case using an intermediate language (in this case, German), the Czech artist undoubtedly found in the Spanish experimental scene a space for dialogue and collaboration that reflected and nurtured his multiform practice. On the Spanish side, the inclusion of Valoch's article in *Sonda* reflected a broader interest on the part of its coordinators for ideas and practices from Central Europe, not only in the field of art but also of marxist philosophy, as shown by Ramón Barce's text "Comentarios a la estética de Lukács" ("Comments on the Aesthetics of Lukács") in which the author proceeded to a sharp and critical reading of the Hungarian philosopher.<sup>63</sup>

Besides his individual career as a composer and his activities in the framework of the Juventudes Musicales, Ramón Barce was also, along with the Spanish and Italian composers Juan Hidalgo and Walter Marchetti, one of the co-founders of the group

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<sup>61</sup> Valoch, "Algunas observaciones sobre la música gráfica", 8.

<sup>62</sup> The event is reported in Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 76-80.

<sup>63</sup> Barce formulated a critical analysis of Lukács' aesthetic system, departing from a factor of "artistic objectivation", rhythm, that allowed him to establish an original basis for artistic creation. Ramón Barce, "Comentarios a la estética de Lukács", *Sonda* no. 5, April 1969, 9-18.

zaj, in 1964. He rapidly left the group, however, invoking economic reasons.<sup>64</sup> Hidalgo and Marchetti had met in 1956 in Milan, where they were trained in the electroacoustic music studio of the Italian composer Bruno Maderna.<sup>65</sup> Their encounter with John Cage at the Darmstadt International Summer Course for New Music (Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik) in 1958 and the friendship that arose were fundamental for their orientation towards a “music of action”. This experimental form relied on the spatial and temporal structure of music to introduce non conventional gestures and objects.<sup>66</sup> The duo Hidalgo-Marchetti moved back to Spain in 1960, where they met Ramón Barce.<sup>67</sup> The 19 November 1964, zaj performed its first collective action titled *Transfer of three objects by foot* (*Traslado a pie de tres objetos*) in the streets of Madrid. The invitation to the action provided a detailed information on its execution:

zaj invites you to the transfer on foot of three objects of complex shape, built in poplar wood and whose dimensions are 1,80x0,70, 1,80x0,70 and 2x1,80 (two of them can be considered as complementary), by the following itinerary [...] with a total distance of 6300 m carried out by Juan Hidalgo Walter Marchetti Ramón

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<sup>64</sup> When Ramón Barce invited Jiří Valoch to contribute to *Sonda* in 1968, the composer was not part of zaj anymore. His reasons for leaving the group in 1965 were mostly economical. In a letter to Juan Hidalgo, Barce explained that he was forced to abandon his zaj activities because some people he was financially dependent on were scandalised and wouldn't have renewed his work contract. Juan Hidalgo, “Zaj”, in *Revista de Letras* n°3, Universidad de Puerto Rico in Mayagüez, September 1969, 432-433, cited in Rosa María Rodríguez Hernández, “La creación Zaj de Ramón Barce formulada desde la memoria (1ª parte)”, *Itamar. Revista de investigación musical: territorios para el arte*, no. 2, 2009, 239.

<sup>65</sup> Henar Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, *Hispanic Issues On Line* no. 21, Fall 2018, 139. On zaj's trajectory, see also *Zaj*, José Antonio Sarmiento, ed., exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1996); Julio Pérez Manzanares, *Juan Hidalgo y Zaj: arte subversivo durante el franquismo* (Madrid: Huerga y Fierro editores, S.L.U., 2018); Diego Luna, *Zaj: arte y política en la estética de lo cotidiano* (Sevilla: Athenaica Ediciones Universitarias, 2015).

<sup>66</sup> Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, 140; see also José Antonio Sarmiento, “El recorrido Zaj”, in *Zaj*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1996), 14-24.

<sup>67</sup> Both as a group and through their individual production, the members of zaj were open to collaboration with other artists from the field of intermedia practices. After Barce left zaj at the end of 1965, the group was joined in 1966 by the poet and diplomat José-Luis Castillejos (who left “zaj” at the end of 1969) and, in 1967, by the artist and performer Esther Ferrer. Hidalgo, Marchetti and Ferrer remained the core members of the group and decided to dissolve it in 1996, on the occasion of its retrospective at the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid. Sarmiento, “El recorrido Zaj”, 14-24.

Barce.<sup>68</sup>”

Its distinctive feature, however, was that the invitation reached its recipients one week after the action took place, thus making impossible any public participation. The action’s delayed acknowledgement raised the question of the relationship between artistic practice and a non-specialist sphere of reception, assuming, in Mayayo and Marzo’s words, the “discomfort of the art audience”.<sup>69</sup> As Hénar Rivière well observed, the group’s beginnings with an “impossible” invitation and an “anonymous route” would mark its constant desire to displace and alter the rules of the game, in a context of cultural repression imposed by the Francoist regime:

By sending the invitation to the *Traslado* once it was over, zaj anticipated the marginality to which it knew it was condemned in Franco’s Spain and chose it as its alternative, demonstrating that it did not need the attention of a public that was aware of being so. In this way it declared a stateless war on the status quo; a war without a desire for conquest, which consisted of accepting the margin, settling in it and dilating it until a new space was opened up in it.<sup>70</sup>

Evolving in the realm of the nonsensical without expecting any recognition, zaj created and occupied a space of independence from the institutions, but also from the public; this self-attributed marginality didn’t prevent their actions, however, to be seen as a threat to the regime, leading to censorship and, finally, to zaj’s decision to perform exclusively out of Spain after 1972 and, for some members, to go into exile.

Valoch and zaj shared the same interest in visual creations and artefacts that established a playful relation to language and orality. The Czech artist was in possession of books from members of zaj that followed the principles of non semantic

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<sup>68</sup> “zaj invitad a vd. al traslado a pie de tres objetos de forma compleja, construidos en madera de chopo y cuyas dimensiones son 1,80x0,70, 1,80x0,70 y 2x1,80 (pudiendo ser considerados dos de ellos como complementarios), por el itinerario siguiente [...] con un recorrido total de 6300 m realizado por Juan Hidalgo Walter Marchetti Ramón Barcelona.” zaj, invitation card, 1964.

<sup>69</sup> Marzo and Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939-2015): ideas, prácticas, políticas*, 246.

<sup>70</sup> “Al enviar la invitación al Traslado una vez concluido, zaj se anticipaba a la marginalidad a la que se sabía condenado en la España de Franco y la escogía como su alternativa, demostrando que no le resultaba imprescindible la atención de un público consciente de serlo. Le declaraba así una guerra apátrida al statu quo; una guerra sin afán de conquista, que consistía en aceptar el margen, instalarse en él y dilatarlo hasta abrir en él un nuevo espacio.” Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, 142.

poetry and language: José Luis Castillejos' *La caída del avión en el terreno baldío* (1966) and Juan Hidalgo's *Viaje a Argel* (1967), two important pieces in the context of Spanish experimental literature.<sup>71</sup> An autobiographical fiction, Castillejos' book was "a set of loose, unbound pages, collected in a cardboard box, which question the Western idea of order and which question the syntax and prosody of narrative discourse."<sup>72</sup> It was produced in Algiers where the poet, who was also a diplomat, was residing as a consul. Invited by him to spend the summer of 1966, Juan Hidalgo created *Viaje a Algiers*, characterized by a cyclic composition of texts, signs and images printed in green (a colour closely linked to Islam and the Arab world) on white paper. Posterior pieces created collectively or individually by members of *zaj* further explored the possibilities on non semantic poetry and language, in relation with sound and gesture. For Valoch, "[t]he poem became [...] more and more an aesthetic structure whereas the semantic dimension was increasingly relegated to the background. Non-semantic typewriter poems and visual poems with extremely reduced semantic material evolved at the same time."<sup>73</sup>

There is evidence of direct contact and dialogue between Valoch and *zaj* in Valoch's piece *3 texts to Juan Hidalgo & all Zaj Friends* (1968) [Fig. 1.8]. It consisted in a vertical cardboard paper folded in three with an inscription on each part: "Zaj but not Zaj..."; "Make Zaj not war"; "Zaj is also much better than Zaj". On the other side, the inscription "brno, checoslovaquia (Czechoslovakia in Spanish language) figured with the title, name of the artist and date. Valoch was playing with the composition and sonority of the word "zaj", adopted by the founders of the group precisely for its absence of meaning in Spanish language and for its inclusion of the typical sounds "z" and "j", foreigners usually find difficult to pronounce.<sup>74</sup> While

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<sup>71</sup> Maderuelo, "Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983", 75.

<sup>72</sup> "[...] un conjunto de paginas sueltas, sin encuadernar, recogidas en una caja de cartón, que ponen en crisis la idea occidental de orden y que cuestionan la sintaxis y la prosodia propias del discurso narrativo." Maderuelo, "Escritura experimental en España, 1963-1983", 75. On both books, see also Marzo and Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939-2015): ideas, prácticas, políticas*, 325; Rivière, "La escritura performativa del grupo *zaj*: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras", 149-151 and 152-155.

<sup>73</sup> Valoch, statement for the anthology of Czech visual poetry of the sixties "Der Würfelwurf", 118.

<sup>74</sup> Juan Hidalgo, "Zaj y Fluxus", interview by Octavio Zaya, *Arena internacional del arte* 2, 1989, 68-75, cited in Rivière, "La escritura performativa del grupo *zaj*: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras", 164.

refusing any identification with a Spanish national context, zaj was at the same time inscribing itself in it and recalling its belonging to that context through the use of idiosyncratic sounds and signs, starting with its proper name. For Ramón Barce, who was at the origin of the name,

[...] it is a well-known fact that when we listen to a conversation or a monologue in our own language, the “meaning” takes up all our attention, so much so that it is practically impossible for us to “hear” the phonetics, the pure sonority, (“the music”) of the words. Conversely, if the language being spoken is unknown to us, we understand very little or nothing, so that semantic attention almost disappears, and we can fully attend to the “sonority” of that language.<sup>75</sup>

In this process of discovering an unknown word, Valoch’s attention had been captured by the visual and acoustic properties of the word “zaj” and its incidental resonance with Central European languages. In fact, “zaj” means noise in Hungarian, busy in Polish, and composes the word “tomorrow” in Czech and Slovak (zajtra), while “ja” means “I”. The plasticity and versatility of the word “zaj” recalled certain poems by Valoch (*Two interlinguistic poems*, 1966), Bohumila Grögerová and Josef Hiršal (*Job Boj*) and Eduard Ovčáček in which the poets manipulated letters and sounds.<sup>76</sup>

Playing with the word’s sonority and its inscription in short aphorisms that conveyed an apparently meaningless message, *3 texts to Juan Hidalgo & all Zaj Friends* seemed to establish a dialogue with a piece titled *ZUJ (Three elements)* (1968) attributed to the Spanish group, of which Valoch had received an exemplary by mail.

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<sup>75</sup> “Es de todos conocido el hecho de que, cuando oímos una conversación o un monólogo cualquiera en nuestro propio idioma, el “significado” acapara toda nuestra atención, hasta el punto de que nos es prácticamente imposible “escuchar” la fonética, la sonoridad pura, (“la música”) de las palabras. Por el contrario, si el idioma en que se habla nos es desconocido, entendemos muy poco o nada, con lo que la atención semántica casi desaparece, y podemos atender plenamente a la “sonoridad” de ese idioma”. Ramón Barce cited in Rodríguez Hernández, “La creación Zaj de Ramón Barce formulada desde la memoria (1ª parte)”, 270.

<sup>76</sup> In her anthology of concrete poetry published in 1968, U.S. poet Mary Ellen Solt observed that ““Boj” means “fight” or “action.” “Job” is not a Czech word, but it mirrors “boj” by printing it backwards as if it had been blotted by folding the paper. [...] Each poem in JOB BOJ employs a completely different method. Some are of graphic as well as of semantic-linguistic interest. Their overall intent is to reveal the world as mixed up and chaotic. In “sobectvi” (“egoism”) the meaning is brought out by breaking a rule of capitalization. In Czech “ja” (“I”) is never capitalized. “Ty” (“thou” or “you”) would be capitalized in a letter if someone were being spoken to directly.” Mary Ellen Solt, “Czechoslovakia”, in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), retrieved from <https://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/czech.html> (Accessed May 2020).

In addition to action music and performance, zaj was in fact also actively engaged in the production of multiple printed works that circulated through the international mail art and Fluxus networks. While being close to Fluxus in its methods and its inscription of art in the ordinary life, zaj has always refused to be exclusively associated with it and to integrate Georges Maciunas' sphere of influence.<sup>77</sup> As for Valoch, he never defined himself as a Fluxus artist either and was seen by certain artists as a “para-Fluxus” artist, who remained on the margins of the network while using its contacts to diffuse his own work.<sup>78</sup>

The pieces produced by zaj, called “cartones” (“cardboards”), were intended to inform about an action that had taken place or was about to take place, or to spread a poetic-linguistic message. *ZUJ (Three elements)* [Fig. 1.9] consisted in three-piece puzzle formed by one central rectangular piece with the top side pointed, and two triangles interlocking on each sides in a way that formed a larger triangle. Each element was cut from a brightly coloured cardboard (pink or light green) and carried a black print letter to form the word, or rather the onomatopoeia “Zuj”, once the three pieces were assembled. Each part of the puzzle also indicated “R.Cortes zaj Madrid, 1968”, referring to the artist Ramiro Cortés who, at that time, collaborated with zaj and used the group's framework to produce and diffuse multiple works on paper—as part of the network of the “friends of zaj” evoked in Valoch's piece.

### 1.5. Poor materials, “cartones” and backwardness

In its first years of activity, the concerts and musical actions performed by zaj were characterized by a “poor materialization” based on simple and inexpensive objects and materials: an apple, rope, metal buckets, pipes...<sup>79</sup> As José Antonio Sarmiento noted, such actions “do not require a great deployment of means. The elements used

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<sup>77</sup> In a letter to Juan Hidalgo, Maciunas proposed him to join Fluxus and merge into the movement—and abandon the name “zaj”, which the group was not interested in. Juan Hidalgo, “Zaj y Fluxus”, cited in Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, 164.

<sup>78</sup> Valoch's designation as a “para-Fluxus” artist was attributed by Ben Vautier. Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 50.

<sup>79</sup> The term “poor materialization” was used by Juan Albarrán to refer to Spanish conceptualism, as a feature that distinguishes it from the “tautological radicalism of analytical and linguistic proposals.” Juan Albarrán, *Del fotoconceptualismo al fototableau: fotografía, performance y escenificación en España (1970-2000)* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2012), 106.

are of extreme poverty. As in their lives, poverty dominates their actions. What is significant are the objects exhibited and the atmosphere created.<sup>80</sup> If we consider the work of Central European artists of that period, it is not unusual to detect a similar tendency towards an economy of means in what Pavlina Morganová have designated as “demonstrations of things”.<sup>81</sup> Poets like Ladislav Novák and Jiří Kolář, visual and action artists like Milan Knížák, Július Koller, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch or also, in Hungary, Tamás Szentjóby, to mention a few, were also developing at that time works and actions that used simple elements borrowed from everyday life and their own body. They sometimes included absurd and humorous elements. We can also relate to this trend Tadeusz Kantor and his interest for “poor reality”, as well as Jerzy Grotowski’s idea of “poor theatre”, as essential protagonists of such exploration of insignificant, cheap and even invisible means in the field of experimental theatre.<sup>82</sup> The fact that Grotowski was invited to the Pamplona Encounters in 1972 (he didn’t attend the event but was represented by Ludwik Flaszen) points at the interest of the Spanish experimental scene for a theatrical language that privileged an economy of means. It resonated with activities carried out by zaj (whose members performed in Pamplona) and artists like Nacho Criado or Jordi Benito.<sup>83</sup>

We have already signaled that the pieces realized by zaj and put into circulation through the mail art network were designated as “cartones” (“cardboards”). The group often used materials discarded by printing companies due to their inappropriate

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<sup>80</sup> “En su desarrollo, estas acciones no necesitan de un gran despliegue de medios. Los elementos utilizados son de una pobreza extrema. Al igual que en sus vidas, la pobreza domina sus actos. Lo que es significativo son los objetos exhibidos y el ambiente creado.” Sarmiento, “El recorrido Zaj”, 14-24.

<sup>81</sup> Morganová used the expression to refer to Milan Knížák’s early installations in the street, consisting of everyday objects on the road that confronted “the random viewer with an unexpected experience directly within his everyday space.” She also specifies that a human figure could appear in these “short-terms exhibitions” in public spaces. Pavlina Morganová, *Czech action art* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2014), 50.

<sup>82</sup> This aspect of Kantor’s work has been analysed in Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989* (London: IB Tauris, 2014), 19-22 and 29.

<sup>83</sup> Valoch also participated in the Pamplona Encounters. However, his presence at one of the most important events for the visibility and consolidation of new artistic languages in Spain happened through the intermediation of a cultural agent from Argentina—and probably without his own knowledge. This issue is addressed in Chapter 4. Regarding Nacho Criado, Jordi Benito and zaj’s interventions in Pamplona, see the exhibition catalogue *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972. Fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, 260-61; 280-83 and 204-209.



format or color.<sup>84</sup> At the same period, the Yugoslav artist Mladen Stilinović used the expression “cardboard design” to refer to his conceptual work. For Stilinović, the “messiness” of his art and that of other artists were in contrast with the “Western way”:

And I don't mean only the artists from ex-Yugoslavia, but also from Eastern Europe at the time. This certainly had to do with the lack of adequate technology and the fact that artists had to do everything themselves. It was also clear that the works weren't going to sell.<sup>85</sup>

Stilinović also talked of “dirty minimalism” regarding his books, specifying that they “included no technology and no geometry aesthetics”.<sup>86</sup> Creators from socialist Eastern Europe—and through the example of Stilinović, this is extended to non-aligned Yugoslavia—and Spain showed little interest in tautological and linguistic inquiries at a time when Anglo-American artists were reflecting on these issue.<sup>87</sup> While particular emphasis has been placed on the influence of Fluxus on practices that claimed the inclusion of life—including its daily and trivial materials—into art and vice-versa, we should also distinguish in the examples we have just mentioned a more prosaic reflection of artists' particular economic condition and its correlated relationship to consumption.<sup>88</sup> Although Francoist Spain and socialist Eastern Europe had entered a

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<sup>84</sup> zaj relied particularly on the generosity of the printer “Artes Gráficas Pérez”, from Madrid, who let the group use its structures and materials. Rivière, “La escritura performativa del grupo zaj: arte postal, libros de artista, etcéteras”, 143-144.

<sup>85</sup> Mladen Stilinović, “Living Means Never Having to Attend Court”, interview with Branka Stipančić, in *Mladen Stilinović—Umetnik na delu 1973-1983/Artist at Work 1973-1983*, exh.cat., Branka Stipančić, Alenka Gregorič ed. (Galerija ŠKUC, Ljubljana, 2005), 35.

<sup>86</sup> Stilinović, “Living Means Never Having to Attend Court”, 29.

<sup>87</sup> Among the representatives of this trend were Lawrence Weiner, Edward Ruscha, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry and Art & Language. See Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972* (1st ed. 1973) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>88</sup> On the reception of Fluxus by Central and Eastern European artists, see Petra Stegmann, *Fluxus East: Fluxus-Netzwerke in Mitteleuropa*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007); Petra Stegmann, “Fluxus in Prague: The Koncert Fluxu of 1966”, in Jerome Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski ed., *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 241-254; Tomáš Pospiszyl, “Fluxus in the Czech Lands and Czechs in Flux: Communication Networks, Information Services, and the Art World Hierarchy”, in Tomáš Pospiszyl, *An Associative Art History: Comparative Studies of Neo-Avant-Gardes in a Bipolar World* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier; Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2018), 146-179; Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, 158-161.

phase of industrial expansion that resulted to a greater access to consumer goods in the 1960s and early 1970s, this situation, as already evoked in our introduction, was not comparable with that of Western capitalist societies. In addition to this, the weight of authoritarian regimes could function in both cases as inhibitors and induce artists to avoid any kind of “brightness” that would bring attention to them.

Helena Musilová has reported a significant episode in which the “poor” character of artworks produced in Czechoslovakia was subject to discussion, involving Jiří Valoch and the Slovak art historian and critic Tomáš Štrauss. The triggering factor of this discussion was the series of exhibitions organised by the Club of Concretists in different locations in Czechoslovakia between 1968 and 1970, with the participation of a large number of local and foreign artists—part of them also exhibited in the “New Tendencies” exhibitions in Zagreb. These initiatives emanating were criticised for the versatility of the exhibited works (spanning from constructivist pieces, visual and concrete poetry, kinetic art, action art and conceptual art) and their “occasional uneven quality”.<sup>89</sup> Musilová’s account on this respect is clear enough:

It is rather paradoxical that the most serious question was not the authentic of “false” Constructivism and the desired scope of such an exhibition [...], but the way of processing the individual works. Eva Šefčáková in her would-be humorous review criticized it for cheapness and low-quality materials, and for its “grasping” and “squeaking breaks”, opining that the Slovak and Czech works were poor and ungraspable copies as compared to the precise, brilliant works from abroad.<sup>90</sup>

Reactions to this interpretation, which minimised the importance of local contributions in favour of a supposedly more advanced and better-made foreign model, were not long in coming. While Jiří Valoch “blamed Šefčáková for failing to understand the concept and claimed that exactly the “failures” could stand for the

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<sup>89</sup> Musilová stressed that in contrast, the international exhibition “New Sensitivity” (“Nová citlivost”) organised by Valoch in Spring 1967 at the House of Arts in Brno, then in Karlovy Vary and Prague, had been well perceived. Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 64-65.

<sup>90</sup> Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 65-66. This aspect can be also connected with other notions important in this dissertation, like the possibility of “failure” claimed by contextual and sociological artists (see Chapter two) and the heated debates regarding the “mediocrity” of non Western art in the context of the international exhibitions (like the Venice Biennale, see Chapter six).

intention”, Tomáš Štrauss insisted that ““technical perfectionism” did not necessarily mean artistic value”.<sup>91</sup>

This debate makes apparent a question that keeps coming up when studying Eastern European art, especially in the context of its circulation and exhibition: that of the differentiated judgement between a production from East of the Iron Curtain considered as necessarily backward and provincial, and a model from Western capitals with all the attributes of modernity: novelty, originality, radicalism, and technical perfection. In this particular case, it is significant that the critiques did not emanate from a Western observer but from a local art critic, showing to what extent binary views involving quality on the one hand and mediocrity and approximation on the other had been integrated and normalized in discourses on art.

Despite the density of contacts and the regular presence of Czechoslovak artists on the Spanish scene from 1966 onwards, one may be surprised not to detect more reciprocity in the exchanges. In fact, among the numerous exhibitions organised by Jiří Valoch, especially in Brno, not a single one was devoted to Spanish artists, and no Spanish artist’s name appeared in collective shows. A rare evidence of direct dialogue between Valoch and artists from Spain, the piece *3 texts to Juan Hidalgo and Zaj friends* shows at the same time how much the Czech artist and the members of *zaj* were close in terms of exploration of the non-semantic properties of language and incursion in the universe of contemporary music—for Valoch, as an enlightened “amateur” and for Hidalgo, Marchetti and Barce, as professional composers. The normalisation period in Czechoslovakia certainly frustrated any intention to establish closer collaborations with artists from this part of Southern Europe. At the same time, the orientation of Valoch’s practice towards a greater presence of visual elements and photographic records in his work over the 1970s may also have influenced this progressive shift. This change, reflected in the whole field of experimental poetry, was pointed at by Fernando Millán and Jesús García Sánchez in 1975 as a “new way of perceiving—and living—poetry and art”.<sup>92</sup> In fact, their attempt of compiling an

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<sup>91</sup> Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 66.

<sup>92</sup> “[...] una nueva forma de percibir—y vivir—la poesía y el arte.” Millán and García Sánchez, “De la poesía experimental a la escritura en libertad”, 12.

anthology of concrete poetry in 1975 turned into a survey on intermedia productions:

[...] from day to day and in an increasingly striking manner, numerous operators, with already considerable work and experience in experimental poetry, have been entering fields and works that are difficult to typify. At the same time, our verification of the results achieved by the most advanced tendencies in other fields (music, plastic arts, etc.), the—sometimes apparent, sometimes profound—coincidences that in numerous cases have occurred between authors considered poets and other musicians or painters, and in short the intrinsic value of these new contributions to the living art of our time, confirmed to us the interest of a publication that would take into account these new realities.<sup>93</sup>

The substantial number of artists from Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia included in the book illustrated the editors' increasing contacts and access to information on creators who mixed poetry with action, plastic intervention and photography.<sup>94</sup> The relationship with poetry, on the other hand, was becoming increasingly tenuous in the mid-1970s.

## **2. Italian connections. A multidirectional exchange (1969-1977)**

### **2.1. Ugo Carrega's Central-European network**

If the relations between Jiří Valoch and his Spanish correspondents did not result in a greater visibility of the latter in Czechoslovakia, nor in monographic initiatives dedicated to Czech artists in Spain, his exchanges with Italian operators resulted in several events and publications in Czechoslovakia and Italy.

In the 1960s, Italy was experiencing a great effervescence in the cultural field with the emergence of various literary and artistic groups that sought to address the radical

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<sup>93</sup> “[...] de día en día y de una manera cada vez mas llamativa, numerosos operadores, con una ya considerable obra y experiencia en poesía experimental, se habían ido introduciendo en unos campos y en unos trabajos difícilmente tipificables. Al mismo tiempo, la comprobación de los resultados ofrecidos por las más avanzadas tendencias en otros campos (música, plástica, etc.), las coincidencias —aparentes unas veces, profundas otras—que en numerosos casos se han dado entre autores considerados poetas y otros músicos o pintores, y en definitiva el valor intrínseco de estas nuevas aportaciones al arte vivo de nuestro tiempo, nos confirmaron el interés de una publicación que tuviera en cuenta estas nuevas realidades.” Millán and García Sánchez, “De la poesía experimental a la escritura en libertad”, 13.

<sup>94</sup> *La escritura en libertad. Antología de poesía experimental* documented works by the Polish, Czech and Yugoslav artists Wanda Gołkowska, Ewa Partum, Petr Štembera, Jiří Kolář, Jiří Valoch, Miroljub Todorović, Franci Zagornicnik and Katalin Ladik.

changes introduced by socioeconomic transformations. They criticised the model of consumption and access to media images these transformations entailed, both in the field of contemporary artistic production and in the social field. Initiated in 1963 in Florence by Lamberto Pignotti and Eugenio Miccini, the Gruppo 70 was joined by poets, writers, critics, painters and musicians whose activities explored the relationship between literature, image and society, with particular attention to language and new themes related to technological and scientific development.<sup>95</sup> Operative until 1968, the Gruppo 70 was at the origin of conferences, exhibitions and publications in which creators explored the universe of mass communication from a critical perspective—according to Eugenio Miccini, visual poetry could operate as a “Trojan horse” or a guerrilla weapon against art’s recuperation and fetishisation by the capitalist system.<sup>96</sup> The members of the group also collaborated with individuals and experimental spaces from other Italian regions. In parallel to the Gruppo 70 and with numerous points of contact, the Gruppo 63 was created in Palermo in 1963 and brought together an important number of writers and intellectuals from the whole peninsula. Often in connection with Marxist ideas and not without polemics, the members of the group advocated a break with traditional writing and demanded literary freedom.<sup>97</sup> Until its dissolution in 1969, the group disseminated its ideas in publications such as *Il Verri*, *Marcatré*, *Malebolge*, *Grammatica* and *Quindici*. Around 1967, *Quindici* opened a space where the intentions of the avant-garde

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<sup>95</sup> The origin of the group is attributed to the symposium *Arte y Comunicazione* organised in May 1963 in Florence by Lamberto Pignotti, Eugenio Miccini, Sergio Salvi and Silvio Ramat. Giuseppe Chiari, Lucia Marcucci, Ketty La Rocca, Luciano Ori. For a detailed account of the group’s constitution and activities, see Teresa Spignoli, “Gruppo 70”, biographical note in *Le Culture del Dissenso*, project led by the Università degli Studi di Firenze, <https://www.culturedeldissenso.com/gruppo-70/> (Accessed May 2020); *La poesia in immagine/l’immagine in poesia. Gruppo 70. Firenze 1963-2013*, Teresa Spignoli, Marco Corsi, Federico Fastelli and Maria Carla Papini ed. (Pisano di Prato: Campanotto, 2014).

<sup>96</sup> Eugenio Miccini, *Poesia e/o poesia. Situazione della poesia visiva italiana*, Eugenio Miccini ed., (Brescia-Florence: Edizioni Sarmic, 1972), cited in Spignoli, “Gruppo 70”.

<sup>97</sup> The main promoters of the group were Nanni Balestrini, Renato Barilli, Fausto Curi, Umberto Eco, Alfredo Giuliani, Angelo Guglielmi, Elio Pagliarani, Antonio Porta and Edoardo Sanguineti, while others participated. For more details on the participants and the story of the group, see Renato Barilli, *La neoavanguardia italiana. Dalla nascita del “Verri” alla fine di “Quindici”* (Lecce: Manni, 2006), and Francesco Muzzioli, *Il Gruppo 63: istruzioni per la lettura* (Roma: Odradek, 2013); Umberto Eco, “Il Gruppo 63, quarant’anni dopo”, lecture given for the fortieth anniversary of Gruppo 63, Bologna, 8 May 2003, retrieved from <http://www.umbertoeco.it/CV/Il%20Gruppo%2063,%20quarant'annin%20dopo.pdf> (Accessed May 2020). See also Giovanna Lo Monaco, “Gruppo 63”, biographical note in *Le Culture del Dissenso*, <https://www.culturedeldissenso.com/gruppo-63/> (Accessed May 2020).

movement met (and shocked) with the oppositional dimension of the students and autonomist movements, leading to the dissolution of the Gruppo 63. From the 1960s onwards, the Italian context was increasingly marked by debates in which the question of new artistic expressions was linked to radical political thoughts, often in dialogue with other realities.<sup>98</sup> In parallel with the ramified activities of the Gruppo 70 and the Gruppo 63, numerous self-managed initiatives created and disseminated experimental writing and visual poetry throughout the country. Due to the great dynamism of artistic research in the field of visual and concrete poetry, Italy became an important space of convergence for artists from different origins, East and West of the Iron Curtain.<sup>99</sup>

Among the artists who had early contacts with Central Europe was Ugo Carrega, an artist and poet actively involved in international networks.<sup>100</sup> Aged thirty-five in 1970, Genoa-born Carrega had started to write poetry in the 1950s, introducing visual components in his works at the end of the decade. He was at the origin of several publications dedicated to visual poetry: after the magazine *Ana Eccetera* in 1963, Carrega founded the magazine *Tool* in 1965, through which he diffused his ideas on “symbiotic writing”, a new expression in which verbal and graphical signs composed a joint expression he called “Nuova scrittura” (“New Writing”). For Carrega, “symbiotic writing refers to all poetic operations that take into account the interaction

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<sup>98</sup> These questions led to a meeting with Spanish critics and writers organised in 1967 at the Escola EINA in Barcelona; on this issue see Paula Barreiro López, “Apuntes sobre los “Diálogos de Eina”: transferencias culturales y circulaciones en los territorios cruzados del arte y la literatura”, unpublished paper, presented in the context of the conference *Cien años de transferencias culturales: Barcelona 1888-1992/One Hundred Years of Cultural Transfer: Barcelona 1888-1992* (Universidad Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, 24-26 November 2016); also Paula Barreiro López, “El giro sociológico de la crítica de arte durante el tardofranquismo”, in Jesus Carrillo and Jaime Vindel ed., *Desacuerdos 8. Sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado español* (Granada/Barcelona/Madrid/Sevilla: Centro José Guerrero, MACBA, MNCARS and UNIA, 2014), 16-36.

<sup>99</sup> On this respect, see the important research realized in the framework of the already mentioned project *Le Culture del Dissenso* at the Università degli Studi di Firenze, dedicated to the definition of a European identity between Italy, France and the Soviet Union (1956-1991) <https://www.culturedeldissenso.com> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>100</sup> Carrega participated in several artistic events in Spain, jus as Valoch. His works were exhibited in the “Semana de poesia de vanguardia” organised by Julio Campal at the Galeria Barandiarán in Bilbao, 1966; in “Poesia internacional de vanguardia” at the Galeria Danae in Madrid and “Odologia 2000” at the Casa de Cultura in Burgos, both organised by Fernando Millán in 1970. Millán was among Carrega’s main contacts from Spain and the work of the Spanish artist circulated in numerous publications and exhibitions in Italy.

between verbal and graphic signs. ART AS THE SCIENCE OF ART. CULT OF JOY AND RHYTHM".<sup>101</sup> He shared his ideas with a group of artists composed by Rodolfo Vitone, Lino Matti, Vincenzo Accame, Rolando Mignani and Liliana Landi, who published their works in *Tool*. In 1966, Carrega moved to Milan and went on developing his artistic activity at the same time he carried out an significant work of promotion and diffusion of visual poetry from other authors.<sup>102</sup> In 1968, *Tool* started to include a news bulletin, *Bollettino Tool*, that provided information related to visual poetry in Italy and abroad, thus contributing to shape a community of international creators aware of each other's work. This model recalled Dick Higgins' *Something Else Newsletter* and anticipated newsletters associated with mail art, which diffusion would increase in the 1970s.<sup>103</sup> In the 1970s, Carrega created several spaces to improve knowledge and research on contemporary experimental poetry: the Centro Suolo, opened in Genova in 1969 for a few months only; the Centro Tool in Milan, inaugurated in January 1971 for one year and reopened between October 1972 and June 1973. Finally, the Mercato del Sale which opened in April 1974 and became a central space for the diffusion of Italian new writing and similar practices from abroad. Carrega also exhibited personally in different spaces and collaborated in the early 1970s with the Galleria Arturo Schwarz in Milan. The gallery was among the few commercial spaces in Italy that exhibited artists from socialist Central Europe and in particular Czechoslovakia, in particular thanks to Arturo Schwarz's collaboration with the Czech art critic and historian Jindřich Chaloupecký (see Chapter three).

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<sup>101</sup>“Con scrittura simbiotica si intendono tutte le operazioni poetiche che tengono presente l'interazione fra segni verbali e segni grafici. ARTE COME SCIENZA DELL'ARTE. CULTO DELLA GIOIA E DEL RITMO”. This definition was printed at the foot of the *Tool* letter paper used by Carrega. Ugo Carrega to Jiří Valoch, letter date 1 November 1967, Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

<sup>102</sup> Publications about Carrega include *Ugo Carrega*, Aldo Rossi and Teresa Balboni ed. (Roma: Carucci, 1976); *Poesia visiva 1963-1988. 5 maestri: Ugo Carrega, Stelio Maria Martini, Eugenio Miccini, Lamberto Pignotti, Sarenco*, Eugenio Miccini and Sarenco ed. (Verona, Edizioni Cooperativa “La Favorita”, 1988); Giorgio Zanchetti, ed., *Emorragia dell'io: l'esperimento di poesia di Ugo Carrega* (Milano: Archivio di Nuova Scrittura, 1995). See also the biography published by Teresa Spignoli in the framework of the research project “Verba Picta. Interrelazione tra testo e immagine nel patrimonio artistico e letterario della seconda metà del Novecento” at the Università degli Studi di Firenze, <http://www.verbapicta.it/dati/autori/ugo-carrega> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>103</sup> Among many examples, Klaus Groh launched from Cologne the collaborative newsletter International Artists Cooperation (IAC) in February 1972 and in Budapest, György and Júlia Gálantai started diffusing *Poolwindow / Pool-Letter* and then *Artpool Letter* at the beginning of the 1980s.

Since the late 1960s, Ugo Carrega was involved in a constellation of events and initiatives emanating from or involving Central European artists, which existence confirms the multidirectional character of exchanges between Italy and Central Europe. Due to his involvement in visual poetry networks and probably also to his early collaboration with Jiří Valoch for an exhibition in Jihlava—I will address in the next section—, Carrega rapidly became a figure of reference for artists who not only focused on experimental poetry, but also embraced mail art, action art, new media and conceptual inquiries. Already in the early 1970s, the Italian poet was receiving a significant amount of correspondence and documentation from the region, addressed to him or to the Centro Tool and then, the Mercato del Sale.

Among these items, we find an invitation to take part in a collaborative piece, *Perform this gesture!* (1971), sent by the Czech artist Petr Štembera. Through the injunction “Perform this gesture! Photo of your performance and this picture’s copy send back to me!”, Štembera proposed his interlocutor to reinterpret in his or her manner the figurative painting a reproduction of which was enclosed in the letter, and send the photographic documentation of this reenactment back to him.<sup>104</sup> If this project reflected the rapid popularisation of transnational collaboration through the mail art network, in the case of Štembera, it remains a unique example of that sort. In fact, while other artists went on exploring the potential of collaborative work relying on distance communication, Štembera rapidly focused on his individual practice. In fact, after some experiments with objects or natural elements under specific time and weather conditions in the early 1970s, concretised in pieces such as *Transposition of 2 Stones* (1971), *Handpieces: Sewing machine’s work* (1971-1972) or *Meteorological Informations* (1971-1972), he rapidly centered on actions involving his own body and individual resistance. Štembera remained involved in long distance communication, however, it was principally to circulate documentation on his work and that of his

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<sup>104</sup> Despite the invitation, Carrega did not participate in *Perform this gesture!* Among the artists who answered Štembera were H. W. Kalkmann, Janos Urban, Peter Kennedy, Július Koller, Rudolf Sikora, J. H. Kocman, Gábor Attalai, Tamás Szentjóby, Julien Blaine, Eric Andersen, Bogdanka Poznanović, Udo Breger. See Hana Buddeus, “Infiltrating the Art World through Photography. Petr Štembera’s 1970s Networks”, *Third Text*, 32:4, 2018, 475. Photographic documentation of this piece can be found in Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2019), 107.



Czech and Slovak peers.<sup>105</sup>

Štembera was among the few artists from socialist Eastern Europe cited in Lucy Lippard's famous book *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972*. Lippard translated and reproduced an article published by Štembera in the magazine *Revista de Arte*, supported by the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez.<sup>106</sup> While this triangular connection has been signaled on various occasions, the transit of Štembera's article through Spain has remained unnoticed.<sup>107</sup> *Revista de Art* was in fact edited by the exiled Spanish art critic Ángel Crespo in collaboration with Pilar Gómez Bedate. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Crespo and Gómez Bedate were among the first to give public diffusion to concrete poetry in Spain, before they left the country in 1967 for Brazil and, then, Puerto Rico. While in Mayagüez, the couple maintained contacts with the Spanish scene, as evidenced by their collaboration with the artist José María Iglesias, who was in charge of the technical production of *Revista de Arte*. Iglesias was also a correspondent in Spain for the magazine, just as the art critic Germano Celant from Italy.<sup>108</sup> The magazine was printed in Madrid, which means that Štembera's text and its related images transited through Spain before they were reproduced in the magazine and sent across the

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<sup>105</sup> The international reach of Štembera's practice through different networks has been addressed in several studies, including Buddeus, "Infiltrating the Art World through Photography. Petr Štembera's 1970s Networks", 468-484 and Juliane Debeusscher, "Traveling images and words: Czech action art through the lens of exhibitions and art criticism in Western Europe", in "Photo-Performance, Performance Photography in Real Existing Socialisms", Katalin Cseh ed., *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* vol. 27, 1, 2019, 29-46.

<sup>106</sup> Lippard, *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972*, 170. Petr Štembera, "Events, Happenings and Land-Art in Czechoslovakia: A Short Information," in *Revista de Arte*, Universidad de Puerto Rico in Mayagüez, no. 7, December 1970, 35-39.

<sup>107</sup> See Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015), 204-205; Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, 6-8; Buddeus, "Infiltrating the Art World through Photography. Petr Štembera's 1970s Networks", 477.

<sup>108</sup> This information is retrieved from the archive's description published on the website of the MNCARS, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/biblioteca-centro-documentacion/archivo-revista-arte-mayaguez> (Accessed May 2020).

Atlantic.<sup>109</sup>

Coming back to *Perform this gesture!* and its international diffusion, we can suggest that the NET probably contributed to Štembera's brief incursion into collaborative mail art projects.<sup>110</sup> Launched in early 1971 by Polish artist Jarosław Kozłowski and art critic Andrzej Kostołowski in the form of a manifest sent to a first list of contacts, NET pretended to operate as an open, non-commercial and self-managed network open to everyone. Its promoters did not claim originality but allowed instead each "user" or "co-creator" to reappropriate the method in his or her own way and benefit from the already existing network. NET became an important catalyst for early exchanges and circulations of artefacts and information between the Eastern bloc and other regions in Europe and beyond. It prompted artists to enthusiastically design projects that required the participation of others creators. In this particular context of distance communication, it was not uncommon for the participants to mention their acquaintances abroad, both to situate themselves on a map of international exchanges and to expand it by exchanging names and addresses with their peers. In a letter to Kozłowski dated June 1972, the Hungarian art critic and cultural operator László Beke thus mentioned Ugo Carrega among his contacts abroad, along with Angelo de Aquino, Klaus Groh, Hans-Werner Kalkmann and Jean-Marc Poinot, known at that time for having conceived the "Section des Envois" at the seventh Paris Biennale, in 1971.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> The archive of the *Revista de Arte* was donated to the Documentation Centre of the Museo Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid) by Pilar Gómez Bedate in 2010. Documentation for issue no. 7 includes Petr Štembera's article, along with images of works from Czech and Slovak artists that were reproduced in the magazine (members of the Actuel group Milan Knížák, Soňa Švecová and Robert Wittmann, as well as Rudolf Němec). It also included comments from the editors of *Revista de arte* regarding their position and size in the magazine; interestingly, one of the editors (unidentified) suggested that it could be interesting to keep the character of "photo of photos" of the illustrations. Štembera had indeed sent in images that seemed photographs of reproductions in magazines or catalogues. *Revista de Arte*. CDB 179503 REV IIA 539 MNCARS Library, Madrid.

<sup>110</sup> On NET, see Piotr Piotrowski, "The Global NETwork: An approach to comparative art history", in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel eds., *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 149-165; Klara Kemp-Welch, "Autonomy, Solidarity and the Antipolitics of NET", in Bożena Czubak, ed., *NET. The Art of Dialogue/NET. Sztuka Dialogu* (Warsaw: Fundacja Profil, 2013) 34-56, Klara Kemp-Welch, "Net: An Open Proposition", *e-flux journal* #98 March 2019; "NET, Jarosław Kozłowski in Conversation with Klara Kemp-Welch", *ARTMargins* 1 (2-3), 2012, 14-35. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM\\_a\\_00016](https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00016).

<sup>111</sup> Beke's letter to Kozłowski was quoted in Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, endnote 44, 442.

Beke and Carrega thus already knew each other in 1973, when Carrega participated in the first international exhibition of experimental poetry taking place in Hungary. Maurizio Nannucci and himself were the only Italians involved in “Szövegek/Texts”, organized by the artist Dóra Maurer with the help of Gabor Toth. The exhibition was on view from 19 to 25 August at the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio, an ancient chapel renovated by the artist György Galántai in a small village near the Lake Balaton to host avant-garde activities.<sup>112</sup> “Szövegek/Texts” was actually the last exhibition held at the Balatonboglár Chapel before its definitive closing by the Hungarian authorities, after four years of summer activities. According to Galántai, the list of artists on the exhibition poster was wrongly interpreted by the authorities as a subversive reference, and the international dimension of the activity bringing together artists from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, France and Italy was considered potentially problematic:

Returning on several occasions, they kept trying to prove with almost hysterical excitement that the poster constituted proof of conspiracy: they found the 56 names (which was just a coincidence) an obvious reference to 1956, and they ‘noticed’ the word alliance hidden in the text: szö-ve-/ts/-gek = szövetség [alliance]; hence, a secret alliance... and it’s being international only made the event even more dangerous!!<sup>113</sup>

We could compare the reactions of the Hungarian authorities described by Galántai with the controversies that surrounded exhibitions subsidised by the Spanish state, like “Rotor Internacional” (1967), whose organisers were accused of collaborating with the Francoist regime. Although the Hungarian and the Spanish examples show two opposite phenomena and their consequences—in state socialist Hungary, the regime of permanent suspicion and paranoid scrutinising of unofficial art leading to

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<sup>112</sup> The Balatonboglár Chapel represents a crucial episode in the history of unofficial avant-garde art from the 1970s in Eastern Europe. The chronology of events that took place from 1970 to 1973 is very well documented on the website of Artpool, the archive György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay started in 1979. See “Balatonboglár Chapel Studio” in [https://www.artpool.hu/boglar/default\\_e.html](https://www.artpool.hu/boglar/default_e.html) (Accessed September 2019); also Júlia Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári, eds., *Törvénytelen avantgárd. Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnaműterme 1970–1973* (Budapest: Artpool-Balassi, 2003).

<sup>113</sup> György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, eds., *ARTPOOL-The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe* (Budapest: Artpool, 2013), 31. The exhibition was also presented at the Pécsi Műhely in Pécs from 9 to 28 December 1973.

ensorship; in Francoist Spain, the problem of artists' fear to compromise themselves with the regime, leading to paralysis or internal divisions—both highlight the interconnectedness of official and unofficial realms, and the difficulty for voluntarily marginal or independent initiatives to keep their autonomy in front of the logics of surveillance and the problem of art's compromise with official policies.

One decade later, Carrega was also among the artists who hosted György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay during their journey across Italy, in the summer 1979.<sup>114</sup> For the couple, who had created Artpool earlier that year with the aim of building an avant-garde archive on the basis of real time relationships and creations, this trip aimed at meeting artists, publishers and cultural organizers, as well as bringing publications and documents back to Budapest.<sup>115</sup> At that time, the conditions for traveling West remained highly restrictive for Hungarian citizens and in particular for Galántai, whose initiatives were not well perceived by the authorities since the episode of the Chapel studio. The trip was possible thanks to Klaniczay's father, who was teaching in Rome at that time and sent an official invitation to the couple.<sup>116</sup> While in Milan, Galántai and Klaniczay spent long hours with Carrega, who acted as an intermediary between them and other artists and cultural agents:

The most interesting place in Milan was Ugo Carrega's poetry gallery called Mercato del Sale, where we accidentally met Peter Frank, an American expert on the artistamp. Thanks to Carrega, we were introduced to Giancarlo Politi (Flash Art) among others, as a result of which Artpool refreshed its 1980 Art Diary address book. Although the galleries were not open, gallerists kindly gave us catalogues for

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<sup>114</sup> Galántai and Klaniczay's trip took place from 21 June to 2 August 1979. They met Carrega again in 1982 during a second, longer journey across Western Europe. Carrega participated in two projects organised by Artpool in the successive decades: the commemorative exhibition for the 100 years of Marcel Duchamp, in 1987 (<https://www.artpool.hu/Duchamp/MDspirit/exhib/Carrega.html>) and to the Flux Flags exhibition in Budapest (1992) and Marseille (1993) (<https://www.artpool.hu/Fluxus/flag/carrega.html>) (Accessed May 2020). Júlia Klaniczay, in an email to the author, 24 August 2019.

<sup>115</sup> "Prior to the journey we had written letters to all the Italian addresses we had at our disposal, asking the addressees to specify what we must definitely see of contemporary Italian art. The answers determined the route and content of the tour. Those who answered were: Vittore Baroni, Ugo Carrega, G.A. Cavellini, Betty Danon, Gillo Dorfles, Marco Pachetti, Romano Peli, Michele Perfetti, Studio Santandrea, Adriano Spatola. We paid a visit to those who recommended themselves." Galántai and Klaniczay, eds., *ARTPOOL-The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, 41.

<sup>116</sup> Alina Șerban and Ștefania Ferchedău, "We Are Always Working on the Roots...", Interview with György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, Artpool, July 2017, online publication by the Institute of the Present, [https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2017/09/16/artpool/#\\_ftn4](https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2017/09/16/artpool/#_ftn4) (Accessed May 2020).

Artpool's archive.<sup>117</sup>

Back in Hungary, the Artpool founders organised “Pacco dall’Italia/Italian package”, an exhibition of works collected during their trip to Italy and additionally with a call for participation. It was planned as the second manifestation of “Artpool Periodical Space” (APS), an itinerant program of exhibitions and activities inspired by Robert Filliou and his Eternal Network.<sup>118</sup> However, the exhibition composed of “mainly visual and sound poetry pieces and the material received by Artpool for its mail art invitation” never materialised. The invitation didn’t reach the Italian addressees due to censorship from the Hungarian postal services, and furthermore, the Budapest Fine Arts Directorate didn’t allow the exhibition. According to a state security report cited by Galántai, Italian art was still perceived by the Hungarian authorities as “fascist in nature”.<sup>119</sup> This project, Artpool’s increasing number of international contacts and the couple’s trip to the West eventually influenced the decision of the Hungarian State Security to open a file on Galántai and place him under surveillance.<sup>120</sup>

The fourth issue of “APS” in 1980 eventually included collected artworks from abroad after a change in the sending method: in order to circumvent censorship, invitations were dispatched “in small portions every day, at different post offices” and this strategy apparently worked. The project, which was no longer exclusively dedicated to Italy, materialised into a mail art exhibition visible in the framework of a

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<sup>117</sup> Galántai and Klaniczay, *ARTPOOL-The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, 41. Also Klaniczay, 24 August 2019. The reference to Politi and the Art Diary is significant in that for many artists and cultural producers (whether from the East or the West), the inclusion in Politi’s yearly publication represented a form of recognition and an efficient way to become contactable by a larger range of people. The importance of the Art Diary was mentioned by Hungarian artist Szabolcs Kisspál in a survey realized in the framework of Zsuzsa László, ed., *Parallel Chronologies: How Art Becomes Public—“Other” Revolutionary Traditions, an exhibition in newspaper format* (Budapest: Tranzit.hu, 2011), 9. It also appears in the exhibition “Sitting Together-Parallel Chronologies of Coincidences in Eastern Europe” curated by Zsuzsa László and Petra Feriancová, transit.sk, Bratislava, from 13 December 2016 to 25 February 2017. A comprehensive study of *Flash Art’s* contribution to the diffusion of Eastern European art was provided in Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, 380-382.

<sup>118</sup> Robert Filliou was the protagonist of the first Artpool Periodical Space (APS) in August 1979 and inspired the Galántais to continue this unlocated project.

<sup>119</sup> Galántai and Klaniczay, *ARTPOOL-The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, 42.

<sup>120</sup> The decision to open a dossier dedicated to Galántai under the pseudonym of Festö (Painter) was communicated the 16 October 1979 by József Horváth, official of the Ministry of Interior. English transcription of this document as well as the Hungarian version of Galántai’s dossier are available on <https://www.Galántai.hu/festo/index.html> (Accessed May 2020).

conference on the Culture of the Seventies, held in the cellar of the Young Artists Club (Fiatal Művészek Klubja) in Budapest. Titled “Küldött Művészet/Sent Art”, it included pieces (postcards, rubberstamps, postage stamps) from a broad range of origins, confirming both the elevated number of contacts acquired by Artpool and the success of mail art initiatives at the turn of the 1980s. The effectiveness of alternative networks of distribution and communication no longer required to be demonstrated.

While the name of Ugo Carrega appeared among a substantial group of Italian artists, the presence of Spanish contributors confirmed that the network had also successfully spread across the Spanish state. Sendings from Madrid, Mallorca, Valencia and Barcelona confirmed that mail art activity was not limited to the state’s artistic capitals but was largely spread across the territory, thus contributing to decentralise the national scene.<sup>121</sup> On the other hand, the profile of an artist like Francesc Abad, a former member of the Group de Treball whose practice was connected to conceptual art with a critical dimension, showed that while the field of experimental poetry and music remained active, research linked to the dematerialisation of the art object and questions of a sociological nature had also significantly developed during the decade.

## **2.2. “Tool etc. Poesia visita italiana” in Jihlava (1969)**

We should now go back in time to address Jiří Valoch and Ugo Carrega’s first collaboration. In 1967, Valoch and Carrega started to work at the distance on a project of exhibition of Italian visual poetry in Czechoslovakia.<sup>122</sup> [Fig. 1.10] “Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana” (“Tool etc. Italian visual poetry”) was on view in early 1969 at

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<sup>121</sup> The exhibition took place from 10 to 22 May 1980. The poster and the list of artists can be consulted on Artpool’s website [https://www.artpool.hu/events/APS\\_4.html](https://www.artpool.hu/events/APS_4.html) (Accessed September 2019). Four contributors from Spain were included: Ricardo Cristóbal, who was the editor of *Orgón*, a magazine dedicated to experimental poetry published in Madrid, the former member of the Group de Treball Francesc Abad, who was involved in the Catalan conceptual art scene, the Mallorca-based poet and artist Joan Palou and the group Texto Poético (Bartolomé Ferrando and David Pérez) from Valencia, who edited the eponymous magazine. *Artpool’s Periodical Space 4* was published on the occasion of the exhibition, held from 10 to 20 April 1980.

<sup>122</sup> Jiří Valoch, “Tool etc”, in Ugo Carrega and Jiří Valoch, eds., *Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana*, exh. cat. (Jihlava: Oblastní Galerie Vysočiny, 1969). Valoch indicated in the exhibition catalogue that Carrega proposed him to do the exhibition. However, it can be assumed that the proposal came from Valoch, since Carrega in a letter to him wrote: “Dear Jiří, Valoch, [...] I agree with you: I’d like too an exhibition Tool etc, Italy.” Ugo Carrega to Jiří Valoch, letter dated 5 July 1967, Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

the Vysocina Regional Gallery in Jihlava.<sup>123</sup> The first part of the exhibition title referred to the core group of poets gathered around the magazine *Tool* published by Carrega, while “Etc.” designated other Italian artists Carrega had suggested to include in the exhibition, in order to give a larger view of Italian experimental production.<sup>124</sup> [Fig. 1.11] While Valoch was in charge of contacting the artists and organising the exhibition, Carrega provided the contacts—in a letter to Valoch, he specified that the invitation should come from both of them—and offered to translate the invitation letters into Italian.<sup>125</sup> The exhibition in Jihlava was accompanied by a catalogue, the typography of which, interestingly, echoed the “cartones” created by zaj.<sup>126</sup> It included reproductions of works from each participants and two inedited texts from Valoch and Carrega, in Czech only. [Fig. 1.12] Valoch’s text signaled that “Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana” had the ambition to give an overview of Italian new poetry and recalled that the visual dimension was in fact predominant in these practices. He remarked the influence of pop art in the exhibited works (Vaccari, Viccinelli, Vitone) through the presence of fragments of press, torn up texts, as well as pictures and slogans from everyday life. At the same time, he observed that the reliance on such elements did not prevent their authors from keeping their “social or political responsibility”, since their work actually “counter-balance[d] the technical character of the present world”.<sup>127</sup> Such reference to consumer society and new forms of mass

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<sup>123</sup> Musilová, *Jiří Valoch: Curator, Theoretician, Collector, Years 1965-1980*, 70.

<sup>124</sup> The artists associated with *Tool* were Vincenzo Accame, Ugo Carrega, Liliana Landi (as a woman, her name was appeared as “Landiová” in the catalogue), Lino Matti, Rolando Mignani, Mussio, Rodolfo Vitone. The others (“etc.”) were Luigi Ferro, Marco Gerra, Emilio Isgró, Maurizio Nannucci, Achille Bonito Oliva, Corrado D’Ottavi, Claudio Parmiggiani, Renato Pedio, Adriano Spatola, Maurizio Spatola, Arrigo Lora Totino, Franco Vaccari, Franco Verdi, Patrizia Viccinelli (Vicinelliová). Carrega and Valoch, eds., *Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana*, exh. cat. (Jihlava: Oblastní Galerie Vysočiny, 1969). The exhibition was held from the 26 January to 23 February 1969.

<sup>125</sup> Carrega to Valoch, 5 July 1967, Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

<sup>126</sup> Interestingly, although there is no proven correlation between these two uses, the “etc.” in the exhibition title recalled the extensive use of this linguistic sign by zaj. In 1965, a “cartón” of the group announced an action at the Galeria Edurne in Cuenca in these terms “Zaj / presenta 2 etcéteras / hmc2 1965 [ ] un etc. de / walter marchetti / y después, en bandeja [ ] un etc. de / juan hidalgo”. The etc. or etcétera was envisaged by Juan Hidalgo as a “public document” or “kôan which seeks to precipitate enlightenment in the receiver”. Henar Rivière, “Papeles para la historia de Fluxus y Zaj: entre el documento y la práctica artística”, *Anales De Historia Del Arte*, (Extra) 2011, 435-436. [https://doi.org/10.5209/rev\\_ANHA.2011.3747](https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_ANHA.2011.3747). See also Hidalgo, “Zaj”, 431.

<sup>127</sup> Valoch, “Tool etc”, unpaginated. This quotation and the others come from the English translation from the Czech original kindly provided by Viola Borková.



communication echoed the experiments of Mec Art that had emerged in 1963 in the wake of New Realism and whose main representatives were Italian and French artists.<sup>128</sup> It was also connected with the concerns of Spanish experimental poets, especially members of the Grupo N. O. and Fernando Millán, who also investigated the potential of photography for the reproduction and montage of images.<sup>129</sup> On the other hand, Valoch also noted another tendency in the exhibited works, the use of “free words” in continuity with concrete poetry and the exploration of a “rational aesthetic organisation of a text”, semantic or not (in Carrega, Matti, Landi). Also included were optical poems (Totino) and works realized as object-books (Sarenco and Pedrotti), although Valoch regretted he had not been able to give more space to this last tendency in the exhibition.

Carrega could only superficially approach the complexities of socialist cultural bureaucracy. He evoked it in rare occasions, however and it is likely that his reference to Czechoslovakia was influenced by the fact that at the same time, he and Jiří Valoch were organizing the exhibition of Italian visual poetry in Jihlava. In February 1969, Carrega participated in the Karnhoval or “Carnevale internazionale degli Artisti”, a six-days festive event organised in the city of Rieti, in the Latium region.<sup>130</sup> **[Fig. 1.13]** For this manifestation orchestrated by Alberto Tessore with the complicity of Adriano Spatola, John Hopkins, Emilio Villa and Wolf Vostell, Carrega produced *Per il Karnhoval in Villa*, a four-pages booklet in cyclostyle he described as a “poem

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<sup>128</sup> The Mec Art was described by Pierre Restany as an attempt to use photographic processes with the aim of a mechanical elaboration of a new image of synthesis. Its main representatives were Serge Béguier, Gianni Bertini, Pol Bury, Alain Jacquet, Nikos and Mimmo Rotella. Pierre Restany, “La Mec-art: una pittura meccanica alla ricerca d'una iconografia moderna,” *Essere* no. 4, November 1967. Retrieved from <https://www.associazionegiannibertini.com/la-mec-art/> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>129</sup> Fernando Millán, *Fotografismos n.o.*, exh.cat. (Madrid: Librería Antonio Machado, 1971).

<sup>130</sup> It should be noted that the characteristics of the Karnhoval held in Rieti from 13 to 18 February 1969 (an interdisciplinary avant-garde festival in a provincial town, placing art in the public space) are reminiscent of the Pamplona Encounters, discussed in Chapter four. Secondary sources concerning the event have been mostly produced in occasion of the exhibition organised in 2019 by the Archivio di Stato in Rieti to commemorate the event's fiftieth anniversary. See Roberto Lorenzetti, “Il Karnhoval e l'abolizione del buon senso nella Rieti del 1969”, *Didattica luce in sabina*, online publication dated 22 March 2018, <https://didatticaluceinsabina.com/2018/03/22/il-karnhoval-e-labolizione-del-buonsenso-nella-rieti-del-1969/>; Elisabette Tarsia, “Le fonti del Karnhoval”, *Didattica luce in sabina*, online publication dated 28 May 2019. <https://didatticaluceinsabina.com/2019/05/28/le-fonti-del-karnhoval/> (both Accessed May 2020).



made of fragments in the form of stories”.<sup>131</sup> [Fig. 1.14] The second page included the reproduction of a headline from the London newspaper *Sunday times* titled “Czech artists in mass plea for help from West”. The article dated 3 September 1967 retranscribed a manifest from more than three hundred Czech and Slovak writers, calling for international support against the regime’s censorship and oppression. This international claim eventually turned out to be a fake, produced by a Czech historian.<sup>132</sup> The following pages of Carrega’s booklet contained poetic fragments composed by him that indirectly referred to a situation of struggle and violence and to the dilemma of having to take a stand. One of these fragments was structured around the idea of “rising up” (“alzarsi”):

could have (would have) not risen up  
 could have (would have) not tried to risen up  
 could have (would have) decided not to risen up  
 could have (would have) decided not to risen up  
 [...]
   
 could have (could have) decided not to risen up  
 could have (could have) decided not to risen up  
 could have (could have) not tried to risen up  
 resolve that it is better not to  
 that in the end it is not worthwhile to  
 ROSE UP  
 because in the end [...]<sup>133</sup>

Carrega dedicated *Per il Karnhoval in Villa* to Aldo Braibanti, an Italian intellectual well known for having been in 1968 judged for “plagio”—in this case, an equivalent to

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<sup>131</sup> “[...] poema per frammenti sotto forma di racconti”. Ugo Carrega, *Per il Karnhoval in Villa*, cyclostyled booklet, 1969.

<sup>132</sup> “This document was the work of a young historian, Ivan Pfaff, who was arrested but not tried before the change of regime in January 1968. He later admitted publicly that the declaration has been his own and had not been signed by others. Although he regretted the form of his action, he defended the content of the document as an expression of his belief in “absolute freedom of expression”. H. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia’s Interrupted Revolution* (1976) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 71.

<sup>133</sup> “potuto (avrebbe) non alzarsi / potuto (avrebbe) non cercare di alzarsi / potuto (avrebbe) non volversi alzare / potuto (avrebbe) decidere di non alzarsi [...] avrebbe (potuto) non alzarsi / avrebbe (potuto) non decidere di alzarsi / avrebbe (potuto) non cercare di alzarsi / risolvere che e meglio non / che in fin dei conti non vale la pena di / SI ALZÓ / perche in fin dei conti [...]” Carrega, *Per il Karnhoval in Villa*, unpaginated.

“brainwashing”—on a young male friend and collaborator, after which he was sentenced to nine years in prison (the sentence was reduced afterwards). Braibanti was a declared homosexual but also a former partisan and a communist who was critical to the Italian Communist Party’s orthodox line—especially after 1956. For a large majority of Italian left-wing intellectuals who sided with him, it was clear that he had been incriminated for his sexual orientation and his critical political position.<sup>134</sup> Carrega’s dedicatory note to Braibanti and the reproduction of the *Sunday Times* article on Czechoslovakia in *Per il Karnhoval in Villa* constitute a rare allusion to current events in his artistic production, generally centered on articulating language and visual games with no concrete historical or political references. The reference to Czechoslovakia in early 1969, while the country was undergoing the consequences of the repression of the Prague Spring, nevertheless captures the impact of international politics on Carrega and the way he connected them with the Italian context. Using a methodology of assemblage of fragments to build an elusive narrative, Carrega proposed a red thread to suggest rather than impose possible parallelisms and analogies between Italy and Czechoslovakia: state censorship, repression and violence.

### **2.3. *Lotta Poetica*. Visual poetry in struggle**

In the catalogue of “Tool etc. Poesia visiva italiana”, Valoch observed that Italian artists were interested in establishing connections with science and studies on perception, as well as in exploring art’s integration in a social environment. Attention to the audience was a relevant aspect to him and he highlighted the existence of activities organised by “North-Italian cities under the patronage of left-wing progressive municipal direction.<sup>135</sup>” The evocation of such local cultural initiatives by Valoch in his text was certainly not accidental: it shows his level of awareness of the importance of maintaining his public activities in a context of orthodox socialism. This comment also confirms why official or semi-official collaboration was easier to

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<sup>134</sup> Gabriele Ferluga, *Il processo Braibanti* (Torino: Silvio Zamorani editore, 2003).

<sup>135</sup> Valoch, “Tool etc”, unpaginated.

envisage with Italian artists than with Spanish creators.<sup>136</sup> It could use indeed local left-wing politics as an argument to collaborate and exchange.

In 1971, Valoch's *Poem for love/for Miroslava* (1969) published in the second issue of the magazine *MEC*—which title referred to Mec Art—coordinated by the Italian artist Gianni Bertini. **[Fig. 1.15]** While Valoch shared his page with Fernando Millán's graphic composition with geometrical figures and letters extracted from his book *Textos y antitextos*, additional works from Jochen Gerz, Henri Chopin, Clemente Padín, Maurizio Spatola or Shimizu Toshihiko confirmed the international reach of Bertini's project.<sup>137</sup> However, what retains our attention is the presence in the publication of a communiqué that strongly contrasted with the artistic tone of the publication. The text was attributed to a Brescia-based "Gruppo di Artisti aderenti alla Lega Marxista-Leninista d'Italia" ("Group of Artists adhering to the Marxist-Leninist League of Italy"). **[Fig. 1.16]** In a vindictive tone, its authors denounced two institutional exhibitions held in the previous year in Montepulciano and Rome. These events had, according to them, consecrated a number of individuals and artistic tendencies (in particular Roman and Turin representatives of "arte povera" as well as the Milanese objectual avant-garde) as "artists of the regime" who contributed to the consolidation of an official culture that supported what the authors designated as a "social-fascism". The Italian Minister of Education Riccardo Misasi and, more particularly, the then President of the Republic Giuseppe Saragat (a socialist who had supported the Christians Democrats) were accused of settling an "American-type presidential Republic" with the complicity of "false left-wing artists". They blocked those who were instead truly committed to build a new visual language and were at the same time involved in the struggle "against capitalism and revisionism", alongside the workers, peasants and students. The authors of this polemic text displayed their adherence to maoism and criticised the Italian Communist Party (PCI), expressing their contempt for the communist painter Renato Guttuso, in their eyes an artist of the

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<sup>136</sup> We will see that this vision of Italy as a left-wing and progressive society in socialist Central Europe had its limits and changed according to the periods and the countries, as shown by the case (further discussed) of the exhibition organised by Galántai and censored by the Hungarian authorities on the pretext of the "fascist" resonances of Italian art.

<sup>137</sup> *MEC* 2, April 1971, unpaginated. Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

regime and a “Pciist gangster” (“bandito pciista”).<sup>138</sup> The virulence of the statement strongly contrasted with the visual and textual games reproduced on the other pages of *MEC*, deprived of any political reference. Its presence in the magazine, however, reflected the concerns of a branch of Italian visual poetry and prefigured developments towards a more direct expression of political views.

The same year in June, the first issue of the magazine *Lotta Poetica* was published in Brescia. A significant example of transnational collaboration at the confluence of visual and verbal experiments and politically engaged cultural theory, *Lotta Poetica* was created by the Italian poet Sarenco (Isaia Marbellini)—certainly one of the authors of the political manifesto published in *MEC*—and the Belgian poet and publisher Paul de Vree. They affirmed that the magazine’s title was “an affirmation of our commitment as poets and artists in general to wage an ongoing battle.”<sup>139</sup> Sarenco, who had started to experiment with visual poetry in 1964, had been involved in the activities of the Gruppo 70 and was close to Eugenio Miccini and Lamberto Pignotti, and also to Luciano Ori, Lucia Marcucci, Giusi Coppini and Michele Perfetti. After the group’s dissolution in 1968, these artists would find in *Lotta Poetica* a significant tribune for exposing their works and ideas, involving other artists whose research and position was close to their own. *Lotta Poetica* was internationally orientated with its three languages (Italian, French and Flemish) and if we compared it with the often ephemeral life of artists’ publications or journals based on artistic collaboration, it had a significant longevity with fifty issues published monthly between 1971 and 1975 (sometimes coupled in a unique edition), and, successively, two reactivations (1982-1984 and 1987). In the second issue, Sarenco and De Vree exposed their vision of visual poetry as a transforming practice:

there are three valid positions before a poetry of the visual:

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<sup>138</sup> Gruppo di Artisti aderenti alla Lega Marxista-Leninista d’Italia, “Denunciamo fino in fondo il tentativo fascista di creare gli artisti del regime!”, *MEC* 2, April 1971, unpaginated. Collection and Archive of Jiří Valoch in the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

<sup>139</sup> “Il titolo “Lotta poetica” è l’affermazione del nostro impegno, come poeti ed artisti in generale ad impostare una battaglia continua.” *Lotta Poetica* 1, June 1971. See *Lotta poetica. Il messaggio politico nella poesia visiva 1965-1978*, Benedetta Carpi De Resmini, ed. (Roma: Iacobelli Editore 2017); Giorgio Bacci, “Ingaggiare le immagini: Il caso di “Lotta Poetica””, *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* serie 5, 8/2, 2016, 589-613.

- 1) to be simply the conscience of crisis (of the world, of culture and of society in general);
- 2) to be the pre-alternative of a new world;
- 3) to be the alternative of this world.

In the light of the preceding, a poetry of the visual can be neither social-christian, nor social-democrat, nor social-realist. in the first two cases it would imply direct agreement with exploitation by the bourgeoisie. in the third case it would imply a definition of the intellectual as engineer of the soul, that is as a passive recorder of historical development. a poetry of the visual enters the scene as a means of active transformation of society, either at the level of language and of paralinguistic media, or at the level of support for the world classe struggle (the exploited against the exploiting).<sup>140</sup>

Valoch's relations with Sarenco were certainly initiated with the exhibition in Jihlava and consolidated with the publication of Valoch's *Optical Book* (1970) by Amodulo, the publishing house founded by Sarenco and Enrico Pedrotta. The book consisted of a minimal, square publication in which a thin vertical red line appeared at different points on each page. Following this, the Czech artist had his works published in *Lotta Poetica's* first issues and his name appeared among the foreign editors of the magazine.<sup>141</sup> The pieces Valoch published in *Lotta Poetica* were particularly representative of the evolution of his practice from a concrete or visual poetry that remained attached to printed letters and signs on paper, towards the introduction of photography and documented actions that, often, also included texts or words. The artistic and intellectual environment of *Lotta Poetica* seemed in fact favourable to the development of this angle of Valoch's work, which could in fact, as we shall see, dialogue with other contributions.

*Lotta Poetica's* third issue from August 1971 included two *Mini poems* by Valoch, based on the photographic medium. [Fig. 1.17] "Mini" in this case could stand for "minimal" or "mini", small. The word "air" and the letter "R" made of distinct

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<sup>140</sup> Sarenco and Paul de Vree, "editoriali/editorials/editoriaux/editrialen", *Lotta Poetica* 2, January 1971, 6 (english version). In Spain at the same period, Fernando Millán affirmed that "Experimental poetry is the only weapon loaded with future" ("La poesia experimental es la única arma cargada de futuro"). Fernando Millán, in the leaflet of the exhibition "Poesia experimental en España" organised by Fernando Millán and Antonio Molina at the Galerie L'ull de vidre in Palma de Mallorca, May 1971.

<sup>141</sup> Valoch was *Lotta Poetica's* first collaborator from a socialist country, he was then joined by the Yugoslav Miroslav Todorović and the East German Carlfriedrich Claus.

materials were photographed in a natural setting, from which they stood out for their incongruous character.<sup>142</sup> As Pavlina Morganová has reported in *Czech Action Art*, this kind of experiment with textual interventions in non-urban environments had been initially carried out by Valoch with the Young Friends of Art club (Mladí přátelé výtvarného umění) connected with the House of Art in Brno and then with the Group m., in the framework of which he organised actions in the early 1970s.<sup>143</sup> Morganová has observed regarding the actions of the Young Friends that “the most important process during these actions was clearly the very act of undertaking them”. In the case of Valoch’s *Mini poems*, it seems however that the action was staged with the idea of producing a photographic image. The same process took place when Valoch requisitioned the human body to accommodate his artificial words, suggesting that the resulting image had been previously composed.

Also documented in the same issue of *Lotta Poetica*, other works relied on the same process of extraction of the written word from its usual support to reproject it in a public space. Realized in a busy street in the centre of Madrid, Alain Arias Misson’s action *Public poem* (1971) exposed the words “Palabras fragiles” (“Fragile words”), written on polyethylene (transparent plastic) sheets and placed in the middle of a street to be subject to the destruction of circulating vehicles. **[Fig. 1.18]** Arias Misson explained: “the poetic “genre” which has been destroyed, sold-out (fetishized) by the urban industrial processes is reinstated by this ritual destruction”, adding though that this new status could be reached only “through the real destruction of any text & recreation of poetry by corporal, physical presences, physical bodies which by their violence (or self-induced violence) erupt into the modern stream of awareness as new signifiers”.<sup>144</sup> The critical intention explicitly present in the poetic intervention of the French poet who was then resident in Spain, both with regard to the recuperation of poetry by a capitalist system and to the traditional use of language, was not perceptible in Valoch’s *Mini poems*. The proposal was rather focused on the semantic and visual game provoked by artificially-made words or letters in a non urban

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<sup>142</sup> *Lotta Poetica* 3, August 1971, 7.

<sup>143</sup> The Group m. was composed by Dušan Klimeš, J.H. Kocman, Jitka Kocmanová and Jiří Valoch. Morganová, *Czech action art*, 112-113.

<sup>144</sup> *Lotta Poetica* 3, August 1971, 8-9.

environment and their consonances—air/R produced the same sound. In this respect, it is clear that the significance and impact of the public poems produced by Valoch, Arias Misson and others was in part conditioned by the modality through which they became visible and the location where this happened; the artists' decision to operate in a rural or a urban environment, a domestic or a public space, influenced the interpretative framework for the their pieces, in straight relation with the sociopolitical context of their time.

In Valoch's pieces, the human intervention with words was subject to entropic or mechanical alteration through the action of nature or other human beings. A few years later, *Memory* (1974) illustrated this specific interaction and introduced a narrative dimension. **[Fig. 1.19]** The piece consisted in six photographs to read in a specific order. The first showed a piece of wood with the English word "Memory" placed in balance between two easels, probably located in a garden. The second image was a close-up view of the piece of wood being sawn by two individuals whose body was only partly visible. The same action was pursued on the next photographs until the last one, in which the split wooden piece was left on the ground, next to the saw, while the two sawyers had abandoned the work field.

Regarding Valoch's pieces consisting of written words on natural objects or elements, Piotr Piotrowski has observed that "[a]ll of these events were of course a sort of reaction to the "normalization" after the repression of the Prague Spring, rather than a direct political involvement; they simply tried to escape from politics."<sup>145</sup> It is tempting indeed to associate the use of generic and abstract terms, removed from any historical or political context, with a desire not to address reality directly and to retreat into an abstract universe to escape all current concerns. On the other hand, we can suggest that the choice of a term such as memory indirectly raised questions about the fragility and mutability of individual and collective reports in front of great imposed narratives. The "tearing down" of memory performed in Valoch's sequence of photographs indirectly recalls the process of assembly and sequencing through which historical accounts are built. Such reading of Valoch's work can bring us closer to the vision of Italian visual poets like Nanni Balestrini and their use of montage as a

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<sup>145</sup> Piotrowski, "The Global NETwork: An approach to comparative art history", 158.

strategy to thwart the systems of recuperation of avant-garde art by the consumer society and its capitalist system. From a perspective of critique of the mass media and the consuming society, Valoch's visual and linguistic exploration highlighted the dismantling-reassembling of imposed discourses and meanings. This may also explain why despite its apparent neutrality and its absence of reference to politics, Valoch's work was appreciated by a politicised branch of Italian poetry included in its publications.

Besides Valoch's *Mini poems* and Arias Misson's *Public poem*, *Lotta Poetica*'s third issue included another public poem, which relied on similar principles: the "placing" of words in an environment and its photographic documentation. Like Valoch's *Memory* (1974), Sarenco and Paul de Vree's *Les poètes à la mer (The poets to the sea)* (1971) consisted in a sequence of photographs.<sup>146</sup> [Fig. 1.20] They portrayed—separately, as the other one was taking the photo—the two editors of *Lotta Poetica* while sitting or lying on a small embankment. They appeared without their shirts and apparently in good spirit. On the grass (or rather, the earth dotted with tufts of grass), letters in volume composed the word "MER" ("Sea"). With a deliberately humorous tone, this "public poem" showed Sarenco and De Vree's attempt to transpose the sea in a rather inauspicious environment, according to the idea that if they could not reach it, the sea could be brought to them through its linguistic materialisation and be enjoyed as if it really existed. Even when conceived as an instrument of struggle and social criticism, visual poetry could manifest itself in a playful and humorous way.

#### **2.4. "Relations". Valoch at the Mercato del Sale (1977)**

Despite his great activity and the intensive circulation of his visual work, Valoch only had three personal exhibitions outside the socialist bloc, two of them in Northern Italy. "Relations" took place at the Mercato del Sale in 1977 and "In, Oltre" at a cultural center in Monza, near Milan, in 1979.<sup>147</sup> Valoch was the only artist from a socialist country to exhibit personally at the Mercato del Sale. [Fig. 1.21]

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<sup>146</sup> *Lotta Poetica* 3, August 1971, 10-11.

<sup>147</sup> The third one took place in 1972 at the Informationszentrale für Ereignisse (Information centre for events) in Bielefeld, West Germany.



In 1977, Ugo Carrega organised a series of exhibitions that explored art making in relation to the practice of experimental writing. As a kind of preamble to this cycle of events, he had published in 1976 the book *Lettere-Documento di artisti sulla condizione attuale del fare arte* (*Letters-documents by artists on the current state of art making*), in which he collected the impressions of fifty artists concerning their own praxis. The publication reflected the extent of Carrega's contacts in Italy and abroad.<sup>148</sup> Collective exhibitions such as “La Nuova scrittura” (1977) and, two years later, “Scrittura attiva” (1979), as well as monographic initiatives including Jiří Valoch's exhibition “Relations” in December 1977 were motivated by Carrega's intention to go deeper into the mechanisms of creation at the crossroads of writing, poetry and the visual arts.

While the absence of an exhibition catalogue makes the task of reconstructing the exact contents of “Relations” difficult, we can cross information on works produced by Valoch in 1976 and 1977, their presence in Italian collections and their title referring to Ugo Carrega or the exhibition in Milan.<sup>149</sup> Interestingly, while Valoch's photographic works had been circulating in *Lotta Poetica* and represented an important part of his practice in the 1970s, most of the pieces presumably exhibited at the Mercato del Sale were works on paper involving rather simple compositions with words and geometrical figures. This distinction seems to reflect the ultimately fragmented nature of the Italian poetry scene and the way in which the expressions were chosen in function of the medium and the channel for which they were produced.

Despite these stylistic differences, however, there were recurring elements in Valoch's work, such as his use of simple words and concepts set in environments (in this case, within the framework of the sheet of paper). The series *Untitled* (1977) was

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<sup>148</sup> Ugo Carrega, *Lettere-Documento di artisti sulla condizione attuale del fare arte* (Milan: Mercato del Sale, 1976). The book included contributions from Gianfranco Baruchello, Robin Crozier, Angelo de Aquino, Pablo Echaurren, Klaus Groh, Ugo La Pietra, Plinio Mesciulam, Luciano Ori, Clemente Padin, Michele Perfetti, Janos Urban, Wolf Vostell. From Czechoslovakia, Karel Adamus, J.H. Kocman, Ladislav Novák and Jiří Valoch were solicited. The connection between *Lettere-Documento di artisti sulla condizione attuale del fare arte* and the successive exhibitions was pointed at by the artist Armando Marrocco in his biography, <https://www.gestaltgallery.it/artist/armando-marrocco> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>149</sup> The works by Valoch that are related here to his exhibition “Relations” are all conserved in the Archivio di Nuova Scrittura (ANS), founded by the collector Paolo Delle Grazie. <http://www.verbovisualevirtuale.org/> (Accessed May 2020).

based on a simple associative or relational game: groups of geometrical forms (for example, triangles) with a typewritten word inside. These modules induced a narrative that “jumped” from an abstract notion, to a natural or atmospheric phenomena, to an action. For example, a piece proposed the sequence “star, time, way, waiting, silence, idea, clouds, memory”; another one “star, memory, wind, time, space, waiting”; a third one “silence, dream, voice, heaven, walk; dream, cloud, breaking, trace, horizon, view.” Elementary shapes and words produced an evocative mobile landscape. Another drawing from 1977 titled *Relations-ART LOVE* represented one straight line (Art) and another, curved one (Love), which at some point came to intersect the former. In the series *Relations exercise* (1976-1977), English words were located on a graph paper, the one usually used for plotting or drawing graphs and curves. [Fig. 1.22] Concepts or actions such as “Art”, “waiting”, “moment”; “love” and “time”, “now”, “space” were situated on the grid, as they were the points of intersection of specific coordinates. A minimal piece dedicated to Carrega highlighted again Valoch’s predilection for exercise. *Exercise for Ugo Carrega* (1976) consisted in three dactylographed words, “water, water, rock”, composing an associative portrait of the Italian poet and artist and also, maybe, an invitation to permuting words and playing with their implications, letters and sounds.

We should insist on the recurrent term “exercise” and its significance for Valoch, as a counterpart to the term “poem”. It reflected the artist’s interest for experimental practice and research, and for a sequential approach to reality through modules constituted by language, forms and ideas. Exercises are serial by nature; they can be repeated over and over and through this repetition, be subject to small variations and changes. Valoch’s *Exercices* insisted on the combinatory aspect of verbal and visual forms rather than their rigid framework. The conception and declination of artistic exercises also implied a pedagogical dimension. On this respect, it is worth recalling that issues of non-conventional education and self-education, as well as new pedagogies were of particular interest of Valoch in his activities of cultural organiser in Brno. He shared this interest with other Central European artists, who carried out at that time pedagogical experiments—often with the support of public organisations or within the structures. In the mid-1970s in Budapest, the organiser of the previously-

mentioned exhibition “Szövegek/Texts” Dóra Maurer conducted along with Miklós Erdély a series of drawing courses called “Creativity exercises”, aimed at amateurs from a workers’ cultural club.<sup>150</sup> Such interest in exercise as a form of open and non-definitive experiment came along with the interest for unconventional pedagogies as well as amateur and dilettantish practices in a socialist environment, as a field through which emancipatory politics could be implemented from inside.<sup>151</sup>

Through the figure of Jiří Valoch and his activities at the crossroads of various disciplines and geographies, as well as the resonances between this and the practices of other Spanish, Italian, Czech, Hungarian or Polish artists and poets, we have slowly begun to draw a map of the circulations of Central European art, marked by the highlighting of relationships that are often ignored or little explored, and by the desire to undo the unidirectional dimension often attached to these transnational exchanges between socialist and non-socialist territories.

On the register of languages and techniques, this chapter has also sought to show the importance of the experiences arising from the field of experimental poetry for the development of an artistic scene that was open not only to disciplinary cross-fertilisation, but also to a questioning of the social function of art and its possibilities of action in a given cultural and intellectual field. These questions, as we shall see, have permeated most of the practices that will be discussed in the following chapters.

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<sup>150</sup> Published as summary in *Kreativitási gyakorlatok, FAFEJ, INDIGO. Erdély Miklós művészetpedagógiai tevékenysége 1975–1986*, Sándor Hornyik and Annamária Szőke ed. (Budapest: MTA Művészettörténeti Kutatóintézet/Gondolat Kiadó, 2007). Erdély and Maurer’s initiative was situated in a broader context and dialogue with other practices in Dóra Hegyi, Zsuzsa László and Franciska Zólyom, eds., *Creativity Exercises. Emancipatory Pedagogies in Art and Beyond* (Sternberg Press: Berlin, 2020).

<sup>151</sup> See Daniel Grůň, “The Politics of Art Education in the Work of Milan Adamčiak, Július Koller and Jiří Valoch”, *Third Text* 32 (“Actually existing Art World of Socialism”), no. 4, 2018, 434-449; Hegyi, László and Zólyom, eds., *Creativity Exercises. Emancipatory Pedagogies in Art and Beyond*.

## CHAPTER 2

### **A transnational community in resistance? Attempts to raise a Third Front**

The first chapter of this dissertation contemplated the productive intersections of individual trajectories at the confluence of concrete and visual poetry, experimental music and distance communication. It approached transnational exchange in terms of circulation and connectivity, emphasising the mobility of artists and/or their work without ignoring at the same time their differentiated contexts of reception and the adaptation of discourses and productions to their media of distribution.

Transnational mobility could lead however to the creation of temporary communities, the existence of which crystallised around a common project. This second chapter addresses the shifting and heterogeneous community constituted around the idea of “art as contextual art” articulated in the mid-1970s by the Polish artist and theoretician Jan Świdziński. It examines the attempts of its members to form an alternative front against a hegemonic and market-driven art world which, in their view, was embodied by the United States and more specifically, the New York art scene.<sup>1</sup> Focusing mostly on the period between 1975 and 1977 that corresponds with the short existence of this community, I will examine how contextual art theory and related activities originating from socialist Poland circulated and entered in dialogue with agents and practices from Canada, France, Great Britain and Spain, who shared similar ideas on art as a social activity and a vector of decentralisation.

Looking back to his practice in 1988, Jan Świdziński synthesised the series of encounters we will deal with in this chapter:

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<sup>1</sup> “Art as contextual art” will be employed here to refer to Jan Świdziński’s theory and ideas. “Contextual art” is used instead to designate the heterogeneous set of practices and their outcomes as artefacts or artistic processes that were considered close to Świdziński’s ideas, yet remained independent from them and their author. The main representatives of Polish contextual art were the artists close to the Recent art gallery in Wrocław: Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera and Lech Mrożek.

In 1976 and 1977 a need arose to discuss the problems that had appeared and which placed us in a hazy world of growing uncertainty. The aim of meetings that were organized then was not to present the artist's output to the public, but the problems. Many meetings, conferences and debates were attended only by the artists, who collectively tried to find answers to the meaning of their actions. Many of these meetings were international in character.<sup>2</sup>

From Gdansk to Lund, Toronto, Paris, Kazimierz nad Wisłą and finally Warsaw, the debate was fuelled by a group of artists and practitioners from Poland (Jan Świdziński, Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera and Lech Mrożek from the Recent Art Gallery in Wrocław), Canada (the collective who ran the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication in Toronto) and France (the Collectif d'Art Sociologique). This core group was joined, sometimes very ephemerally, by other interlocutors from different origins who showed a similar approach to “art as an activity in the context of reality”, to borrow the title of the international conference held in Warsaw in July 1977 that closed this collective process. Among the artists and collectives who approached and briefly collaborated with the above-mentioned operators were Emil Cieślak, Paul Woodrow, Brian Dyson, Loraine Leeson, Peter Dunn, and Bartomeu Cabot, Sara Gibert, Andreu Terrades and Steva Terrades, whose work undoubtedly resonated with Świdziński's ideas, while at the same time expanding their meaning and reach in their own way. Although this community did not last very long and existed mostly on a theoretical level, I argue that its existence reveals a culture of engagement and a social imaginary shared by artists and cultural producers from different contexts.

## **1. Setting the foundations of “Art as contextual art”**

### **1.1. What is Art as contextual art?**

The idea of “art as contextual art”, formulated by Jan Świdziński and promoted from the mid-1970s on through a multiplicity of texts and statements, constituted the first theoretical ground and catalyst for the above-mentioned international encounters. Jan Świdziński defined “art as contextual art” as a social practice performed and effective

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art* (Eindhoven: Het Apollohuis, 1988), 101.

in reality, located out of the sphere of aesthetics. He saw in it a model of art able to cope with a permanently transforming world and even co-construct and co-create reality. In Świdziński's mind, "contextual artists" stood in contrast with "the whole tradition of conceptual art" which, in his opinion, was unable to "be an answer to the problems of modern civilization".<sup>3</sup>

Świdziński was particularly critical to the views exposed by the U.S. artist and theoretician Joseph Kosuth in his essay *Art after philosophy* (1969).<sup>4</sup> In contrast with the tautological and analytical processes exposed by the North-American, Świdziński considered that art as contextual art was deeply engaged with reality, understood as a continuously changing realm that not only caused "the never-ending change of forms and objects of art, but also the never-ending change of appropriated meanings of objects."<sup>5</sup> The Polish artist and theoretician explained that in most cases, including in traditional and modern art, the meanings attributed to objects were outdated and operated as "empty signs" that had not followed the transformation of reality and constituted inappropriate keys to access it. The only way to mark "the end of the socio-cultural consensus" relying on this illusion was then to have these meanings "filled by reality." In other words, contextual art's mission consisted in decomposing outdated meanings in order to leave space for new ones that actually corresponded with reality. Świdziński criticised the fixity of art objects and believed on the contrary that each given context and situation had a true expression that had to be maintained until its conditions of existence vanished.<sup>6</sup> Art as contextual art thus arose out of the

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Świdziński, *Sztuka jako sztuka kontekstual/Art as Contextual Art*, *Art Text* 3/77 (Warsaw: Galeria Remont, 1977), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Kosuth's "Art After Philosophy" was first published in *Studio International*, no. 915, October 1969, 134-137; no. 916, November 1969, 160-161 and no. 917, December 1969, 212-213. The essay investigated the means through which art acquired cultural significance and status as art: "Works of art are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context—as art—they provide no information whatsoever about any matter of fact. A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that that particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art." Joseph Kosuth, "Art after philosophy" (1969), in from Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After. Collected writings, 1966-1990* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art*, 113.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Markowska has recalled that Świdziński studied at the Warsaw Fine Art Academy under the post-impressionist professor Jan Cybis, whose teaching methods were already "petrified" while a totally distinct reality was being experienced by people. She has suggested that Świdziński's ideas derived from his personal experience (she evoked an "art trauma"). Anna Markowska, "Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland", *Zeszyty Artystyczne* no. 32, 2018, 228.

recognition of the impossibility to propose common and universal socio-cultural patterns of knowledge, and the necessity to constantly adapt to a specific—i.e. embedded in reality—context. Its formula was synthesised as such:

the indexical proposition/the occasional sentence/of naturally contextual meanings:  
Art “a” in time “t”, in the place “p”,  
in the situation “s”, in relation to the  
person/persons “o” [sic].<sup>7</sup>

It is not this chapter’s purpose, however, to provide a complete analysis of the theoretical apparatus built by Świdziński.<sup>8</sup> What we will focus on instead is the way Świdziński’s ideas and theories operated as a catalyst for the emergence of an alliance between artists from distinct geographies, and as a cohesive element which, for a short period, provided this heterogeneous group with the impetus to collectively challenge the established order of the capitalist contemporary art system and its centrality. Our main focus here is hence not so much Świdziński’s theory in itself and its critique to the abstractness of the Anglo-American model of conceptual art, but the way his ideas on art as contextual art fostered the possibility for a socially-oriented and decentralising practice that federated distinct types of creators across Europe and North America.

How did contextual art look like or concretely materialise, and in what context did it start to acquire greater visibility? To understand this, we need to return briefly to Świdziński’s early trajectory. From an older generation than most of the artists who collaborated or exchanged with him, Świdziński, who was aged fifty-two in 1975, studied architecture and ballet during the Second World War, then painting and graphic arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, from which he graduated in 1952. After an early career as a painter during which he created a series titled

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<sup>7</sup> Świdziński, *Sztuka jako sztuka kontekstual/Art as Contextual Art*, 9 and 11.

<sup>8</sup> For a more precise analysis of Świdziński’s “doctrine” and its relations to conceptual art, see Kazimierz Piotrowski, “Hommage à Jan Świdziński (an attempted introduction to art as contextual art)”, *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* no. 8, 2013, 79-95; Markowska, “Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland”, 220-241.

*Semantic Signs (Znaki semantyczne)* (1952-62), Świdziński showed from the mid-1960s an increasing interest for the structure of language and communication.

Among his works from the early 1970s, it is worth mentioning *Action in space (Akcja w przestrzeni)* (1972), carried on in Warsaw with Włodzimierz Borowski and Krzysztof Wodiczko. This work characteristic of conceptual photography reflected the three artists' concern in documenting reality through automated processes.<sup>9</sup> In an ample outdoor space, Borowski, Świdziński and Wodiczko positioned themselves in order to form an equilateral triangle and took simultaneously pictures of one another with snapshot cameras. They progressively moved further away from one another, drawing increasingly larger triangular figures. They photographed each other nine times until they lost sight of each other. The result was exhibited in May 1972 at the Galeria Adres, opened by Ewa Partum in the headquarters of the Association of Polish Art Photographers (ZPAF) in Łódź, and a triptych titled *Exhibition/exposure of a same work (Ekspozycja jdenej pracy/Exposition d'un travail)* was published, including a brief explanatory note in French and Polish. [Fig. 2.1] Świdziński, however, moved quickly away from conceptual-type inquiries to focus on theory. According to him, the conference "The Situation of Modern Art" ("Sytuacja sztuki współczesnej") organised in March 1975 by the Galeria Remont in Warsaw marked a first step towards his formulation of "art as a contextual art".<sup>10</sup> The adoption of this designation, however, happened only after Świdziński's encounter with a group of young artists from Wrocław, who was decisive in creating the conditions for a public projection of his ideas and for connecting them with concrete artifacts and gestures.

Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera, Lech Mrożek, Piotr Olszański, Stanisław Antosz and Katarzyna Chierowska were students at the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Wrocław in their early twenties. In 1975, they started running the Recent Art Gallery (Galerii Sztuki Najnowszej, RAG) in the Academic Culture Centre "Pałacyk", lent by

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<sup>9</sup> The same type of systematic inquiry was developed at that time by the founders of Galeria Permafo in Wrocław: Andrzej Lachowicz, Natalia LL and Zbigniew Dłubak. Świdziński collaborated with them and published several texts in the *Permafo* journal between 1972 and 1980. *Permafo 1970-1981*, Anna Markowska, ed. (Wrocław: Wrocław Contemporary Museum and Motto Books, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> This is reported in Świdziński's first attempt to drawing a "protohistory of contextualism." Jan Świdziński, "A look at history", in *Materials from the Conference of Contextual Art* (Lublin: Arcus Gallery, June 1977), 49.



the municipality of Wrocław.<sup>11</sup> In September 1975, the RAG organised in Gdansk the International Festival of Artistic Schools of the Baltic States (F-Art '75) in collaboration with students from the Gdansk Academy of Fine Arts. Artists from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Denmark, Sweden, France and the UK took part in the festival, as well as gallery managers, critics and art theoreticians.<sup>12</sup> Among the guests were Świdziński and also Jean Sellem, a French artist emigrated to Sweden who had created in Lund a space dedicated to marginal and experimental art, the Galerie St: Petri. Sellem's immediate interest for the work of Anna Kutera led to an invitation to exhibit personally and Kutera's exhibition "Morphology of the New Reality" ("Morfologia nowej rzeczywistości") took place at the Galerie St: Petri, in November.<sup>13</sup> While attending the opening in Lund, Świdziński discussed with Sellem the possibility of organising an exhibition of young Polish avant-garde art. It was Sellem himself who coined the term "contextual art" during these exchanges, as Anna Kutera recalled:

During our stay in Lund we discussed the "New Avant-garde" and its theoretical assumptions different from conceptualism developed during our meetings with Jan Świdziński. Because a lot was said about the context of art and reality, Jean Sellem proposed the name CONTEXTUAL ART that remained in opposition to Joseph Kosuth's Conceptualism. Jean agreed to organise a large Polish exhibition entitled "Contextual Art".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Previously, in 1973, Anna Kutera and Romuald Kutera had created the International Recent Art Gallery (Międzynarodowa Galeria Sztuki Najnowszej) in Anna's family apartment. It was a platform to send their own production and documentation abroad and organise discussions on the received artworks. See Anna Markowska, "From mail-art and trop-art to structural film and the beautiful Odryka, or almost the entire truth about Romuald Kutera", in *Romuald Kutera. The Avant-Garde Did Not Applaud, Part 2*, Anna Markowska, ed. (Wrocław Contemporary Museum Wrocław 2014), 49-50. On the Recent Art Gallery, from the same author, Anna Markowska, "This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975-1980) at the Pałacyk Academic Culture Centre", in *The Recent Art Gallery. The Avant-Garde Did Not Applaud, Part 1*, Anna Markowska, ed. (Wrocław: Wrocław Contemporary Museum, 2014), 259. Markowska's comprehensive essay has been an essential source of information and reflection for the writing of this chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Kutera, "Prologue to the Toronto Conference", unpublished document sent to the author by email, May 2019. I am grateful to Anna Kutera for sharing her comments on these episodes.

<sup>13</sup> The exhibition was then replicated at the Recent Art Gallery, opening on February 1, 1976.

<sup>14</sup> Kutera, "Prologue to the Toronto Conference".

Taking place at the Galerie St: Petri in February 1976 with the help of the Union of Polish Art Photographers, the exhibition “Contextual Art” gathered Polish artists from different circles: the RAG in Wrocław (Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera and Lech Mrożek), the Remont Gallery in Warsaw (Henryk Gajewski and Andrzej Jórczak) and the Workshop of the Film Form in Łódź (Józef Robakowski, Ryszard Waśko and Wojciech Bruszewski).<sup>15</sup> [Fig. 2.2] These three circles were joined by two artists from an older generation, Świdziński himself and Zbigniew Dłubak.<sup>16</sup>

While they seemed at a first glance to be close to conceptual aesthetics and privileged the use of photography and film, the works displayed in Lund were nevertheless distinct for their attention to contingencies, referring to the conditions of their realisation and the present of their formulation. Their authors reacted to their close visual and intellectual environment.

One of the most emblematic examples of contextual art—or “contextualism”, as it was also called—was Anna Kutera’s performance *Presentation (Prezentacja)* (1975), documented by a 16mm film and a series of photographs.<sup>17</sup> [Fig. 2.3] Performed during the F-Art ’75 in Gdansk, *Presentation* was introduced by Kutera herself: “I am happy to be together with a group who understands the meaning of being together in art and getting to know each other without words.<sup>18</sup>” Sitting on a chair at a table, the artist invited, one by one, nine male members of the audience to join her and have a sit, while both of them remained silent. Kutera had minimally prepared the stage for a situation of dialogue—two chairs—but at the same time, she suppressed that possibility, making visible the fragility of communication. The film showed a succession of

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<sup>15</sup> Of these circles present in the “Contextual Art” exhibition in Lund, the artists close to the Remont Gallery and the Workshop of Film Form quickly disappeared from activities related to the dissemination of contextual art, leaving the artists of the RAG as its only “representatives”. Precisions on the Workshop of Film Form’s position on contextual art were provided by Tomasz Załuski, whom I thank.

<sup>16</sup> One of the co-founders of the Galeria Permafo who had become closer to the RAG, Dłubak was also interested in developing a critical reflection on recent art in Poland. On his early practice and its relation with the conceptual frame, see Martin Patrick, “Polish Conceptualism of the 1960s and 1970s: Images, Objects, Systems and Texts”, *Third Text* 96, Spring 2001, 38-42.

<sup>17</sup> We also find the performance reported as *Introduction*. Among the participants were the Polish artists Piotr Olszański, Lech Mrożek, Jerzy Olek, Kazimierz Helebrandt, Romuald Kutera, the Danish artist Niels Lomholt and other anonymous artists from Budapest, Prague, and Zagreb. Ewa Malgorzata Tatar, “The Introduction—performance by Anna Kutera”, in *Parallel Chronologies*, <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/ewa-malgorzata-tatar-is-wyspa-anna-kutera-the-introduction/> (Accessed June 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Anna Kutera, cited in Tatar, “The Introduction—performance by Anna Kutera”.

short-around one minute-silent encounters. The physical proximity of the artist and her interlocutor on the one hand, and the awkwardness of non-verbal communication with a stranger on the other, created a situation at the same time intimate and embarrassing, making each confrontation unique. The performance nourished the public's expectation and its ability to draw its own conclusions regarding the real or fictional character of each situation-in fact, the question of both individuals being spontaneous or on the contrary "acting" over this encounter was implicitly raised. The fact that Kutera's nine partners were all men was not emphasised by the artist herself during the performance or posteriorly, however, it should not be regarded as insignificant since the situation also reflected the gender distribution in the art world at that time-an issue Kutera would directly address two years later in her piece *Is the word "Woman" a noun or an adjective? (Czy wyraz 'kobieta' to rzeczownik, czy przymiotnik?)* (1977), further discussed in this chapter.

We might be tempted to compare *Presentation* with other performances by women artists that also involved a relation with the audience, such as Yoko Ono's *Cut piece* (1964) or Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974), just to mention well-known examples. However, the tone was totally different in Kutera's case, since she was close to, but not in physical contact with her interlocutors and her physical integrity was never endangered or susceptible to be so.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Kutera well pointed at in her introduction that the individuals she invited on stage and herself were her "comrades in art", and so was the audience of the festival. While arrogating the right to designate her interlocutors herself, the artist established a horizontal relationship of collaboration and comradeship; this aspect circumscribed the performance within a particular community from which she could expect complicity and collaboration instead of indifference or confrontation. Taking into account that *Presentation* was Kutera's first public performance out of her group of art students from Wrocław, it can thus be seen as an affirmative gesture through which she wanted to introduce

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<sup>19</sup> Anna Markowska has compared *Presentation* with Marina Abramović's famous performance *The artist is present* (MoMA New York, 2010) set from totally distinct parameters. The simple fact that Kutera's performance did not rely on a distance between the artist and her partners, but on the contrary on a situation of "being together", makes it radically distinct from the exceptionality and exclusivity of the codified visual relationship between Abramović and her audience. Markowska, "This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975-1980) at the Pałacyk Academic Culture Centre", 287-288.

herself (in)to the artistic community. It also signaled her intention to develop her practice from within, on the limited scale of small communities and through the “willingness to enter into dialogue on equal rights”.<sup>20</sup>

*Presentation* was part of a cycle of Kutera’s works (mostly photographic series) called *Stimulated situations (Sytacje stymulowane)*, which placed interaction with the audience at the centre. In the series, interaction was not only established through eye contact between the subject and the audience, but also through the sequential structure of the work, which invited to an exercise of recognition and completion of a suggested narrative, like in the case of *The Monologue (Monolog)* (1976). This particular relation was also explored in Kutera’s subsequent cycle of photographic works, *Morphology of the New Reality (Morfologia nowej rzeczywistości)*, which gave its name to Kutera’s solo exhibition at the Galerie St. Petri.

## 1.2 From theory to practice. Świdziński’s controversial figure

The “Contextual art” exhibition in Lund incorporated theoretical work on the same level as images.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the exhibited pieces included a text by Świdziński on art as contextual art that was printed and hung on the wall. [Fig. 2.4] This textual piece confirmed that Świdziński had made his own the formula coined by Jean Sellem and had started to use it as a theoretical frame susceptible to be transposed into a visual artifact on display. In this respect, this exhibition already revealed an aspect that would give rise to criticism on Świdziński’s idea of contextual art: a disjunction between, on the one hand, the theory elaborated by Świdziński himself (“art as contextual art”) and, on the other hand, its materialisation through artworks or productions designated as “contextual art” by their authors who were, however, not interested in forming a movement or a new -ism.

At the same time, the filling in of theory with aesthetic production was not a satisfactory option for Świdziński, who showed reluctance to use art as an illustration of reflection of his ideas. As Anna Markowska has explained, instead of concrete

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<sup>20</sup> Markowska, “This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975–1980) at the Pałac Academic Culture Centre”, 287.

<sup>21</sup> The exhibition thus enabled the “cooperation of a letter and an image”. Markowska, “Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland”, 224.

artworks or pieces, Świdziński's art of that time consisted in "art as contextual art", i.e., the ideas, presented through oral and written displays, and subject to discussion. The most important for Świdziński was thus the "journey" and not the objects produced through it.<sup>22</sup> Acknowledging that Świdziński's theory was his artistic work, and not just a list of principles or a recipe artists had to follow in order to produce contextual artworks thus invalidates the idea of Świdziński as an "artist without artworks". His intention as an artist was, in fact, "to show the framework" and not produce artifacts.<sup>23</sup>

Opening a short parenthesis, we can establish an interesting parallel between the idea of a predominance of theory in Świdziński's work with concerns expressed in the first half of the 1970s in Spanish circles close to conceptual tendencies and new artistic behaviours. Several discussions gravitated around the question of the autonomy of art and the possibility, through new artistic languages, of articulating a critique to society. Inspired in a Marxist critique of society and class struggles, the Catalan artists collective Group de Treball ("Working group") active between 1973 and 1975 formulated an analysis of the mechanisms of social and economic domination which, in a Francoist context, automatically fell within the field of militant and politicised art.<sup>24</sup> Their work was in line with the reflections carried out by the art critic and theoretician Simón Marchán Fiz, who considered conceptual art as particularly adapted to occupy a critical position and have a direct impact on the social sphere.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "[c]ontextual art in its early stage was not meant to create finished facts in the form of "artworks", but [...] was meant to open for various possibilities resulting from brain storming". Markowska, "Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland", 225.

<sup>23</sup> Markowska, "Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland", 225.

<sup>24</sup> The group has brought together the artists Carles Santos, Antoni Mercader, Antoni Muntadas, Pere Portabella, Francesc Torres, Jordi Benito, Francesc Abad, Àngels Ribé with different degrees of involvement in each work. On the collective's activity, see *Grup de treball*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1999); posterior considerations on the place that was attributed to in Spanish historiography and museography include Jesús Carrillo, "Amnesia y Desacuerdos. Notas acerca de los lugares de la memoria de las prácticas artístico-críticas del tardofranquismo", *Arte y Políticas de Identidad* 1, 2009, 1-22, <https://revistas.um.es/reapi/article/view/89381> and Albarrán, "Repositioning Spanish Conceptualisms: New Institutionalism, Coloniality and the Contemporary", 357-360. See also Pablo Santa Olalla, *La historiografía alrededor de lo conceptual: el caso de Grup de Treball*, Master Thesis (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful to Paula Barreiro López for signaling this connection to me. See Paula Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 266.

Quite interestingly, while the Group de Treball and Marchán agreed on art's social function, Marchán suggested at some point that the group should focus more on artistic creation and less on politics, and invited them to abandon what he designated as the "Ghost of Realism". He was aware in fact of the limits of the simple appropriation and application of a Marxist terminology and critique in the visual arts field and, as Paula Barreiro observed, "[e]ven though [Marchán] acknowledged the capacity of Grup de Treball's work to overcome the autonomy of the arts—and saw that its artists really were, through their strong theoretical basis, in contact with "the problems of ideological class struggle"—he wanted to convince them to focus now on developing experimental artistic solutions".<sup>26</sup> By proposing a return to art, Marchán was trying to restore a balance between the commitment of left-wing artists and collectives and the need to an art and a related aesthetics that would escape the simple transposition of political discourses.

The critical potential of Świdziński's position was not always perceived in the same way. From an art historiographical perspective, Piotr Piotrowski has been perhaps among his most virulent critics. He considered in fact that the artist and theoretician benefited from the particular situation of liberalisation of the Polish cultural scene—in particular, the possibility of receiving economical support from the state for non conformist activities—to develop his theoretical position without taking any risks. According to Piotrowski, Świdziński's theorising was "much safer than action in a post-totalitarian state". Piotrowski's critique to Świdziński deserves to be fully reported here, as it provides key elements to understand the polarised debate that focused on art's autonomy in Polish historiography:

Świdziński advocated art that would be 'completed' by the context, one whose meaning was defined by the context. The artist preferred, however, to limit himself to purely theoretical statements that were never translated into concrete instances of criticism. Such theorizing was much safer than action in a post-totalitarian state. The state's permissive attitude towards politically uncritical or pseudo-critical statements formulated in the language of the neo-avant-garde, postmodernism, or any other art

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<sup>26</sup> Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*, 271.

trend, its financial support for art galleries and venues, conferences and exhibitions, something that could not be taken for granted in the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, was commonplace in Poland. The regime needed the artists, but the artists also needed the regime. The possibility of working in the public sphere and having access to state subsidies was simply too significant a privilege to be jeopardized by production of ‘undesirable’ art. This type of accommodation entrenched conformist attitudes observed by Hável across the entire social spectrum of the post-totalitarian society, from managers of food stores to party officials. The game played by the artists was therefore not an exception, but the norm that defined the entire system of power. Conformism exemplified by uncritical or pseudo-critical art was the basis of what Michel Foucault referred to as the function of the ‘microphysics of power’, and as such was the core mechanism underpinning the functioning of the Polish art scene.<sup>27</sup>

Piotrowski thus considered practices like that of Świdziński as “uncritical” or even worse, “pseudo-critical” and pointed at the symbiotic relationship or tacit agreement of non aggression between art and the structures of power. According to Mathilde Arnoux, Piotrowski’s position was due to the fact that he focused on “the artist’s position in relation to the ideological state apparatus”, without considering “distinctions between [...] various levels of interpretations.<sup>28</sup>” In fact, while Piotrowski’s approach to Eastern European art history remains a reference for shedding light on the imbricated mechanisms of artistic production and the socialist political systems in which it emerged, on the other hand, such perspective can lead, like in the case of Świdziński, to moral readings in which artists who openly resisted against or refused to collaborate with state institutions are supposedly more valuable than those who privileged art’s autonomy and proclaimed their distance from politics—

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<sup>27</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe*, trans. Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 289-290.

<sup>28</sup> “[...] the inextricable link between art and power established by Turowski and Piotrowski, sometimes reduces the work to an object of political science, and the history of art to artists' strategies for situating themselves, responding and resisting the political system in place.”([...]“le lien inextricable de l’art avec le pouvoir établi par Turowski et Piotrowski, réduit parfois l’oeuvre à un objet de sciences politiques, et l’histoire de l’art à des stratégies d’artistes pour se situer, répondre et résister au système politique en place.”) Mathilde Arnoux, “Compromission, engagement, neutralité: analyses de l’art polonais de la guerre froide”, *Perspective [En ligne]* 1, 2012, 196. <https://doi.org/10.4000/perspective.657>.

which, in this particular context, was a political statement.<sup>29</sup> Such interpretative grid has a real impact on the way historical narratives are constructed today and exclude artists seen as being not radical enough in their actions, or not iconic enough in their production to be integrated into a narrative in search of committed heroes.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, the fact of not taking these readings for granted should certainly not obscure Świdziński's controversial character and the fact that his relation with the Polish authorities could be seen as ambivalent, not only by art historians, but also by some of his peers and colleagues. During the Second World War, Świdziński was involved in the German police (Kripo) in Warsaw and in 1944, he became a soldier in the Polish liberation army, until his former collaboration with the German police was denounced and he was sent for one month to a penitentiary company.<sup>31</sup> In 1953, Świdziński was arrested by the State security and accused of having concealed his collaboration with the Kripo, after which he was asked to cooperate as an informer, which he did until 1959. He was approached again by the State security in the 1970s but there are no evidences that he collaborated.<sup>32</sup> In the period we are interested in, Świdziński travelled abroad without difficulty, especially to Western Europe and North America. While this great international mobility in the 1970s looked suspicious to some at a time when other artists had more difficulties in obtaining a visa, it should be pointed out that Świdziński benefited on the one hand

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<sup>29</sup> See Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art. Reticence as Dissidence Under Post-totalitarian Rule 1956-1989* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> This brings us directly back to Chapter one and the way in which visual and concrete poetry may have been swept out of accounts of art history in Franco's Spain because it was too apolitical in the face of other, more explicit, positions. See Paula Barreiro López, "Tránsitos concretos: de la pintura a la poesía en la España franquista", *Bulletin of Hispanic studies* Vol. 95, no. 9, 2018, 993-995 ; the same for the narratives on Spanish conceptual art that have insisted on its political character, with the Group de Treble in its center—this issue will be addressed in Chapter four—, see Juan Albarrán, "Repositioning Spanish Conceptualisms: New Institutionalism, Coloniality and the Contemporary", in Nick Aikens, Susan Pui San Lok, Sophie Orlando eds., *Conceptualism—Intersectional Readings, International Framings: Situating 'Black Artists & Modernism' in Europe* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2019), 352-368.

<sup>31</sup> The artist Zbigniew Libera has written a detailed account of Świdziński's life, especially during the war and post-war period. He has suggested that Świdziński was perhaps an infiltrated element of the Home army intelligence in the German police, specifying however that this is not documented. Zbigniew Libera, "Kontekstualna ewangelia według Jana Libera wybiera, czyli subiektywny poczet polskich artystów", *Przekrój*, 20 March 2020, <https://przekroj.pl/kultura/kontekstualna-ewangelia-wedlug-jana-libera-wybiera> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>32</sup> According to Libera, Świdziński collaborated between 1952 and 1959 and was newly approached in the 1970s, without informing again. Libera, "Kontekstualna ewangelia według Jana Libera wybiera, czyli subiektywny poczet polskich artystów".



from official invitations as well as grants or funds set up by the host countries (in particular, Canada), and was, on the other, also hosted by his colleagues artists (Hervé Fischer in Paris, for example).<sup>33</sup>

Świdziński has also been criticised for having prioritised his own interests and international relations over the support of the local Polish scene, in particular in the framework of his international activities in the 1970s.<sup>34</sup> Given the high sensitivity of this issue for the protagonists of this scene, a careful and contrasted approach to Świdziński's practice and trajectory in this particular decade is required.

In parallel with the "Contextual Art" exhibition in Lund, a symposium took place at the Malmö Konsthall. Świdziński gave a lecture based on the publication *Art as contextual art* released with the support of Jean Sellem and the Galerie S:t Petri. *Art as contextual art* included a seminal manifest titled "12 points of contextual art", as well as others texts exposing his theory, all in English language.<sup>35</sup> Thanks to this publication in English, the public presentation in Malmö and the exhibition in Lund, art as contextual art was turned into a theoretical product suitable for international exportation, manipulation and re-appropriation by other artists. The centrality of the figure of Świdziński, quickly propelled as the main "ideologue" of this trend—and actually the only one, since the other artists had no interest in challenging this theoretical authority—, influenced the spread and visibility of his theory outside the Polish context. We can thus affirm that this Swedish episode was the platform for the international launch of art as contextual art.

At the same time, the platform offered by the Galerie S:t Petri was very specific, out of the realm of art's institutional and commercial circuits. Jean Sellem, who evolved within an extensive network of self-designated marginal artistic and cultural practices, was interested above all in developing collaborations with similar structures and people and this orientation certainly shaped the sphere of reception of contextual

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<sup>33</sup> These aspects were confirmed by the Canadian artist and Świdziński's friend Hank Bull in a conversation by Skype with the author, 3 July 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Kutera, "Prologue to the Toronto Conference".

<sup>35</sup> Jan Świdziński, *Art as contextual art* (Lund: Ed. Sellem Galerie S:t Petri Archive of Experimental Art, 1976). The Polish version of these writings would be published only one year later in a bilingual edition from the Galeria Remont. Świdziński, *Sztuka jako sztuka kontekstual/Art as Contextual Art*.

art.<sup>36</sup> The Galerie S:t Petri's sponsorship of this operation thus anchored art as contextual art in a fabric of international interlocutors who expressed critical views on the art's system and assumed their marginal (and, I would add, decentralised) position. It is not a coincidence indeed if other artists involved in the alliance discussed in this chapter also collaborated and exhibited in Sellem's space in Lund: this was the case of Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest and Jean-Paul Thénot from the Collective d'Art Sociologique, and also, as we will see further, the group of artists who published the magazine *Neon de Suro* in Spain.

### **1.3 The Toronto symposium and the premises of a Third Front**

Among the people who discovered Świdziński's ideas in Sweden was Amerigo Marras. An Italian émigré settled in Canada at the beginning of the 1970s, Marras was actively involved in Toronto's cultural scene as a cultural worker and a gay activist. In the early 1970s, he co-founded the monthly magazine *The Body Politic*, one of Canada's first gay publications. Together with Suber Corley, Marras formed in 1973 the Kensington Arts Association (KAA) to exhibit non-commercial art and language, as well as diffusing their theoretical ideas. As a continuation of the KAA, they created in 1975 the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC), which rapidly became an important alternative—yet publicly funded—space in Toronto.<sup>37</sup>

Marras' ambition was to establish CEAC as a significant place on the international scene. The proximity of the name chosen for his organisation with that of the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (Centre of Art and Communication, CAYC) created in 1968 in Buenos Aires by a group of artists (the "Group of Thirteen") was not accidental. Marras, who had participated in the CAYC's Fourth International Open Encounter of video art in Buenos Aires in 1975, was particularly fascinated by the capacity of the organisation and especially of its co-founder and main promoter, the influential industrial Jorge Glusberg, to radiate internationally and export its conceptions and

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<sup>36</sup> The profile of Jean Sellem and his connection to the Internationale Situationiste are examined in Markowska, "Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland," 220-241.

<sup>37</sup> Information on Marras' trajectory is provided in Philip Monk, *Is Toronto Burning?* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2016) and Dot Tuer, "The CEAC was banned in Canada", *C Magazine* 11, 1986, 22-37. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/80191867.pdf> (Accessed May 2019).

ideas on art (we will come back to this aspect in Chapter four). In fact, as Dot Tuer has observed,

[t]he radical impetus of CAYC's aesthetic, intent upon challenging the repressive regime of Argentina through form as well as content, combined with the concept of video exchange and alternative information networks, informed CEAC's approach to video, which included the production and collection of both local and international tapes as well as an emphasis on documenting events held by CEAC.<sup>38</sup>

CEAC not only looked at the model of the CAYC for its approach to video; the political ideas and the methodology promoted by the Argentinian organisation had a strong impact on Marras and influenced his elaboration of the whole program of the Toronto organisation. Tuer has suggested that while Marras had clear ideas about the model of structure he wanted to develop, he lacked a consistent theoretical frame to promote his ideas on the international scene. This, according to her, also explains why Marras was seduced by Świdziński's theory on art at contextual art, which "offered CEAC the theoretical means to locate their activities on an international art map of manifestos and debates."<sup>39</sup> On this respect, Kazimierz Piotrowski has also pointed out an essential motive for Świdziński's good reception by agents from alternative or marginal organisations like CEAC:

[...] the 1970s were a decade in which there was observed a growing popularity of neo-Marxism (Frankfurt school of thought) as well as the wave of counter-culture which enticed many artists. With that in view, it is easier to understand why Świdziński's voice from the East criticising neo-positivism and exposing fake ideology was so audible, mature, resonating and gaining appreciation.<sup>40</sup>

After discovering Świdziński's theory in Sweden, Marras went back to Toronto with the idea to organise a symposium in which these ideas would be discussed by artists

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<sup>38</sup> "Amerigo Marras' interest in new technology had been influenced by his studies with McLuhan, and his political ideas formed while attending an international video encounter held in Buenos Aires. It was there that Marras met the CAYC group [...]." Tuer, "The CEAC was banned in Canada", 27.

<sup>39</sup> Tuer, "The CEAC was banned in Canada", 31.

<sup>40</sup> Piotrowski, "Hommage à Jan Świdziński (an attempted introduction to art as contextual art)", 80.

and art workers from different origins. Held at CEAC in Toronto from 10 to 12 November 1976, the “Contextual Art symposium” pretended “to find the commonalities and divergences among the parties, as a process of initiating a dialectical communication among these groups sharing similar elaborations of socio-political practice.<sup>41</sup>” Besides Świdziński, participants were Anna Kutera (the only other participant from Poland), Hervé Fischer (who represented the Collectif d’Art Sociologique from France), the British filmmaker Anthony MacCall, the New-York-based artists Joseph Kosuth and Sarah Charlesworth, the Australian art critic Jo-Anne Birnie-Danzker, and Amerigo Marras himself. [Fig. 2.5 to 2.8] Also invited, the Canadian artists Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge preferred to participate from the audience, while other members of the public eventually spoke up, including Vera Frenkel, John Scott, John Bentley Mays, AA Bronson of General Idea, John Faichney and Ron Gillespie.<sup>42</sup> Participants were expected to have read Świdziński’s writings on art as contextual art and use them as a common basis to discuss their respective positions.

Sylvia Serafinowicz has defined the Toronto symposium—sometimes also referred to as a seminar—as “one of the most mythologized events in the history of Polish art of the 1970s.<sup>43</sup>” While this statement may seem slightly exaggerated, it is certain that by setting a horizontal encounter between practitioners from different origins and backgrounds to discuss the theory of a little known artist from socialist Central Europe, the event contradicted the art world’s current balance of power and distribution of symbolic authority.

At the opening of the symposium, Świdziński expressed his hope to “get out of all the kinds of trenches we are in”, specifying that he was not referring to “the trenches of countries or artistic groups, but one big trench of the whole world of art”.<sup>44</sup> What rapidly came out of the four sessions of open discussions, however, was that these

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<sup>41</sup> Anonymous (probably Amerigo Marras), “Contextual Art”, *Art Communication Edition* no. 2, January 1977, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Tuer, “The CEAC was banned in Canada”, 31.

<sup>43</sup> Sylwia Serafinowicz, “Broken English: Jan Świdziński and Toronto’s Contextual Art Symposium, 1976”, in *Villa Toronto* (Warsaw: Fundacja Raster, 2015), 12.

<sup>44</sup> Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art*, 106.

trenches still existed and were hard to remove. The report of the event published in the magazine *Art & Communication Edition*—CEAC’s main organ of diffusion for its ideas and projects—listed a series of elements that had obstructed this attempt to communicate: “individual hostility”—concretely, splits between the US and the Canadian branches of Art&Language—, “New York cultural and economical domination”, and the symposium’s format itself, too formal and inauspicious for exchange.<sup>45</sup> A look at the event’s transcripts confirms that the participants had difficulties in finding a common ground for discussion and sometimes adopted a self-defensive behaviour that could lead to an atmosphere of “theoretical posturing and personal invective”.<sup>46</sup> On top of that, the fact that the New York artists—namely, Joseph Kosuth and Sarah Charlesworth—had come with no previous knowledge of Świdziński’s theory was perceived by some participants as a mark of disrespect and a clear symptom of the permanence of geographical hierarchies. If, on the one hand, Kosuth and Charlesworth were not interested in discussing again positions they had recently rejected—Kosuth in particular had already reoriented his approach towards “anthropologised art”<sup>47</sup>—, on the other, as Dot Tuer observed, their “unwillingness to identify a position or ideology assumed the arrogance of artists producing at the cultural centre who feel no need to engage the periphery with a clear understanding of their aims.”<sup>48</sup>

While contextual art was claimed by its followers (mostly Świdziński and Marras) as a crucial instrument to counter the supremacy of Anglo-American conceptual art on the international scene, other participants saw in Świdziński’s theory a backward and delayed answer—in particular, Kosuth, whose patronising undertone was perceptible. Quite significantly, later readings of this episode have perpetuated this kind of centralised vision based on originality and primacy. Philip Monk thus estimated that “Świdziński’s fixation as late as 1976–1977 on critiquing an outmoded form of

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<sup>45</sup> Anonymous (probably Amerigo Marras), “Contextual Art”, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Tuer, “The CEAC was banned in Canada”, 31. The debate’s full transcription is published in Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art*, 99-190.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Kosuth, “The Artist as Anthropologist”, *The Fox* Vol. 1. Issue 1, 1975, 18-30. See also Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov, “Ethnographic conceptualism: an introduction”, *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* Vol. 5. no. 2, 2013, 4-18.

<sup>48</sup> Tuer, “The CEAC was banned in Canada”, 31; Monk, *Is Toronto Burning?*, 96-98.

conceptual art—and in particular Kosuth’s 1969 notion of art as an analytical proposition which had long been rejected, by Kosuth himself moreover—only showed the isolated position of Polish art”, taking for granted the vision of a closed country behind the Iron Curtain and ignoring the level of access to information of Polish artists in the 1970s and their extensive exchange with cultural agents from other regions and continents.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, this reading also left apart what is particularly interesting to us here, i.e. the way Świdziński’s theory worked as a cohesive ground for exchanges and activities across the Cold War divides and actually contributed to make visible all the processes of negotiation and the contradictions at stake between its protagonists.

The polarised situation of the Toronto seminar impacted the participants, more particularly Hervé Fischer, Jan Świdziński and Amerigo Marras who, forced to evaluate their proper position in terms of backwardness and peripherality—as diverse as such concepts could result and be experienced by each of them—, felt a compelling need to self-organize outside a circuit they perceived as conceptually and materially dominated by the New York scene.

It would be too simplistic, however, to suggest that their desire to join forces surged from a mere feeling of resentment or inferiority. The three artists and cultural agents also felt united by similar visions and programs of action. Nor should we imagine that they totally broke off all relations with the New Yorkers. In fact, to demonstrate the absence of animosity and the willingness to keep exchanging and collaborating after the symposium in Toronto, Jan Świdziński and Anna Kutera were invited to New York by Sarah Charlesworth and Joseph Kosuth. Their guests, Kutera recalled, organised “meetings at the Weber Gallery, Visual Art School, Neuberger Museum, State University and a seminary at the Guggenheim Museum led by Diane Waldman”.<sup>50</sup> This invitation confirms the complexity of transnational exchange and

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<sup>49</sup> Monk, *Is Toronto Burning ?*, 100. In contrast, the art historians Łukasz Guzek, Anna Markowska, Kazimierz Piotrowski and the artist Zbigniew Libera have challenged such Eurocentric readings by addressing Świdziński’s practices from the perspective of his particular position in the Polish and the global context.

<sup>50</sup> Kutera, “Prologue to the Toronto Conference.”

the impossibility of situating them within the simple opposition between collaborative and conflictive relations.

While Świdziński and Kutera had the opportunity to discover the New York scene in person, neither of them was interested in playing the exotic and marginal role of the Eastern European artist in search of Western recognition and benefits from the art market. They operated instead as cultural practitioners who were interested in confronting critically their own field of action with that of their peers in the U.S., adopting a comparative perspective and possibly integrating references that could be transposed to and used within their own field of practice and reflection. While in New York, they met John Weber, owner of the John Weber Gallery, where Hans Haacke and his works based on the recollection of visitors' information and the history of ownership of modern artworks had been exhibited.<sup>51</sup> However, while institutional critique was, for US artists, one of the "hottest" tendencies at that time, Haacke's works did not result very attractive to Kutera and Świdziński.<sup>52</sup> They felt more concerned by issues like the changing relations between cities and villages, urbanisation processes and country life than by a critical analysis of the art system and its satellite institutions.<sup>53</sup>

Świdziński did not consider the Toronto symposium a failure; or, if failure was considered, it was as a productive impulse for individual and collective learning. His "assumed strategy" was indeed "to reveal the uniqueness of the contexts of the

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<sup>51</sup> The encounter with John Weber and its implications are substantially examined by Markowska, according to whom "[b]oth Świdziński, who did not talk about his art, and a young art student from Wrocław did not represent for Weber any attraction. Weber did not want to see Kutera's work". Markowska, "Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland", 234-236.

<sup>52</sup> Markowska, "Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland", 236-37. During a collective exhibition at the John Weber Gallery, in October 1972, Hans Haacke asked the visitors to fill a questionnaire regarding their background and opinion on sociopolitical issues. The answers reflected their proximity to liberal ideas and a social environment with good access to culture. In 1975, Haacke exhibited in the gallery a piece that investigated the history of the ownership of a painting by Edgar Degas, *Les Poseuses* (Small version from 1888). On Haacke's *Gallery-Visitor's Profile* (1969-1973), see Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977", in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson ed. (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1999), xxiv; On *Seurat's "Les Poseuses" (Small Version) 1888-1975* (1975), see Carmen Fernández Aparicio, "Seurat's "Les Poseuses" (Small Version), 1888-1975", comment on the collection of the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/seurats-poseuses-small-version-1888-1975>.

<sup>53</sup> Łukasz Guzek noted that Świdziński showed more interest for visiting an Indian Reservation Land than for being introduced to the art world by Kosuth. Łukasz Guzek, "Art as contextual art. Jan Świdziński's theory and practice in view of the 1970s art", *Zeszyty Artystyczne*, no. 32, 2018, 217.

individual groups of artists working in different cultural surroundings”.<sup>54</sup> From that perspective, the possibility of disagreements and even conflicts represented an opportunity for raising consciousness on these differences, including for the audience. The Toronto event confirmed in fact that art as contextual art was not so much a matter of producing artworks or plastic experiments, than of sharing ideas and questions in the framework of “local activities” through which the participants could reconsider their relationship with reality—in the particular case of the symposium at CEAC, the reality of art making in capitalist and socialist societies.<sup>55</sup> Hervé Fischer and Amerigo Marras also felt that the Toronto symposium had raised important issues that required to be addressed properly. For Fischer, it was

[...] something very interesting and maybe important, even if the differences between us seem very big, because it’s the first time that people working in Europe, East and West Europe, and in North America, come together to discuss the possibility of using art as a way of changing society (...).<sup>56</sup>

In an issue of the Canadian magazine *Parachute* focusing on contextual art, Fischer stressed that the symposium had highlighted “the convergence of artistic approaches from both Europe and North America, towards an awareness of the artist’s political and philosophical responsibility in society”. To him, the event had “given the opportunity to demystify the economic power taking of New York cultural regionalism”.<sup>57</sup> Amerigo Marras also shared this idea and amplified it, considering the event as “simply the beginning for a platform of a new consciousness emerging in

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<sup>54</sup> Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art*, 101.

<sup>55</sup> In Świdziński’s book *Quotations on contextual art*, the transcripts of the Toronto symposium were collected under the title “Local activities—In the context of the art world”, thus suggesting that the event in itself was an artistic project with a spatially and temporally-defined frame.

<sup>56</sup> Hervé Fischer, cited in Serafinowicz, “Broken English: Jan Świdziński and Toronto’s Contextual Art Symposium, 1976”, 14-15.

<sup>57</sup> “Il est important que ce séminaire ait eu lieu, car il a souligné la convergence de démarches artistiques venues des deux Europes et d’Amérique du Nord, vers une prise de conscience de la responsabilité politique et philosophique de l’artiste dans la société. Il est important que ce séminaire ait donné l’occasion de démystifier la prise de pouvoir économique du régionalisme culturel new-yorkais.” Hervé Fischer in *Parachute* no. 5, Spring 1976, cited in Richard Martel, “Présentation”, *Inter* no. 93, Spring 2006, 7. The special issue of *Parachute* dedicated to contextual art included a translation of Świdziński’s text “Art as contextual art” and some notes and comments by Fischer.



various countries with the same intensity and similar directions”.<sup>58</sup> The Canadian encounter in November 1976 thus became the first step for a common project which existence would materialise half a year later in Paris, as a “Third Front”.

## **2. The Collectif d’Art Sociologique as a privileged interlocutor**

### **2.1. An interrogative and pedagogical practice**

Before addressing the Paris encounter, we should present the collective who organised and hosted it, one of the main interlocutors and sounding boards for Świdziński’s ideas in Western Europe. The Collectif d’Art Sociologique (CAS) was founded in 1974 by the artists Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest and Jean-Paul Thénot, who were already carrying out individual practices oriented towards sociological issues. [Fig. 2.9] The collective announced its creation in October 1974 with the diffusion of a joint manifesto sent by mail to their close contacts and then published in the daily newspaper *Le Monde*.<sup>59</sup> [Fig. 2.10] The manifesto signaled “a new awareness of sociological facts, linked to the process of massification” and insisted on the collective’s focus on the relationship between man and society.<sup>60</sup> The CAS defined itself as “a liaison and working structure for all whose research and practical work in the field of art takes the sociological phenomena and the link between art and society as its fundamental theme.”<sup>61</sup> It borrowed operative modes and methodologies from the social sciences to implement them in the art field, with particular emphasis on interactions with the public. By the means of inquiries and social surveys, participatory and pedagogical actions as well as collective discussions on art’s social function, the CAS sought to interrogate the mechanisms of collective identification and representation that permeated society, as well as the problems that could derive

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<sup>58</sup> Amerigo Marras, “Notes and Statements of Activity, Toronto 1977”, *La Mamelle* no 5, 1977, 33.

<sup>59</sup> See “Formation, évolution et action du Collectif d’art sociologique” in *Collectif Art Sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique: Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, Jean-Paul Thenot*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée Galliéra, 1975), 9-10.

<sup>60</sup> Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest and Jean-Paul Thénot, “Collectif d’Art Sociologique”, *Le Monde*, 10 October 1974. I cite here the English version of the Manifest: Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest and Jean-Paul Thénot, “Sociological art group” in *Collectif Art Sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique: Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, Jean-Paul Thenot*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée Galliéra, 1975), 5.

<sup>61</sup> Fischer, Forest and Thénot, “Sociological art group”, 5.

from these mechanisms.<sup>62</sup> Sociological art, as Hervé Fischer retrospectively suggested, “was initially a concept developed in a concrete situation where the sociology of art challenged Sunday painting”. Against idealistic views, it relied on the idea that “art should finally tell the truth about art; obviously not an essentialist or eternal truth, but the ideological critique of art and its demystification.”<sup>63</sup> Such aspirations certainly resonated with Świdziński’s theory and his call to unveil the codes through which reality was perceived in society and transform them.

When they decided to found a collective, Fischer, Forest and Thénot were already evolving in a circle of artists who developed their work in the same direction and frequently collaborated. The decision to constitute a closed “sociological” group was seen as an unfair appropriation by some of them, including the Spanish artist Joan Rabascall, who had resided in Paris since 1962 and was also involved in these activities:

As far as sociological art is concerned, I am a founder, yes. It was a very large group and I was at their first meeting. [...] Sociological art interested me because you could include artists who made sociological, critical, political art, without thinking about the market... It was after May 68, a very interesting moment, but the sociological art

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<sup>62</sup> On the CAS, see Lily Woodruff, *Disordering the Establishment: Participatory Art and Institutional Critique in France, 1958-1981* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), chapter 4; Elena Lespes Muñoz, “Expériences et expérimentations dans les pratiques du Collectif d’art sociologique”, *Marges*, vol. 24 no. 1, 2017, 57-68; Ruth Elaine Erickson, *Assembling Social forms: Sociological Art Practice in Post-1968 France*, PhD Dissertation (Philadelphia: Penn State University, 2014) <https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/1270> (Accessed May 2020); Hervé Fischer, *Théorie de l’Art Sociologique* (Tournai: Casterman, 1977), digital edition: [http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/fischer\\_herve/theorie\\_art\\_sociologique/theorie\\_art\\_sociologique.pdf](http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/fischer_herve/theorie_art_sociologique/theorie_art_sociologique.pdf) (Accessed June 2020); Fred Forest, *Art sociologique* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1977).

<sup>63</sup> “En 1971, l’art sociologique fut d’abord un concept élaboré dans une situation concrète où la sociologie de l’art mettait en question la peinture du dimanche. Il s’agissait spécifiquement du retournement de la théorie sociologique de l’art contre l’art lui-même et contre son fonctionnement idéaliste dans la société. Apparaissait comme sociologique cette pratique issue de la sociologie de l’art, et qui impliquait que l’art dise enfin la vérité sur l’art; évidemment pas une vérité de type essentialiste ou éternel, mais bien la critique idéologique de l’art, et sa démystification.” Fischer, *Théorie de l’Art Sociologique* (Tournai: Casterman, 1977), 8.

that the three who stole the name did no longer interested me, and besides it was a closed group, far from what we had imagined.<sup>64</sup>

Despite these frictions, numerous artists from this former group participated in a series of collective exhibitions organised by the CAS between January and May 1975. Conceived as informative events, they addressed topics such as art's relations with economy and the market, new artistic methodologies that challenged art's object-centered tradition, and the application of communication methods in art with a focus on "marginal communication".<sup>65</sup>

The reference to sociology and social sciences in art was not new to the art field, however. In the early 1960s, Pierre Restany's ideas promoting Nouveau Réalisme considered "sociological" any practice that reflected the social and cultural changes introduced by consumer society and the increasing mass media. For example, this view appeared clearly in the critic's reading of Arman's *Allures d'objets* (1960), a series that resulted from inked objects projected on paper. Restany observed with interest the way chance, favoured by the automatic and mechanical process, cohabited with the artist's intention, manifested though his choice of the objects and the intensity of his gesture:

To admit, in the total expression of oneself, this objective relay, is to introduce the whole of sociology into the phenomenology of creative art. Sociology now comes to

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<sup>64</sup> "En cuanto al arte sociológico soy fundador, sí. Era un grupo muy grande y estuve en su primera reunión. [...] El arte sociológico me interesaba porque se podía incluir artistas que hacían arte sociológico, crítico, político, sin pensar en el mercado... Era después del mayo del 68, un momento muy interesante, pero el arte sociológico que han hecho los tres que robaron el nombre ya no me interesaba, y además era un grupo cerrado, lejos de lo que habíamos imaginado." "Entrevista con Joan Rabascall", 8 November 2012, retrieved from <http://www.camilayelarte.org/2012/11/entrevista-con-joan-rabascall.html> (Accessed July 2020).

<sup>65</sup> "L'art et ses structures socio-économiques" ("Art and its socioeconomic structures") or "Art Sociologique 1" was held at the Galerie Germain in Paris (January 1975) and included documentation from Art and Language (New York section), Hans Haacke, John Latham, Lea Lublin, Adrian Piper, Klaus Staeck and Wolf Vostell, among others. Also in Paris, "Problèmes et méthodes de l'art sociologique" ("Problems and methods of sociological art") or "Art Sociologique 2" took place at the Galerie Mathias Fels in March 1975 with the artists Jean-François Bory, Jacques Charlier, Antoni Muntadas, Joan Rabascall, Maurice Roquet, Sosno, Tomek Kawiak and Horacio Zabala, among others. "Art et communication" ("Art and communication") or Art Sociologique 3 was on view at the French Institute in Cologne in May 1975. The name of the participants in "Art et Communication" were not specified. We know from the CAS' monograph that the exhibition "brought together a lot of approaches of marginal communication." *Collectif Art Sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique: Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, Jean-Paul Thenot*, 10. On marginal communication, see also Hervé Fischer, "Diffusions de masse et communications marginales", in Hervé Fischer, *Art et communication marginale* (Paris: Balland, 1974), 5-18.

the rescue of chance: this objective relay safeguards the necessary margin of unforeseen events between the end and the means.<sup>66</sup>

For Restany, the introduction of a “sociological relay” in artistic expression made it possible to rehumanise it by integrating it to reality. Throughout this process, the artist was necessarily aware of his or her intention and social function.

Sociological concerns were also present in a sector of European art criticism—including Restany—that had designated itself as “militant” from the 1960s onwards, seeking to reaffirm the importance of the combined action of artists and art critics for social intervention. In the Spanish case in particular but also in Italy, the attention to sociology was strongly informed by marxism and operated for these cultural operators as “an alternative path to the autonomous and aesthetic concept of the arts promoted by the regime.”<sup>67</sup> On the register of cultural policies, the introduction of sociological methodologies in the cultural field should be also related with the politics of cultural decentralisation implemented in France at that time, and with the development of “cultural action” (“action culturelle”), as an effort to secure a more democratic access to culture—including contemporary art—to a wider audience, by the means of educational initiatives and through the consolidation of a network of local institutions.<sup>68</sup> While the CAS claimed to reject cultural institutionalisation, its practice of intervention in communities of people in fact had points of contact with the concerns of the “action culturelle” and operated in the same direction on its own, marginal level. A few years later, the French cultural “animator” Pierre Gaudibert, himself actively involved in practices of cultural action, would situate the practice of

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<sup>66</sup> “Admettre, dans la totale expression de soi, ce relai objectif, c’est introduire la sociologie tout entière au sein de la phénoménologie de l’art créateur. La sociologie désormais vient au secours du hasard: ce relai objectif sauvegarde la marge d’imprévu nécessaire entre la fin et les moyens.” Pierre Restany, *Les nouveaux réalistes* (Paris: Éditions Planète, 1968), 30. See also Mathilde Arnoux, *La réalité en partage. Pour une histoire des relations artistiques entre l’Est et l’Ouest en Europe pendant la Guerre froide* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, Paris, 2018), 42-43.

<sup>67</sup> See Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*, 224. The issue of militant art criticism is addressed more in detail in Chapter three.

<sup>68</sup> On this respect we should highlight the central role played by Pierre Gaudibert as the founder and director of the A.R.C (for Action Recherche Confrontation) (1967-1972) in Paris and through his numerous writings on the democratization of culture and its pitfalls. Gaudibert was himself referring to the notion of “cultural field” (champ culturel), derived from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social fields. See Pierre Gaudibert, “Champ culturel et formation artistique” in Jean Cassou, ed. *Art et Contestation* (Bruxelles: La Connaissance, 1968), 137-150, and Pierre Gaudibert, *Action culturelle: intégration et/ou subversion* (Paris: Casterman, 1972).

the CAS within the field of “self-contestation” that critically addressed art’s commodification and recuperation by the system and reflected on its potentially subversive function.<sup>69</sup>

It was therefore in a cultural sphere already sensibilised to sociology and sociological issues that the CAS articulated and promoted its own vision. For the collective, sociological art moved away from the large-scale structures embodied by the state, its cultural policies and institutions to focus on communities and milieus (neighborhoods, circumscribed social groups, etc.). Hence the collective’s interest in field action and documentation through new media, photography and film. If such endeavor resonated with the numerous examples of documentary work carried out at that time in the sphere of social and political activism, the interventions carried out by the CAS however were not necessarily connected with the urgency of social demands and concrete struggles, but rather with the way communities and social groups constructed and transmitted their identity.<sup>70</sup>

Since its first manifesto, the CAS clearly exposed its pedagogical aim:

The art collective uses the methods of animation, investigation and pedagogy. At the same time as it puts art in relation to its sociological context, it draws attention to the channels of communication and diffusion, a new theme in the history of art, and which also implies a new practice.<sup>71</sup>

Among the CAS members, Hervé Fischer made his central interest for pedagogical actions explicit and this position led him to foster different types of participation and interaction with an audience that was, also, not necessarily familiar with

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<sup>69</sup> Pierre Gaudibert, “Dalla contestazione alla dissidenza”, in *La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale*, exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia/Marsilio Editori, 1977), 22. We will come back to Gaudibert’s text in Chapter six, dedicated to the Venice Biennale del Dissenso.

<sup>70</sup> Among the groups that documented specific collectives in France, the Medvedkine group realised social audiovisual experiences with workers between 1967 and 1974; Vidéo Out created in the 1970s by Carole Roussopoulos and Paul Roussopoulos collected testimonies from marginalized citizens, and the feminist collective Les Muses s’amuse (later Les Insoumuses) whose main members were Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig and Ioana Wieder operated in the field of feminist activism. Marion Froger, “De la fraternité. À propos des groupes Medvedkine”, *Cinémas* Volume 17, no. 1, Autumn 2006, 118-143; *Musas insumisas: Delphine Seyrig y los colectivos de vídeo feminista en Francia en los 70 y 80*, exh. cat. (Madrid : Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2019).

<sup>71</sup> Fischer, Forest and Thénot, “Sociological art group”, 5.

contemporary art.<sup>72</sup> Public performances, like for example *Pharmacie Fischer* (1974-1977), reflected his will to intervene in what he referred to as “the real world” and explore the social imaginary of specific places. The performance consisted in a travelling pharmacist’s desk activated in differed locations, where the artist distributed pills–placebos–to the public. The action established a special relationship between Fischer as a pharmacist and the participants, who felt gradually encouraged to ask a cure for all sorts of troubles and desires. By altering a pharmacological device such as pills, increasingly used to “solve” psychological disorders of all sorts, the work also referred to the pathologisation of madness and its treatment by medicine in a critical way that recalled the concerns of the anti-psychiatry movement, which had emerged in the 1960s.<sup>73</sup> For Fischer, these actions were “no longer related to aestheticism but [were] embedded in the issue of communication as a responsible and critical exchange.”<sup>74</sup> While these performances took place in cities like Milan, Sao Paulo, Perpignan or Calgary, they were not limited to capitals and urban centres but also travelled to smaller towns and villages, showing the artist’s intention to decentralise his practice and reach populations who were less familiar with contemporary art.

On the other hand, Jan Świdziński and the artists connected with contextual art did not directly refer to their practice as “pedagogical” or “educational”. However, they wanted to incite people to ask themselves about the meaning of the codes through which reality was perceived and, by doing so, start questioning the models of understanding it. Such process, Świdziński insisted, could only occur within a relatively small circle, insofar as

[...] an artist cannot by any means influence people whom he doesn’t meet, with whom he doesn’t have any contact. What he can do is influence people around him,

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<sup>72</sup> “Signification de l’art sociologique” (1974), Fonds Hervé Fischer, Bibliothèque Kandinsky/MNAM, Paris. Reproduced in Duplaix, ed., *Hervé Fischer et l’art sociologique*, 60.

<sup>73</sup> On anti-psychiatry, see the section 3.1. in Chapter six.

<sup>74</sup> “Ces expériences nouvelles n’ont plus rien à voir avec l’esthétisme mais s’inscrivent dans la problématique de la communication comme échange responsable et critique.” Fischer, *Théorie de l’Art Sociologique*, 129.

the people who are meeting him, and then in the process those people can influence other people, and that's why certain ideas are thrown about among large groups.<sup>75</sup>

Sharing and discussing with close interlocutors was constitutive of the hoped-for transformation. Contextual art, even when focused on theoretical issues, had to be based on collective and participatory forms rather than on an isolated and individualistic research. At the same time, no previous knowledge of art or cultural theory was required to the audience: contextual art was not elitist or reserved for the sphere of the initiated into contemporary art, but had on the contrary the ambition to be accessible to all in the form of situations that would encourage the audience to reflect on its own reality and “abolish old codes and canons”.<sup>76</sup>

The notion of “local activities” is essential to understand the pedagogical dimension of contextual practices and their reluctance to any kind of generic and universal model. Pedagogical practices are, by essence, specifically-oriented and operate on a small scale. We can consider contextual art as pedagogical, in the sense that it established a dialogue (the conditions of which are set beforehand by the artist) and a series of elements that acted as catalysts (whether they be questions, situations, choices to be made, invitations to give an account of a phenomenon close to the public and to compare it with others) in order to lead their interlocutor to reflect on his or her own position and understanding of reality not as an abstract concept but as a specific experience.

The Collectif d'Art Sociologique and its members were strongly committed to carrying out the theoretical work of defining their own position and ideas. In fact, while art critics and theoreticians like Vilém Flusser, Edgar Morin or Pierre Restany were close to the collective and produced critical texts about its activities, its members did not delegate in any way the writing of manifestos and programmatic

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<sup>75</sup> Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art*, 125.

<sup>76</sup> Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art*, 125.

texts.<sup>77</sup> Some collaborations could even end up in conflict, like in the case of the CAS' relationship with the art critic Bernard Teyssède, whose personal position on sociological art led Fischer, Forest and Thénot to ostentatiously break with him with a telegram, in February 1975.<sup>78</sup>

Early on, the CAS adopted a conscious position of self-historisation: only half a year after the formulation of the collective's existence, its first solo exhibition at the Palais Galliera in Paris documented carefully its trajectory and that of its members.<sup>79</sup> In addition to the two manifestos so far published by the group, the catalogue included a chronology of each member's sociological practice, as well as an anthology of texts or extracts of texts in which the notion of "sociological art" was addressed by the members of the CAS themselves and critics like François Pluchart, Edgar Morin, Otto Hahn, Willem Flusser and Pierre Restany. For the CAS, financial and intellectual independence were two essential—and complementary—conditions to remain free from the economic and symbolic structures of power:

The artist now has to leave the poet's tower and if he wants to transform society, he has to live there. Contrary to what Picasso said, the artist must have a second

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<sup>77</sup> After the first manifesto in October 1974, the "Manifeste 2 de l'art sociologique" from May 1975 was published in the catalogue of their first solo exhibition at Palais Galliera, *Collectif Art Sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique: Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, Jean-Paul Thénot*, exh. cat., Paris : Musée Galliera, 1975, 6 ; the "Manifeste no 3 de l'art sociologique: méthodologie et stratégie" was published in the catalogue of the Venice Biennale in 1976, to which the collective participated on the invitation of Pierre Restany; the "Manifeste no 4 de l'art sociologique: art et économie" was issued in February 1977. All the manifestos are reproduced in Fischer, *Théorie de l'Art Sociologique*.

<sup>78</sup> The telegram was sent in February 1975. The CAS and Bernard Teyssède started collaborating in October 1974 and in December, Teyssède organised the exhibition "L'art contre l'idéologie" at the Galerie Rencontres in Paris (10 December 1974 to 4 January 1975), with Jean-François Bory, the CAS, the Grupo Rosario, Guerrilla Action Group, Hans Haacke, Michel Journiac, Maccheroni, Serge Oldenburg, Joan Rabascall, Sosno, as well as Teyssède himself and the art critic Louis Chavignier. On this occasion, Teyssède published a manifesto in which he gave his own definition of sociological art as a practice aiming at "telling the truth about art". This certainly prompted Fischer, Forest and Thénot to publish their manifesto in *Le Monde*. Pilar Parcerisas, *Conceptualismo(s) poéticos, políticos y periféricos. En torno al arte conceptual en España, 1964-1980* (Madrid: Akal, 2007), 450; Pilar Parcerisas, "Ensayo crítico al capital como espectáculo", in *Rabascall. Producción 1964-1982*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: MACBA, 2009), 176.

<sup>79</sup> *Collectif Art Sociologique: théorie, pratique, critique: Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, Jean-Paul Thénot*, 9-13. The exhibition took place from June to August 1975.



profession. This is the price of his independence, and no doubt the experience necessary to envisage a sociological practice.<sup>80</sup>

The collective affirmed its total independence from art criticism, refusing to integrate an “artistic lumpenproletariat” on which art critics could speculate. Such attention to self-definition and self-historicization was also present in the work of Jan Świdziński, whose writings and presentations often recreated a genealogy of contextual art and signaled the different stages of its theoretical and artistic development.<sup>81</sup>

In the context of a study of transnational exchanges and circulations during the Cold War period, it is important to examine the specific taxonomies used to refer to practices that fostered art’s inscription in a concrete social environment and its reality.<sup>82</sup> The terms favoured by artists from different places and backgrounds were indeed far from being insignificant and tell a lot on their own position and relation to the context in which they were developing their work. Recalling his experience and that of the CAS in Poland and Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, Hervé Fischer was well aware that “the concept of “sociological” art did not inspire the artists who suffered the communist dictatorship and aspired rather to an art rebellious to the society, individualistic, transgressive.” While the CAS “had shown sociological art’s attitude of critical questioning in relation to institutions and social operating systems”, the

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<sup>80</sup> “[...] il faut aujourd'hui que l'artiste quitte la tour d'ivoire du poète et s'il veut transformer la société, il faut qu'il y vive. Contrairement à ce que disait Picasso, il faut que l'artiste ait un second métier. C'est le prix de son indépendance, et sans doute une expérience nécessaire pour envisager une pratique sociologique.” Fischer, Hervé, Forest, Fred and Thénot, Jean-Paul, “Mise au point du Collectif d'Art Sociologique”, in *Une expérience socio-écologique: photo-film-video: Neuenkirchen '75* (S.l.: Office franco-allemand pour la jeunesse, 1975), unpaginated. To be economically independent, artists had to work to be able to support themselves. The subject of their mode of subsistence, evidently connected with the issue of social class, still remains little discussed in art historical studies. Class and the origin of financial resources were determining factors for the development of artists’ activity and for their international mobility.

<sup>81</sup> See for example Jan Świdziński, “Calendarium of contextual art”, in *Materials from the Conference of Contextual Art* (Lublin: Arcus Gallery, June 1977), 81-85. Available at <https://artmuseum.pl/en/archiwum/druki-artystyczne-galerii-wymiany/2933/130155> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>82</sup> The project “To Each his Own Reality” has brought an essential contribution in this field, addressing different understandings and interpretations of the notion of reality in Poland, the two Germanies and France between 1960 and 1989, <https://dfk-paris.org/en/ownreality> (Accessed May 2020). Jan Świdziński’s approach to this notion through the contextual lens is mentioned in Arnoux, *La réalité en partage: Pour une histoire des relations artistiques entre l'Est et l'Ouest en Europe pendant la guerre froide*, online edition, Chapter two, paragraph 28. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsmsmsh.17034>.

artists who were close to contextual art and Świdziński himself had a different understanding of what could “sociological” mean in a socialist society.<sup>83</sup>

Fischer’s remark and belief that individualism and transgression were the only alternatives to officially imposed collectivism in a socialist context points at the possible limits of a dialogue on art as a means of intervention in the social fabric between creators from radically distinct political and social systems. The situation in France in the 1970s was that of a gradual return to order after the events of 1968 and as such, it was marked by the weight of the absorption and institutionalisation of social protests by a system in which technocratic decisions played a primary role. Under such circumstances, the state and its institutions generated mistrust and artists like the members of the CAS considered that only grassroots communitarian and pedagogical practices could destabilise or at least question their authority. At the same time, the desire for decentralisation expressed in the state’s territorial policies was reflected in an alternative way by the actions of the CAS through its introduction in a wide variety of communities who were unfamiliar with contemporary art.

On the other hand, Świdziński and the Polish contextual artists were grappling with a social and political reality that already implied a condition of duality or dissociation: the consciousness of living within an authoritarian and undemocratic system that invoked a Marxist-Leninist doctrine part of the citizens continued to consider as an instrument of social progress and equality, while being at the same time aware that its application by “real existing socialism” produced a highly unequal and repressive system. The awareness of this disjunction provoked a need to return to what was more tangible and operate on a smaller, more human scale of proximity. In this environment, the idea of context opened up the possibility of targeted actions in the social field without having to deal, at least in a direct manner, with “macro” issues raised by the misapplication of the doctrine in socialist systems.

Regarding the development of sociological studies in socialist Europe between 1945 and 1989, Sveta Koleva has observed that “sociological practice went on in the

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<sup>83</sup> “[...] nous avons bien noté que le concept d’art “sociologique” n’enthousiasmait guère les artistes qui subissaient la dictature communiste et aspiraient plutôt à un art rebelle à la société, individualiste, transgressif, même si nous avons d’entrée de jeu montré une attitude interrogative critique de l’art sociologique par rapport aux institutions et aux fonctionnements sociaux.” Hervé Fischer, “Pour un art anticontextuel”, *Inter*, n°93, Spring 2006, 15.

context of the syncretism of the epistemological, political, and ideological normativity of institutionalized Marxism-Leninism.”<sup>84</sup> This is probably one of the reasons why, seen from an external perspective like the artistic realm, the use of an overtly sociological methodology or terminology met with some reticence because of its too obvious connection with the sphere of power and the political system in place. More than “contextual”, the emphasis on the “sociological” would have strongly conditioned the reception and perception of their artistic work by local audiences—who would have associated it with official discourse—and, also, by the socialist authorities. From this perspective, the terms context and contextual were more neutral and inclusive.

## 2.2 Sociological Art in Warsaw

In May 1975, the members of the CAS participated in the exhibition “Video and Sociological Art” organised by the artist Tomek Kawiak at the Galeria Współczesna in Warsaw. [Fig. 2.11] Kawiak, who was born in Lublin and had lived between Warsaw and his city of origin, emigrated to France in 1970. He was an important intermediary between the Polish art scene and artists connected to sociological art in France.<sup>85</sup> Earlier the same year, he had also organised “The Forms of Artistic Activity” (“Formy Aktywności Artystycznej”) in collaboration with Zdzisław Sosnowski (artist and director of the Galeria Współczesna), with the participation of several artists, including Hervé Fischer.<sup>86</sup> [Fig. 2.12]

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<sup>84</sup> Sveta Koleva, “Doing Post-Western sociology in Central and Eastern Europe before and after the Great Change: some epistemological questions”, *Journal of Chinese Sociology* Vol. 7, no. 20, 2020, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-020-00133-8> (Accessed May 2020). Interestingly enough, beyond this situation that implied that autonomy was impossible for sociological research in Central and Eastern Europe, Koleva sustains that under “Marxist monoparadigmality”, the discipline was characterized by “methodological rigor” and “conceptual inventiveness”. This facts, however, did not influence the way sociological inquiries were perceived in the art sphere.

<sup>85</sup> Participants to “Video and Sociological Art” were Bernard Teyssède, Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, Jean Paul Thénot, Joan Rabascall, Lea Lublin, Gerald Minkoff, Roland Baladi, Jean Pierre Bertrand, Antoni Muntadas, Tomek Kawiak, Jean Roualdès, Sosno, Muriel Olesen, Jochen Gerz, Marc Masse, Nil Yalter, the CAYC, Grupa CAP, Luca Patella and Jonier Marin. A significant number had previously collaborated with the CAS or participated in one of its three “Art Sociologique” exhibitions.

<sup>86</sup> The exhibition took place from 12 February to 12 March 1975 and brought together works by Borgeaud, Clareboudt, Pineau, Da Rocha, Groh, Hubert, Kawiak, Marin and Fischer. Exchanges with Zdzisław Sosnowski (then director of Współczesna) are documented in the Fonds Hervé Fischer, Bibliothèque Kandinsky/MNAM, Paris.

In occasion of “Video and Sociological Art”, the Galeria Współczesna published a special issue of its magazine *Współczesna*. It including a text in three languages (Polish, English and French) written for the occasion by the philosopher Vilém Flusser, as well as documentation of artists works that ranged from videos and films to documented actions.<sup>87</sup> While artists like Joan Rabascall or Roland Baladi explored video’s technical and formal possibilities, others like Tomek Kawiak or Fred Forest used the media’s communicational properties to articulate a sociological reflexion on reality. The video and photo camera appeared as a privileged instrument to record artistic inquiries and open new fields of action. Fred Forest’s two pieces documented in the magazine *Współczesna* (actually, the exhibition’s catalogue) were a good example of how video could be used to highlight social dynamics. They resulted from his interest in addressing gesture and behaviour as modes of inscription of “human signs” written in space and time. Forest’s videos relied on the participation of unknown passersby (in *Band 1. The photograph’s gesture (Bande 1. Le geste du photographe)* (1974), he registered an action realised in Montpellier) or small isolated groups (*Band 2. Gestures, postures, mimics in the discussion (Bande 2. Gestes, postures, mimiques dans la discussion)* (1973)) whose gestures were registered and analysed. “Gestures”, Forest explained, were “a valuable way of mechanical intervention in reality” and also a crucial form of non-verbal language and communication.<sup>88</sup> Such interest for documenting non verbal forms of social interaction recalls Anna Kutera’s performance *Presentation* (1975) and its focus on the language of bodies, with the difference that the anonymous and spontaneous gestures documented by Forest were not inscribed in the context of an artistic action.

As was often the case, the works reproduced in *Współczesna* differed from those actually exhibited in the gallery. Many artists who traveled to Warsaw decided in fact to realise works directly related with the local context. Forest had the intention to

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<sup>87</sup> *Galeria Współczesna, nr 5, 03.05.1975, “VIDEO”* (Warsaw: Klub Międzynarodowej Książki i Prasy, 1975), unpaginated. Available on <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/druki-artystyczne-galerii-wymiany/2936/130122> (Accessed August 2020).

<sup>88</sup> “The video work presents the artist’s new search for gesture and behaviour. Gesture in profession, work and social relations. A daily gesture. Human signs are written in space and time. Gestures as a valuable way of mechanical intervention in reality, but also as a language without words, are above all a way of communication.” (author’s translated from the original Polish) Fred Forest, in *Galeria Współczesna, nr 5, 03.05.1975, “VIDEO”*, unpaginated.

record scenes and images from the streets with his Portapak—the most famous portable camera at that time, commercialized by Sony—, a still unusual device at that time in Poland, which use was strictly controlled by the authorities. The artist’s intention to approach the sociological reality of the city and exchange with the population was frustrated by the fact that he and his foreign colleagues were constantly accompanied by an official, who prevented any spontaneous encounter or conversation to happen. Confronted with his inability to produce a video in Warsaw, Forest eventually opted for carrying out an action that involved inexistent images. Standing next to a monitor covered with a white sheet that let the light of the flickering screen show through, the artist introduced his action by saying a few words about the ambiguous relationship between fiction and reality that was produced in this particular political context. He then started to narrate himself “the images, which visualisation is forbidden in Warsaw in 1975!”, using in his own words to describe what only appeared as a spectral manifestation on the screen.<sup>89</sup> His intervention illuminated the constructed and fragile character of the correspondence between words and images, verbal and visual language, and the fact that the possibility of communication was highly contingent and relied on external sociopolitical factors.<sup>90</sup>

Also evoked in the catalogue of “Video and Sociological Art” was the artistic campaign *Hygiène de l’art (Hygiene of Art)* launched by Hervé Fischer in 1971, before he integrated the CAS. *Hygiène de l’art* was conceived as a great clean-up of the habits and conceptions inherited from a consecrated culture (“culture consacrée”), often connected to the socio-cultural prohibition to touch, to break, to mutilate art. Fischer was not trained as an artist but had learnt to draw and paint attending weekly classes given by a painter in the suburbs where he grew up. “At a given moment, I realized that my painting and drawing were commonplaces, i.e., that, in keeping with what I knew about art or from my museum visits, I was, in turn, trying to imitate

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<sup>89</sup> Fred Forest, *Un Pionnier de l’art vidéo à l’art sur internet: art sociologique, esthétique de la communication et art de la commutation* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004), 109.

<sup>90</sup> Villém Flusser observed in the catalogue that “Forest may believe that he is making a research of a street, while he is provoking people to free themselves from street domination and alienation.” Willém Flusser, “Reflexions of an exhibition vidéo to be held at Galeria Współczesna RSW Warsaw”, in *Galeria Współczesna, nr 5, 03.05.1975, “VIDEO”*, unpaginated.

models.”<sup>91</sup> One of the first works resulting from this idea and already identified as sociological art consisted in a hand towel roll—at that time a common object in public places such as cafés—on which the artist applied his handprints, later declined in silk-screen printing on plastic—a “hygienic” material par excellence. Pursuing his inquiry on art’s sociological, political and commercial function, Fischer produced different propositions that altered a given condition or situation, one of them consisting in wrapping himself in plastic in the manner of a consumer item in a public place—*The ultimate use of vinyl chloride, Place Bourdelle, Montauban* (*L’usage ultime du chlorure de vinyle, Place Bourdelle, Montauban*) (1972). After these preliminary works, he launched in 1973 the participatory piece *The tearing-up of art works* (*La déchirure des oeuvres d’art*) (1973) through a campaign diffused by mail:

Hervé Fischer will tear up and send back free of charge all works of art and reproductions of works to the artists who will accept to send them to him, with fragments of his old personal paintings, all packed in a hygienic plastic bag to be thrown away. This action is part of the 1972 PROPHYLACTIC CAMPAIGN pursued by Hervé Fischer.<sup>92</sup>

The artist placed the remnants he received in plastic sleeves and exhibited them as different specimens or relics of a defunct artistic practice. [Fig. 2.13] While it is tempting to relate Fischer’s action of tearing artworks with an iconoclast avant-garde of destruction and questioning of artistic authorities, ranging from Rauschenberg and his *Erased De Kooning* (1953) to the affichistes, the socialisation of this destruction through a collective action and the use of a hygienic device—the plastic sleeves—that depersonalised and anonymised the contributors placed his project on a different register.<sup>93</sup> Instead of a radical action inscribed in the field of formalist experiments,

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<sup>91</sup> “Interview Hervé Fischer par/with Sophie Duplaix”, in Sophie Duplaix, ed., *Hervé Fischer et l’art sociologique/and sociological art*, exh. cat. (Paris: MNAM/Manuela Editions, 2017), 10.

<sup>92</sup> “Hervé Fischer déchirera et renverra gratuitement toutes les oeuvres d’art et reproductions d’oeuvres aux artistes qui voudront bien lui en envoyer, en y joignant des debris de ses anciennes peintures personnelles, le tout conditionné sous sachet plastique hygiénique à jeter. Cette action se situe dans le cadre de la CAMPAGNE PROPHYLACTIQUE 1972 que poursuit Hervé Fischer”. *Campagne prophylactique Hygiène de l’art: la déchirure* (*Prophylactic Campaign, Hygiene of Art: Tearing*), flyer, Fonds Hervé Fischer, Bibliothèque Kandinsky/MNAM, Paris.

<sup>93</sup> *La déchirure des oeuvres d’art* is now conserved at the Musée National d’Art Moderne (MNAM/ Centre Pompidou) in Paris and includes 339 objects.

Fischer considered tearing as a fundamentally anaesthetic action with an important pedagogical aim. This pedagogical aim was reached through the exposition of the ripped artworks, which, according to the artist, testified “to the awareness of the mystificatory nature of art, recognised by the artists themselves.<sup>94</sup>”

By turning other artists into active participants in his campaign and inviting them to reflect on their relationship with creation and the art system in which they operated, Fischer was focusing on the particular social environment of the artistic community, which was, in this case, both the recipient and the actor of his proposal. This circumscription of a precise social field for carrying out an action recalls, once again, Anna Kutera’s above mentioned performance *Presentation* (1975) in Gdansk, addressed to a restricted circle of art students and professionals. Challenging the idea of an experimental practice disconnected from its socio-political context, Fischer and Kutera’s works emphasised the capacity of artistic experiences to operate pedagogically in a localised social fabric, in close collaboration with its audience.

Although Jan Świdziński did not participate in “Video and Sociological Art” at the Galeria Współczesna, he was met by several participants while in Warsaw. The Spanish artist Antoni Muntadas, present in Warsaw for the exhibition, recalled having thwarted the official surveillance imposed to foreign artists during their stay in Poland and met Świdziński.<sup>95</sup> From his perspective of artist who had settled in New York in the early 1970s, the Polish art scene seemed divided between what he considered the avant-garde scene par excellence, embodied by the the Foksal Gallery, and other alternative or, in his words, “amateur” practices carried out by artists such as Świdziński or the circle around the Galeria Współczesna. If we go further in the analysis of Muntadas’ words, the ability of artists to expatriate seemed to be a determining factor in the constitution of a “serious” professional career—indeed, he cited the Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, he got acquainted with while living in

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<sup>94</sup> “L’ensemble témoigne de la prise de conscience du caractère mystificateur de l’art, reconnu par les artistes eux-mêmes.” Hervé Fischer, “La Déchirure comme pédagogie”, *L’Humidité*, no. 21, February 1974.

<sup>95</sup> Antoni Muntadas settled in New York 1971. These comments were collected during a conversation with Muntadas at the Arxiu Muntadas, 19 June 2020 in Barcelona. I am very grateful to the artist for sharing his thoughts and to Pablo Santa Olalla for facilitating this meeting.

New York, as an example of an artist who was “serious” if compared to others who, for one reason or another, did not take the opportunity of leaving to develop their career. Muntadas’ comments are particularly revealing of the strong international outreach and reputation of the Foksal Gallery and its artists abroad, as the representatives of Poland’s radical artistic avant-garde. On the other hand, they point at his differentiated approach on artists who entered art’s international circuit and developed an institutional and commercial career, and those who stayed on the margins of the system and who, in the eyes of the structures of promotion and diffusion of contemporary art, remained forever “amateurs”.

Hervé Fischer and Jan Świdziński first met in 1974, on the occasion of an exhibition organised by the Galeria Labirynt in Lublin to which Fischer participated. They already felt they had much in common.<sup>96</sup> In an undated letter probably written in the summer 1975, Świdziński regretted not having been able to meet Fischer in Italy and added: “It would be very important to discuss some questions about the recent situation of art. However, I hope to meet you—maybe—in Canada in October.”<sup>97</sup> **[Fig. 2.14]** Interestingly, the letter’s post scriptum referred to a possible exhibition by Świdziński in Argentina: “If you meet [Jorge] Glusberg ask him if he is still interested in my visit to Argentina. In this case he is to send me new invitation, and after receiving it I have to wait four months for visa.” Świdziński showed a lot of interest in meeting the co-founder of the CAYC, a “missing link” in the transnational alliance he may have had already in mind. Glusberg’s engagement in favour of a specific Latin America approach to art resonated with the way Świdziński and his colleagues envisioned their own position in relation to the world art scene—the idea of “local activity” present in contextual theory could be discussed in fact in relation to that of

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<sup>96</sup> Fischer’s work “Document, Film, Contact” by Fischer was included in this exhibition, according to Markovska, “Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland”, 230.

<sup>97</sup> Jan Świdziński to Hervé Fischer, undated letter, Fonds Hervé Fischer, Bibliothèque Kandinsky/MNAM, Paris. The encounter in Italy mentioned by Świdziński was probably the Third International Open Encounter on Video organised by the CAYC in Ferrara, in May 1975. Fischer’s archive also holds a letter from Świdziński dating from 1 July 1977, thanking the artist and his wife for accommodating him during his stay in Paris (probably on the occasion of the seminar at the École Sociologique Interrogative).



“critical regionalism” diffused by the CAYC.<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, if Świdziński wanted to make his own work and theories visible out of the Euro-American axis, Glusberg and the CAYC were certainly the best intermediaries to disseminate them in Argentina and Latin America—an opportunity his colleagues from France and Canada already had.<sup>99</sup> Świdziński eventually never managed to exhibit in Argentina, but his desired encounter with Glusberg took place in Poland during the conference “Art as an activity in the context of reality” in July 1977, leading to the Argentinean’s brief inclusion in the transnational alliance set by Świdziński, the Polish contextual artists, the CAS and the CEAC.

### **2.3 The Paris seminar and the formulation of the Third Front (May 1977)**

The idea of a common front uniting artists and cultural practitioners formulated in Toronto became reality in Paris, in the context of the international seminar “Art and Social Transformation” (“Art et transformation sociale”) held from 10 to 13 May 1977. The event, organised by the Collectif d’Art Sociologique, was announced as “an encounter between artists and theoreticians from different countries, who are engaged today, through their practice as well as their theoretical research, in a process that binds art to social transformation.”<sup>100</sup> It took place at the École Sociologique Interrogative (Interrogative Sociological School, ESI), a self-managed space created in 1976 by the collective in the basement of Hervé Fischer’s house and aimed at

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<sup>98</sup> CAYC’s approach on Latin American art was diffused through the itinerant exhibitions “Towards a Latin American profile of art” (“Hacia un perfil del arte Latinoamericano”), from 1972 on. The theory produced around these exhibitions are exposed in detail in Chapter four. See also María José Herrera and Mariana Marchesi, eds., *Arte de sistemas: el CAYC y el proyecto de un nuevo arte regional 1969-1977*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Fundación OSDE, 2013); Karatzyna Cytlak, “Hacia el arte latinoamericano globalizado. La auto-invencción del CAYC—Centro de Arte y Comunicación—desde la perspectiva transmoderna y transregional”, in Paula Barreiro López and Juliane Debeusscher, eds., *Revista de Estudios Globales y Arte Contemporáneo* vol. 5, no. 1, 2017-18, 53-85.

<sup>99</sup> We have seen that Amerigo Marras participated in CAYC’s Fourth International Open Encounter of video art in Buenos Aires in 1975; Fred Forest was involved in this event. The CAS also exhibited and its member did various performances at the CAYC in July 1975. Previously, Hervé Fischer had also been in contact with Argentinian artists like Carlos Ginzburg, Juan Carlos Romero, Edgardo Antonio Vigo and Horacio Zabala for his book *Art et Communication Marginale* (1974).

<sup>100</sup> “Le Collectif d’Art Sociologique organise, du 10 au 13 mai, à l’École Sociologique Interrogative, une rencontre entre des artistes et des théoriciens qui, dans différents pays, sont engagés aujourd’hui, tant par leur pratique que par leurs recherches théoriques, dans une démarche qui lie l’art à la transformation sociale.” “Collectif d’Art Sociologique”, *Info Artitudes*, n°18, May 1977, 14.

hosting meetings, seminars and debates.<sup>101</sup> [Fig. 2.15 and 2.16] Besides the three CAS members, the seminar “Art et transformation sociale” included participants from Poland (Jan Świdziński and Emil Cieślak), Canada (Amerigo Marras, Suber Corley, Bruce Eves and Diane Boadway from CEAC, as well as Canadian artists Paul Woodrow and Brian Dyson), Great Britain (Lorraine Leeson and Peter Dunn) and the Netherlands (Franck Gribling). This small group of creators, cultural workers and curators shared the same interest for artistic practices developed in relation to a specific environment and space of reception—in Świdziński’s words, “local activities more loosely connected with actual social progress.”<sup>102</sup>

During the seminar, participants shared their projects and reflections, some with a particular emphasis on theory and others on practice. Fischer, Forest and Thénot read the texts and manifests on sociological art they had released since 1974; Świdziński delivered a lecture on art’s ideological conditioning that pointed at the hegemonic enforcement of the capitalist art world upon individual artists. The artist and theoretician stressed his refusal of an art system in which the social model proposed would differ from the world in which he lived, considering the acceptance of such model a form of “provincialism”.<sup>103</sup> Among the practice-based pieces discussed in the context of the seminar was the project in progress *The Present Day Creates History* (1976-77) by the British artists Lorraine Leeson and Peter Dunn. The duo was investigating changes in the working, living and environmental conditions of the inhabitants of Ruislip, an industrial suburb of London where Leeson had grown up.<sup>104</sup> The result was a photo-text exhibition imagined as an interactive structure that would allow a critical analysis of the conditions, factors and policies that affected people’s

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<sup>101</sup> The ESI hosted presentations and debates on a large variety of subjects, such as sociological music, self-managed architecture, birth without violence, urban planning, video and communication processes.

<sup>102</sup> Jan Świdziński, *Art, Society and Self-Consciousness*, Alberta: Alberta College of Art Gallery, 1979, 114.

<sup>103</sup> Jan Świdziński, “Paris seminar: statements”, in *Art Communication Edition* n°6, July 1977, 13-14.

<sup>104</sup> This use of photography for social activism was not an isolated case in the United Kingdom at that time. The Hackney Flashers were also active at that time and divulged a feminist and socialist message. See Na’ama Klorman-Eraqi, *The Visual Is Political: Feminist Photography and Countercultural Activity in 1970s Britain* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019); Laia Manonelles Moner, “The Personal Is Political. Who Cares for Babies, The Sick and The Elderly?”, in *Critical Cartography of Art and Visuality in the Global Age II, The Territories of the Contemporary* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 165-177.

lives. [Fig. 2.17 and 2.18] Despite the fact that Leeson was originally from Ruislip and that Dunn and herself had been working with local sources, this attempt to establish “meaningful connection with the local residents [...] somewhat failed to take place”, as she retrospectively observed. She nevertheless considered this work their “first real lesson concerning collective action.”<sup>105</sup> This aspect is worth mentioning because failure, as we have seen in the case of Świdziński in Toronto, was a recurrent issue in the practice of most of the artists involved in contextual and sociological practices, accepted as part of the process of adapting to a changing context and as a source for individual and collective learning.

Questioned about her own experience in the Paris seminar, Leeson recalled that Peter Dunn and her were a bit disappointed since they felt that the other participants’ projects were “staged”, in contrast with their own engagement with social practice.<sup>106</sup> This testimony accounts for the heterogeneity of the conception and use of art as an element of social transformation by the participants to the seminar. As other British artists working at that time with communities and the public, Leeson and Dunn were taking the social impact of their work very seriously—at the same time, they did not consider themselves activists, Leeson insisted—and they were surprised about the insistence of the other participants in the Paris seminar in circumscribing theoretically their practice and not presenting concrete outcomes.<sup>107</sup>

Another concrete work was presented by Emil Cieślar who was at that time, along with his wife Elżbieta Cieślar, in charge of the Repassage Gallery in Warsaw, one of the most important spaces for the development and exhibition of new artistic experiences at that time. Cieślar’s presence at the seminar, however, was not due to Jan Świdziński but to his friendship with Hervé Fischer and the CAS. The Cieślars

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<sup>105</sup> Comment retrieved from Loraine Leeson’s personal website, <http://cspace.org.uk/category/archive/the-present-day-creates-history/> (Accessed June 2020)

<sup>106</sup> “I remember, Hervé Fischer, he had this project where he would be at the market and giving pills... Well, that sort of thing is what a lot of people does now, called social practice. But actually, it is not what we did. Because as I said, when we tried doing things as artists, we discovered that this was very effective. So we were a bit disappointed to find out that they were still staging a lot of the art practice, as art.” Interview with Loraine Leeson from the author, 27 June 2019.

<sup>107</sup> Curated by Richard Cork (then editor of *Studio International*) at the Serpentine Gallery in London, in April-May 1978, the exhibition “Art for Whom” provided an overview of artistic experiments in Great Britain focused the idea of community and group and the role of art as a vector of social experience. It included Leeson and Dunn’s work, among others.

had been considering leaving Poland since 1976 and Emil Cieślars traveled several times to Western Europe to look for working opportunities and contacts in order to prepare his family's arrival.<sup>108</sup> His presentation in the seminar focused on the project *A Carousel of Attitudes (Karuzela Postaw)* (1975-76) developed by Elżbieta Cieślars and himself. The Carousel was conceived as a game aimed at defining the attitudes and values endorsed by contemporary and avant-garde artists in relation to their creation. Artists were invited to situate themselves and their art on a board divided in six areas, thus performing the interpretation and self-definition of their own practice. **[Fig. 2.19]** Each area corresponded with a specific attitude or form of envisioning art: A. Art as art, B. Art as function, C. Art as artwork, D. Art as a money issue, E. Art as fetish, F. Art as Utopia. Artists' attitudes could be inscribed in one or more areas, thus allowing a significant range of modulations and variations between the six poles, while creating zones of shared artistic visions. After the *Carousel's* first presentation at the Galerie Repassage in August 1975, the XIth Congress of the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art (AICA) held the same year in Warsaw led the Cieślars to formulate other questions related to the values endorsed by art criticism in its judgement and transpose the *Carousel* into a three-dimensional volume. For the couple, the piece was closely connected to the notion of freedom, contemplated as "an expression of individual choices in the hierarchy of values."<sup>109</sup> In the context of the Paris seminar, the Cieślars' project proposed a model of self-awareness and responsibility in relation to artistic activities in a determined social and political context. In self-defining themselves, the artists took a personal decision but they also decided if providing a sincere, a strategic or a deliberately blurred image of themselves. The *Carousel* thus raised the question of the strategic use of self-

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<sup>108</sup> The reason for which the Cieślars decided to emigrate is that both lost their jobs in public institutions in 1976 and were blacklisted (they could not work for the state anymore). Hervé Fischer hosted Emil Cieślars several times during this period of research of opportunities and in 1978, when the Cieślars definitely emigrated to France, they lived at Fischer's home for half a year. I thank very much Elżbieta Cieślars for providing these details. Email from Elżbieta Cieślars to the author, 25 June 2020.

<sup>109</sup> The three-dimensional volume (an octahedron) of the *Carousel* included three internal diagonals that symbolised three modalities of knowledge: reason (A-D), intuition (B-E) and meaning (C-F). This information relies on my exchange of emails with Elżbieta Cieślars in June 2020 and from Emil and Elżbieta Cieślars, text on the Carousel of Attitudes, retrieved from their webpage, <https://artsetmontagnes.com/2018/03/22/carrousel-des-attitudes-1972-1975/> (Accessed June 2020).

definition and the ultimately political dimension of this gesture, especially when it was publicly displayed.

The Parisian seminar was in itself an exercise of self-definition and positioning with regard to art's social function. The diary of the CEAC member Diane Boadway, in which she reported the encounters and exhibitions across Europe in which she participated between May and June 1977, reveals the tone of these exchanges, full of intentional statements melting programmatic injunctions and abstract concepts.<sup>110</sup> **[Fig. 2.20]** It is therefore not surprising that the four-days event concluded with the elaboration a joint manifesto. Titled “Third Front”, it introduced “the one strategy to offset the “capitalist division of labour” in the art market”, starting with the following points:

1. We propose to develop a socially based practice through which artists can provide a critical contribution in a social transformation towards an “autogestive” power base.
2. We affirm that cultural activity can have a dynamic interrogative role in ideological transformation which stands in dialectic relations to the power base. This is in opposition to the cultural hegemony reflected in the international art market which appropriates art as a commodity to bolster capitalist ideology.
3. We accept that there might be intellectual and cultural differences within the group which create contextual perspectives upon these essential aims but maintain that the aims themselves are fundamental.<sup>111</sup> **[Fig. 2.21]**

The statement emphasised its authors' willingness to contribute critically to the struggle against the hegemony of capitalism in the international art world, especially in the New York scene. For them, the constitution of an “autogestive power base” could be achieved only through a liberation from economic, institutional and state control. While self-managed and independent collective initiatives were not an exception at that time in the art sphere—starting with international networks constituted around mail art practices—, what made the Third Front special is the

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<sup>110</sup> Boadway, Diane, *Journal by Diane Boadway*, 1977. <http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=15154> (Accessed August 2020).

<sup>111</sup> “Third Front common statement”, *Art Communication Edition*, n°6, July 1977, 14.

articulation of a concrete theoretical and practical program and its adoption by actors from both sides of the Iron Curtain. In fact, the Third Front presented itself from the beginning as a heterogeneous group and its manifesto signaled that the diverse origins of its authors would allow different “contextual perspectives” to flourish alongside the pursuit of common goals. This intrinsic plurality was seen as an asset, since the sum of individualities in resistance allowed the deployment of a wider and more diversified front.

The name agreed upon for designating this gathering of forces of multiple origins was certainly not incidental. “Front” directly referred to a state of war and the particular site of confrontational encounter between two parties, thus suggesting a belligerent or combative stance that was, in fact, clearly expressed in the statement. In the context of the Cold War, “Third” alluded to a will to escape the blocs division and a nod to the “third way” embodied at that time by the non-aligned movement.<sup>112</sup> The group’s self-designation as “Third Front” reflected the ambition of its members to constitute a non-aligned alternative, not only to the centralised capitalist art system, but also to the distribution of the world between a capitalist and a socialist system of production and diffusion. “Third”, however, also referred to the historical rise of the Third Estate (“Tiers État”), also designated as “the commons”, the most important social group constitutive of society in pre-revolutionary France, whose deputies proclaimed the National Constituent Assembly on 17 June 1789.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> The term “Third World” (in French: “Tiers Monde”) was first used in 1952 by the French demographer and economist Alfred Sauvy (1898-1990) in an article published in the magazine *France-Observateur* to refer to the non-aligned countries. His use of the term “third” referred to the Third Estate (Tiers État) who, during the French Revolution, had opposed the clergy and nobles. The term was then popularized in connection with the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the 1950s and the rise of “third-worldism” as a political doctrine that sustained decolonisation struggles in Africa, Asia and South America. It contributed to highlight the North-South divisions instead of the traditional East-West divide of the Cold War. Immanuel Wallerstein, “C’était quoi, le tiers-monde?”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 2000, 18-19. <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2000/08/WALLERSTEIN/1946> (Accessed August 2020).

<sup>113</sup> The use of the Third Front formulation was anticipated by two events. A few months before the Paris seminar, Jan Świdziński’s personal exhibition at the Recent Art Gallery in Wrocław was titled “Third Context” (“Kontekst trzeci”) (22-27 January 1977). See Markowska, “This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975–1980) at the Pałac Akademicki Culture Centre”, 267. The “Third Front” was also anticipated as “Tiers Front” in the Manifesto n°4 of the CAS titled “Art and the Economy”, written in February 1977. “[...] we are setting up a THIRD FRONT OUTSIDE NEW YORK involving strategies devised and applied outside international market able to give full range to the realisation of our consciousness and identities, without any dependence whatsoever on the funds of the New York banks.” Collectif d’Art Sociologique, “Art and the economy”, reproduced in *Art Communication Edition*, n°6, July 1977, 11-12. Original text in French, “Art et économie”, in Fischer, *Théorie de l’Art Sociologique*, 36-37.

In addition to specifying the ideological position of its members, the constitutive manifesto of the Third Front formulated a program of action based on communication, resistance (to economic dependency) and self-organisation. It proposed to:

- a) Begin an international network of communication for people of like aims.
- b) To oppose the international art market controlled economically from New York.
- c) To coordinate regularly future activities: research, practice, forum, etc.<sup>114</sup>

What motivated artists from such different backgrounds to formulate this common agenda? The manifesto reveals that all its authors perceived themselves as excluded from the mainstream and official artistic narratives, a condition they seemed however to be proud of and wanted to preserve. Whether real or perceived, marginality thus represented a cohesive element for this transnational alliance, which foundations were laid out around the desire to resist and emancipate from the grip of an international art world, the epicenter of which was, for them, New York. In gestation since Toronto and finally born in Paris in 1977, the Third Front can be thus read as an agonistic community raised by artists who felt geographically and economically excluded from the structures of artistic power and thought they needed a collective strategy to challenge them. Hervé Fischer even described it as “a decolonising wink of our European third world”—a third world which conditions, he added, were not defined in terms of economic resources, but rather of symbolic authority:

New York criticized the influence of Paris, already past, while imposing on us the massive bludgeoning of everything that appeared in the USA. Military, economic and cultural imperialism. It is against this omnipresent power in the Parisian art circuits, which exasperated us that we rose up. [...] Canada, too, was overwhelmed by the cannibal influence of New York.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> “Third Front common statement”, 14.

<sup>115</sup> “New York a critiqué l’influence de Paris, déjà passée, tout en nous imposant le matraquage massif de tout ce qui apparaissait aux USA. Impérialisme militaire, économique et culturel. C’est contre cette puissance omniprésente dans les circuits d’art parisien qui nous exaspérait, que nous nous sommes élevés. [...] Le Canada aussi était submergé par le rayonnement cannibale de New York.” Hervé Fischer, email to the author, 5 February 2019 (1).

We may wonder how artists working in a capital like Paris or in a Canadian metropole like Toronto could feel truly excluded from the arts system, and to what extent could their experience be related with that of their colleagues from socialist Poland. Precisely because of these disjoined experiences in reality, the Third Front should be envisaged less as a true movement or collective than as an imagined and desirable realm that crossed the Cold War's divisions and articulated a decentered artistic geography, relying on context-based and socially conscious practices. This imagined space of resistance using English as an indisputable *lingua franca* was, in fact, not deprived of contradictions and frictions.<sup>116</sup>

### **3. “Art as an activity in the context of reality”. The end of the Third Front**

#### **3.1 Kazimierz nad Wisłą. Anna Kutera's feminist contribution to contextual art**

A few weeks after the Paris seminar, the following steps in the activities of the Third Front were two international encounters in Poland. The first one took place in Kazimierz nad Wisłą (Kazimierz on Vistula) from 24 to 26 May 1977 and was organised by the Galeria Arcus from Lublin in collaboration with other four organisations: the Recent Art Gallery from Wrocław, the Galeria Remont from Warsaw, the Galeria Labirynt from Lublin and the Galeria Znak from Białystok. Once again, the aim of the conference, specified by the director of the Galeria Arcus Zbigniew Korzeb, was to discuss the motto “Art as an activity in the context of reality”—a motto that gave its title to the international conference held a few weeks later in Warsaw.<sup>117</sup> The conference in Kazimierz operated then as a sort of preparatory meeting before the larger event in Warsaw, but it also provided an opportunity for rediscussing art as contextual art from a much more local and situated perspective,

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<sup>116</sup> The role of English language in this context was addressed in Serafinowicz, “Broken English: Jan Świdziński and Toronto's Contextual Art Symposium, 1976”, 11-17.

<sup>117</sup> Zbigniew Korzeb, “Information note on the conference”, in *Contextual Art. Materials from the conference of Contextual Art* (Lublin: Arcus Gallery, 1977), 5.



since a large majority of participants were Polish artists, art critics and academics.<sup>118</sup>

[Fig. 2.22] The only foreign participants were, in fact, the members of the CEAC from Toronto (Diane Boadway, Suber Corley, Bruce Eves and Amerigo Marras).<sup>119</sup>

In a way that reminds the Toronto and Paris events, one of the objectives of the encounter in Kazimierz was to “establishing common assumptions which can define activities of not only participants of the conference.”<sup>120</sup> This time again, it resulted in a statement in which the participants exposed their views and proposals of action. Curiously enough, this new text did not mention the Third Front’s existence and articulated another program, which echoed however the Paris manifesto.<sup>121</sup> Since both statements have a lot of similar elements, we will not enter in its details and will focus instead on Anna Kutera’s contribution to the seminar, which broke into the generally abstract and theoretical tone of the event.

Kutera was not able to participate in person in the conference in Kazimierz, she thus sent her contribution in the form of a text that was read by the participants and included in the conference’s publication.<sup>122</sup> Her proposal is important, not only because it was a rare example of concrete contextual production in a theoretically focused event, but also because it articulated a feminist critique informed by the artist’s previous experiences and her exchange with other women artists, including while participating in the Toronto symposium, in November 1976. We will come back in a few paragraphs on the conditions of her presence at the Toronto symposium and the position she occupied in it, as a young female artist from Central Europe.

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<sup>118</sup> The meeting was organised by the Galeria Arcus and the Scientific Circle of the Department of Polish from the Marie Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. Świdziński, “Calendarium of Contextual Art”, 85.

<sup>119</sup> The CEAC members realised a performance at the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin (27 May 1977) and at the Recent Art Gallery in Wrocław (29 May 1977)—the latter, with the participation of Jan Świdziński. The group then left Poland to Italy (via Czechoslovakia) to participate in a series of encounters at the Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna in Bologna (6 June 1977) with a performance (significantly titled “Contextually defined behaviour”) and at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara (9 and 10 June 1977) (with the performances “Interactions I and II”). We find a short description of these activities in Diane Boadway’s diary. Boadway, *Journal by Diane Boadway*.

<sup>120</sup> Korzeb, “Information note on the conference”, 5.

<sup>121</sup> Anonymous, “Statement”, in *Contextual Art. Materials from the conference of Contextual Art* (Lublin: Arcus Gallery, 1977), 6.

<sup>122</sup> Anna Kutera, “Is the word “Woman” a noun or an adjective?”, in *Contextual Art. Materials from the conference of Contextual Art* (Lublin: Arcus Gallery), 1977, 66-69.

Kutera's contribution to the conference in Kazimierz, *Is the word "Woman" a noun or an adjective? (Czy wyraz 'kobieta' to rzeczownik, czy przymiotnik?)*, proposed a critical reflection on the social role of women in Poland, especially in the arts field. [Fig. 2.23 and 2.24] Departing from the fact that the United Nations had declared 1975 as Women's Year, Kutera examined several fragments extracted from the publication *Woman in Poland*, issued by the Polish Chief Statistical Office. This publication provided statistical information on the evolution of women's social position in the country between 1960 and 1974 and suggested that there had been an improvement in their presence and conditions as workers. Kutera's attention had been particularly captured by a passage according to which women were well represented in different artistic disciplines. The official publication cited Alina Szapocznikow, Magdalena Abakanowicz and Ludwika Nitschowa as examples of "talented" woman artists—which, in this context, meant publicly recognised. In reaction, Kutera formulated a series of interrogations that problematised the publication's optimism regarding a supposedly egalitarian balance:

1. Why, then are they still marked off and discriminated in the society?
2. Who again and touches upon the problem again [sic] of this difference?
3. Is there any "difference", and if so, what is it?/except for the aspects already mentioned/
4. Why do the differences appear only when an independent individual action is taken?
5. Why does women's interest in subjects which are manifestations of the progress of the civilization decrease?<sup>123</sup>

Invoking then statistical data that pointed at the significant decrease in female presence between the secondary schools of fine arts (the first step in an artist career) and the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (which marked professional recognition), the artist thought-provocatively wondered:

6. And how many of those women are creatively active?
7. What were the reasons of international feminist tendencies in the arts?

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<sup>123</sup> Kutera, "Is the word "Woman" a noun or an adjective?", 69.

8. Could it be women themselves who aim at alienation?<sup>124</sup>

*Is the word “Woman” a noun or an adjective?* applied the research methods of contextual art—relying on the observation of a narrow field and raising questions instead of affirmations—in order to introduce and discuss the issue of what would be designated today as gender equality in the cultural sphere, in an event protagonised by a large majority of male artists, critics and theoreticians. Bringing the issue of women’s social role and professional recognition to the fore with the help of statistical and sociological data, Kutera made clear that Polish women in general, and women artists in particular, needed to be destigmatised and liberated from the eternal condition of minor and non autonomous individuals.

These questions were completely topical in the context in which Kutera was evolving. She was, in fact, the only woman artist to be directly associated with contextual art, and the fact that her condition and that of other women artists were totally ignored by their male pairs certainly prompted her to give greater visibility to this issue in the Kazimierz meeting.

The lack of recognition and attention given to women artists pointed out by Kutera was far from being a rare occurrence. During the symposium at the CEAC in Toronto in November 1976, she had already been among the few women, yet not the only one—Sarah Charlesworth and Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker also actively participated in the debates. She was, however, the only woman artist from a socialist country of Eastern Europe. While photographs of the event attest to her presence at the symposium [Fig. 2.8], Kutera’s “voice”, surprisingly, does not appear in the transcripts published by Świdziński.<sup>125</sup> We can propose several explanations to this absence; on the one hand, the focus on the figure of Świdziński and his “paternity” of the contextual art theory—against Joseph Kosuth as another authoritative “father”—certainly overshadowed other interventions. From this perspective, the almost invisible presence of a twenty-four-years-old woman among a group constituted in majority by older males used to self-centered intellectual debate was a mere reflection

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<sup>124</sup> Kutera, “Is the word “Woman” a noun or an adjective?”, 69.

<sup>125</sup> Świdziński, *Quotations on Contextual Art*, 99-190.

of the predominantly masculine occupation of the public arena. On the other hand, we should also recall that in what was her first trip outside Europe, Kutera was more interested in presenting her works and that of other Polish artists to a foreign audience and engaging into conversations about them than in contributing to abstract discussions that compared the merits of different artistic theories.<sup>126</sup>

Kutera, however, did not remain silent while she was listening to her colleagues's debates: she actively exchanged with other artists (in particular, Sarah Charlesworth and Carole Condé) about feminism and art, as well as women's rights movement in the United States and the conditions of work and life of her peers in North America. The fact that these conversations are not present in the transcriptions from the symposium—we do not know if they were eliminated or were carried out “on the sidelines” of the main debates—only confirms how marginal the issue of feminism remained, even in the context of an event set up by the CEAC, which pretended to be engaged in favor of social minorities.

Back to Poland, Świdziński and Kutera reported their experience at a meeting at the Pałac Akademicki Culture Centre in Wrocław, titled “Account from Toronto” (“Sprawozdanie z Toronto”), in January 1977.<sup>127</sup> Kutera's intervention insisted on her active exchange with women artists and activists during her Canadian trip, and she also came back to this episode in a small publication:

I presented women's situation in Poland at the conference. My report on the living standards, work and education of women met with huge interest. I emphasised the different socioeconomic conditions of Polish women, who enjoy the rights that American women are fighting for. Women's activeness in Women's League or other

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<sup>126</sup> Świdziński, in contrast, was not in favour of showing contextual artworks or their documentation. Anna Kutera recalled that “[c]ontrarily to Świdziński (who claimed there was not time to disclose the practice), I asked to display our photographic works (my *Morphology*... and other prints and catalogues). The imported materials proved to be a very good choice because Joseph [Kosuth] and Sara Charlesworth viewed them with great interest and admired Romuald Kutera's 1973 publication”. Kutera, “Prologue to the Toronto Conference”. See also Markowska, “Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland”, 220-241.

<sup>127</sup> The event's invitation specified that it was an initiative from the Department of Fine Arts of the Ministry of Culture and Art, the Association of Polish Artist Photographers, and the Recent Art Gallery. Anna Markowska has suggested that the organisers received financial support “probably because their struggle with imperialism was taken seriously.” Markowska, “This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975–1980) at the Pałac Akademicki Culture Centre”, 270.

social organisations sets new aims for them, such as promoting creative work for the society. There is no gender division in the field of art.<sup>128</sup>

Interestingly enough, Kutera was far from idealising the feminist struggle in capitalist societies. Earlier in the same text, she warned of the danger of a misinterpretation of the feminist struggle through the lens of liberalism, that even led, in her view, some movements of “liberated women” to terrorise the rest of society, like a criminal gang. For Kutera, the contributions of the feminist struggle could only be made from a “democratic, humanitarian and peaceful” perspective. Taking the example of the movements that sought to free themselves from the “male yoke” in Italy, she stressed the importance of constitutional changes rather than confrontation with the other sex.<sup>129</sup> Her perspective as an artist from a socialist context thus allowed her to take a more objective look at the excesses of an exclusionary and authoritarian feminism in the West. While her account from Toronto suggests that she supported the advanced model represented by socialist societies in which “no gender division” seemed to exist “in the field of art”, we see with her intervention in Kazimierz a few months later that Kutera had incorporated a more critical and balanced view of this reality.

Świdziński also showed interest for the feminist movement while in Toronto. Unlike for Kutera, his brief exchange with other participants on this topic was transcribed and actually shows the generational and ideological gap that characterised his approach to feminism. Asking to be enlightened on feminism and the goals of the movement, Świdziński was answered to by Sarah Charlesworth, who exposed in detail the struggles of the feminism in the United States and its division into three major trends—liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism. The Polish artist and theoretician then observed that all of this sounded “very exotic” to him, since such “tradition of disregarding women”, typical of “bourgeois society”, didn’t exist in

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<sup>128</sup> Anna Kutera in *Sztuka kontekstualna w Galerii Sztuki Najnowszej/Contextual Art in the Recent Art Gallery* (Wrocław, 1977), cited in Markowska, “This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975–1980) at the Pałac Akademicki Culture Centre”, 271.

<sup>129</sup> Anna Kutera in *Sztuka kontekstualna w Galerii Sztuki Najnowszej/Contextual Art in the Recent Art Gallery*, cited in Markowska, “This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975–1980) at the Pałac Akademicki Culture Centre”, 271.

Poland.<sup>130</sup> To which Canadian artist Carole Condé immediately answered and recalled that since communism hadn't been achieved yet in the Eastern bloc, total equality was yet to come. Świdziński's observations suggest that despite his injunctions to critically re-examine reality, he was himself conditioned by his proper background and more particularly, by a vision based on the Marxist-Leninist doctrine that prevented him from acknowledging the real condition of women in socialist societies.

While Anna Kutera seemed initially to share Świdziński's views, her intervention in Kazimierz nad Wisłą with *Is the word "Woman" a noun or an adjective?* tells a lot about the way her approach to this issue got transformed. Her denunciation of structural gender inequalities in the Polish arts sphere demonstrated that contextual art had a central role to play as a vehicle for social awareness and, in this particular case, of deconstruction of patriarchal models and social gazes.

### **3.2. Art as an activity in the context of reality, Warsaw**

A few weeks after the conference in Kazimierz, the Galeria Remont hosted the international conference "Art as activity in the context of reality". In addition to a large contingent of Polish artists, an important number of foreign participants came to Warsaw. The event was headed by the director of the Galeria Remont Henryk Gajewski with Jan Świdziński and Zbigniew Dlubak as co-organisers—Świdziński was the chairman of the program board.<sup>131</sup> In Gajewski's words, the conference aimed at "the confrontation of attitudes and experiences in relation to art-artist-reality."<sup>132</sup> His introductory discourse insisted on the fact that the conference was not "of marginal character in relation to the official artistic reality" and was indeed "an official event in

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<sup>130</sup> Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art*, 140-141. For an overview of historiographical debates about the place of women in socialist societies, see for example Kristen Rogheh Ghodsee and Julia Mead, "What Has Socialism Ever Done For Women?", *Catalyst*, Vol. 2, no. 2, Summer 2018, 100-133.

<sup>131</sup> The Remont Gallery was part of the Club Centre of the Warsaw Technical University "Riviera-Remont" of the Socialist Union of Polish Students and received financial support from state institutions (also in the particular case of this conference).

<sup>132</sup> Gajewski's discourse given at the opening, on 11 July 1977, was reproduced in a press dossier that was distributed to all the participants, the second day of the conference. He specified that the problematic of the conference had been first examined by the "Polish contextual movement", mainly—but not exclusively—represented by artists connected with galleries in Wrocław (the Recent Art Gallery), Lublin (Galeria Labirynt), Białystok (Galeria Sign/Znak) and the Warsaw seminar. According to the press release included in the dossier, the event's opening was attended by 150 persons. "International conference Art as activity in the context of reality. Press information", 12 July 1977 (Warsaw: Remont Gallery, 1977), unpaginated.

which considerable public funds have been engaged.”<sup>133</sup> Gajewski’s distancing from any kind of unofficial or marginal activity—including oppositional—and the acknowledgement of the conference’s public funding confirm once again that the ensemble of reflections and practices that configured the contextual art field was not directly opposed to the regime in place and its ideology, but operated on another front, raising questions about art and its relationship with reality instead of providing categorical answers and models of action.

“Art as activity in the context of reality” was attended by participants from Argentina, Austria, Berlin, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Spain, Holland, Yugoslavia, Canada, German Democratic Republic, German Federal Republic, the United States, Switzerland, Sweden, Hungary and Great Britain. Others didn’t make it but sent papers or statements to be shared during the conference. Besides Świdziński, the signatories of the Third Front statement who attended the conference were the three members of the CAS, Lorraine Leeson and Peter Dunn. **[Fig. 2.25]** Gajewski believed that the topic of the conference had a particular resonance in Poland, where “the social meaning of art” had been determining since the interwar period.<sup>134</sup> According to him, the “Polish traditions of art’s function as ideology and not as merchandise” had encouraged the development of what he designated as “the Contextual Movement”. He also insisted on the open character of the proposal and on the participants’ total independence: “We do not wish to impose our own context upon the others, but we also do not want the others to impose their context upon us as the compulsory model for imitation.” The “we” referred at the same time to Polish contextualists but also, more generally, to Polish artists. The refusal to uncritically integrate forms and discourses imported from other contexts recalled Swizdinski’s rejection of a “provincial art” that accepted and even incorporated the influence of the centers:

[...] the acceptance of an art system behind which lies a different model of the world from that in which I live, implies an acceptance of words without accepting their

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<sup>133</sup> “International conference Art as activity in the context of reality. Press information”, unpaginated.

<sup>134</sup> “International conference Art as activity in the context of reality. Press information”, unpaginated.

meaning. This would place me in the position of a stylist, which is what all provincial artists do.

Provincial art never acts in its own interest. Its dependence on the leader only strengthens the position of the latter as one who supplies the only true models to copy.

Art models, because of the contextual dependencies, are at the same time models of reality proposed by the leader. The idea of isolated areas of art is unacceptable. Being in reality impossible to apply it would simultaneously imply an abandoning of contextual influences of art. The only possible situation is that of introducing ones own context to the set of parameters characterizing the context of others.<sup>135</sup>

We can decipher a clear anti-colonial orientation in this positioning against the unilateral relation between a dominant model and its alleged imitation. Świdziński and the artists who practices contextual art recommended reciprocal exchanges allowing authors and their contexts to interact horizontally through a process of cultural transfer and crossings that not only enriched both parts, but also allowed them to “have a better understanding of [their] own.”<sup>136</sup>

This situation was undoubtedly empowering as it gave artists the agency to deal with dominant expressions and ideologies without yielding to their influence. By emphasizing the specificity of spatial and temporal coordinates against a set of imposed aesthetics and practices, contextual art could in fact potentially operate as a weapon, as Łukasz Ronduda pointed at.<sup>137</sup> In the same line, Anna Markowska has insisted that “[s]eeing the situation from peripheries may be beneficial and multidimensional provided that it shall not be used for self-colonisation, but for performing comparisons and engaging in a dialogue. Various contexts enrich the knowledge and enable comparisons.”<sup>138</sup> Contextual art, but this was also the case for sociological art and other practices that paid attention to the social context, not only

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<sup>135</sup> Świdziński, *Sztuka jako sztuka kontekstual/Art as Contextual Art*, 87.

<sup>136</sup> “We believe that getting acquainted with the problems of others will permit us a better understanding of our own and the confrontation of experiences and attitudes understood in such a way is one of the objectives of this conference.” “International conference Art as activity in the context of reality. Press information”, unpaginated.

<sup>137</sup> Łukasz Ronduda, “Flexibility Makes Our Existence Possible: The Contextual Art of Jan Świdziński”, in *ArtMargins online*, 9 October 2008. [https://artmargins.com/flexibility-makes-our-existence-possible-the-contextual-art-of-jan-widziski/#ftnlink\\_artnotes1\\_13](https://artmargins.com/flexibility-makes-our-existence-possible-the-contextual-art-of-jan-widziski/#ftnlink_artnotes1_13) (Accessed May 2019).

<sup>138</sup> Markowska, “Contextualism. Art in the political and social context of the 1970s Poland”, 229.



challenged the canons and artistic models that had acquired commercial value in the United States and Western Europe; they also allowed artists from different geographies considered as peripheral to engage into concrete experiments without being concerned with the allegedly paradigmatic character of central model.

#### **4. Decentralising art and reaffirming the local. Southern connections**

##### **4.1 *Neon de Suro*. A contextualism from Southern Europe?**

The conference “Art as an activity in the context of reality” made possible the confluence of artists who expressed the same concerns in a wide range of countries. In particular, the participation of a group of artists from Spain invites to reconsider the consistency of the transnational alliance proposed by the Third Front and reflect on the possibility of a dialogue, even indirect, with a Southern European context. [Fig. 2.26] Although Bartomeu Cabot, Sara Gibert, Andreu Terrades and Steva Terrades did not explicitly adhere to Świdziński’s ideas and had their singular trajectory strongly related with the context of Francoist and post-Francoist Spain, as the editors and contributors of the periodical publication *Neon de Suro*, they certainly shared the same concerns regarding the need for a greater independence from institutional and commercial circuits, self-organization, self-definition, and the search for a decentralised art practice.

Bartomeu Cabot, Sara Gibert and the brothers Andreu and Steva Terrades started to publish *Neon de Suro* in 1975 and even if we cannot speak of them as a collective in the manner of the CAS, they sometimes designated themselves through this group identity. The four artists and the publication *Neon de Suro* were associated with the renewal of the art scene in Mallorca, in the Mediterranean archipelago of the Balearic islands. Three of them were born in the island and resided there. Sara Gibert, originally from a small town near Barcelona, met them while studying art at the Academia Sant Jordi in Barcelona. Since their early career, Cabot and the Terrades brothers situated themselves in rupture with Mallorca’s artistic tradition, characterised by post-impressionist painting and supported by a local circuit of commercial galleries and art dealers. In their intention to break with the island’s artistic tradition, the artists focused primarily on the structures for the dissemination and promotion of

art. They wanted to liberate the island's contemporary art scene from the laws of the market and the influence of a conservative group of local artists and collectors.

Two initiatives foreshadowed the emergence of *Neon de Suro* and the consolidation of its core group. In 1973, Steva Terrades organised an exhibition titled “Ensenya 1” (translatable as “Show 1”) at the Galeria 4 Gats in Mallorca, in which the future members of the group participated.<sup>139</sup> The exhibition relied on an experimental display that searched for alternatives to hanging works and activated a close relationship with the spectator. In the catalogue, Terrades described it as an experience of “non use of the gallery’s usable space” and explained that such “indifference” for the common use of the exhibition space could be interpreted as “a posture of confrontation and denunciation of the non-functionality of the galleries.”<sup>140</sup> The second episode that anticipated the creation of *Neon de Suro* was the emergence in November 1974 of the group Criada 74, formed on the occasion of an exhibition at the Tous bookstore in Palma de Mallorca. The ten participants (Catty Bonnín, Bartomeu Cabot, Pep Canyelles, Tinus Castanyer, Miquel Angel Femenies, Angel Muerza, Lleonard Muntaner, Carme Roign Vicent Torres and Miquel Trias) exhibited individually, but in relation to a central motive, the portrait of a maid—in Spanish language, a “criada”—holding a tray. Criada 74 called for artists collective organisation and intervention in order to provoke a discussion regarding the mechanisms of control, especially economic, over art in the island.<sup>141</sup> In July 1975, the group took part in the “First cycle of plastic investigation “City of Alcudia”” (“Primer Cicle d’Investigacions Plàstiques “Ciutat d’Alcudia””) with an anonymous intervention that

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<sup>139</sup> The exhibition took place from 6 to 31 August 1973 with the artists Bartomeu Cabot, Ramon Canet, Sara Gibert, Marcelino Grande, Gerard Matas, Miquel Angel Femenies, Aundreu Terrades and Steva Terrades. See Maria Muntaner González, “Espais transgredits. Transformació dels marcs culturals a la Mallorca dels setanta”, in Maria Muntaner González, Mercé Picornell, Margalida Pons and Josep Antoni Reynés, eds., *Transformacions: Literatura i canvi sociocultural dels anys setanta ençà*, (Valencia: Universitat de Valencia, 2010), 305-307.

<sup>140</sup> Muntaner González, Picornell, Pons and Reynés, eds., *Transformacions: Literatura i canvi socio-cultural dels anys setanta ençà*, 305-306.

<sup>141</sup> Crónica de Tres, “Criada 74. De la revolta a la provocació”, *Lluc* no. 651, September 1975, 24-25. Behind the name “Crónica de Tres” were the art critics Damià Ferrá-Ponç (mainly) and Lleonard Muntaner. Ferrá-Ponç was among the Mallorcan art critics interested in the “Nova Plàstica” (“New plastic art”) and he supported the emergence of the young artists and artistic collectives, especially through his writings in *Lluc* and the newspaper *Ultima Hora*. See also Maria Muntaner González, *L’escriptura soterrada. La pràctica interartística en l’obra de Josep Albertí* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l’Abadia de Montserrat, 2009), 82-85.

consisted in disseminating in the public space one hundred human figures realised with the technique of silkscreen printing on a wooden panel. Thirty of them represented the former Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai, then retired in France, whose image had been taken from a photograph published in a Spanish newspaper. His tie had been coloured with red and blue stripes. The second figure was a photomontage combining a photograph of the body of a Nazi soldier and a motorcyclist's head photographed by the artist Miguel Àngel Femenias. The soldier's image was taken from a Spanish magazine that had itself reproduced a photograph from *Life* magazine. The swastika on the soldier's arm had been erased, turning him into an archetypal, yet recognizable military figure. Both elements remained enigmatic and their presence on the street was not subject to any declaration or claim from the members of Criada 74. According to them, however, the intervention was not directly political, but was rather conceived as a contextual presentation aimed at stimulating the viewers' consciousness. The purpose was to produce a "communicative impact with the public", invited to interpret these figures with its own historical and cultural references.<sup>142</sup> Without evoking directly Franco's still ongoing dictatorship—the dictator died the same year, on 20 November—, this "unpredictable and risky association" brought out, as the author of an article in Mallorca's cultural magazine *LLuc* pointed out, "the devils of repression".<sup>143</sup> The work was censored indeed, causing numerous reactions in the local press and the circulation of a petition to demand respect for freedom of expression for the people of the Balearic Islands, signed by more than two hundred persons.<sup>144</sup>

The idea of creating a "Monographic brochure for dissemination" ("Fullet monogràfic de divulgació") surged from Steva Terrades, who offered to Andreu Terrades, Bartomeu Cabot and Sara Gibert to work jointly on a periodical publication

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<sup>142</sup> Crónica de Tres, "Criada 74. De la revolta a la provocació", 25.

<sup>143</sup> Crónica de Tres, "Criada 74. De la revolta a la provocació", 25.

<sup>144</sup> This action reminds the intervention *Espectadores de espectadores* (*Spectators of spectators*) carried out by Equipo Crónica at the Pamplona Encounters, in 1972. In that case, the dissemination of cardboard figures representing state security officers—easily identifiable with their grey rain coats and sunglasses—in a cinema (they were initially intended for the public space) provoked an unexpected cathartic reaction from the public. See José Díaz Cuyás, "Literalismo y carnavalización en la última vanguardia", in *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972. Fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2009), 16-55.

that would be freely distributed in order to reach a broader audience.<sup>145</sup> The decision to name it *Neon de Suro* reflected the artists' anchorage into contemporaneity ("neon") and at the same time, their attachment to local roots and tradition ("suro" meaning "cork"). In an article significantly titled "Grassroots and cosmopolitanism" ("Arrelament i cosmopolitisme"), the art critic Damiá Ferra-Ponç signaled this oxymoron:

A name formed by an element–neon–, highly significant for the artificial and aggressive brightness of the advertising mechanism in a technological consumer society, and an opaque element–cork–for ages familiar to Mallorca's lower classes. By choosing it, the group Neon de Suro shows its strong support to its own homeland.<sup>146</sup> [Fig. 47]

The intention to assemble grassroots/local and cosmopolitan ambitions undoubtedly resonated with claims expressed by contextual and sociological artists, who sought to embed their practice within a specific reality and, at the same time, look for dialogue and confrontation with a broader environment.<sup>147</sup> Interestingly, none of these artists identified themselves with a national context. They all referred to the local context and carried out "local activities" as a way to contribute to the decentralisation of the art sphere, not to its exclusive recentralisation through a national paradigm.

The first issue of *Neon de Suro* came out in October 1975 and was printed in one thousand offset copies. It adopted a newspaper-like format, A3 in black and white, with a few pages. By adopting the "multiple" format and being available for free, *Neon de Suro* challenged any fetishist and commercial approach to art. Cabot, Gibert and the Terrades were not concerned with being easily understandable or articulating a specific message; they wanted to share their creative work without the pressure of making it suitable for a particular audience or sphere of reception. Damiá Ferra-Ponç enthusiastically compared the publication's method and its first outcomes with the

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<sup>145</sup> Crónica de Tres, "Conversa amb Sara Gibert", *Lluc* no. 659, May 1976, 26.

<sup>146</sup> Crónica de Tres, "Arrelament i cosmopolitisme", *Lluc* n°654, December 1975, 22. An English version is available in Jaume Reus, "Ludic Aggression", in *A l'entorn de Neon de Suro: 1975-1982, col·lecció Rafael Tous* (Palma: Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca/Ajuntament de Palma, 1999), 102.

<sup>147</sup> Crónica de Tres, "Arrelament i cosmopolitisme", 22.

field of comics production, for the dynamic process that characterised their creation and their large diffusion.<sup>148</sup>

Importantly, one of the ways of financing the production and free distribution of *Neon de Suro* was to sell the original pieces or derivative works such as posters to a limited circle of friends and collectors. The four editors insisted however that these transactions were carried out for the sole purpose of maintaining their independence, and that the separate sale of the works in no way affected the status of the publication, a freely accessible work of art challenging the system of speculation and commodification of art.<sup>149</sup> By considering each issue of *Neon de Suro* a “printed work of art”, Gibert, Cabot and the Terrades didn’t question the artistic nature and value of their work but proposed instead to intervene its circuits of production and circulation, providing access through free distribution. Rather than questioning art as a constructed notion, they challenged the structures that determined its exclusiveness and converted it into a commodity reserved to an elite. Such position of non-questioning art’s value but rather reflecting on its social impact was particularly close to the ideas articulated around contextual and sociological art, whose representatives never pretended or sought to operate out of the artistic realm.

For its editors, *Neon de Suro* represented an opportunity to circulate their work and ideas beyond the sphere of Mallorcan art, but also beyond the Spanish context. Andreu Terrades insisted in 1976: “I believe that one of the best successes of *Neon de Suro* is that it has brought us into contact with artists, with groups that, without the brochures, would never have had a relationship with us.”<sup>150</sup> Between 1975 and 1982, twenty-one issues were published and freely distributed through different artistic networks. The first four issues published between October 1975 and May 1976 were monographic and realised by the editors themselves, starting with Steva Terrades’ “Els retrats en el seu lloc” (“The portraits in their place”). After a fifth issue realised by Miquel Barceló, who was a close friend of the group, the editions started to

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<sup>148</sup> Crónica de Tres, “Arrelament i cosmopolitisme”, 22.

<sup>149</sup> Albert Fargas, “Neon de Suro, Capcalera d’art marginal”, *Mundo Diario*, 12 June 1978, cited in Reus, “Ludic Aggression”, 109.

<sup>150</sup> “Crec que un dels millors exits del “Neon de Suro” es que ens ha fet entrar en contacte am buns artistes, am buns grups que, sense els fullets, mai no haurien tengut relació amb nosaltres”. Andreu Terrades, in Crónica de Tres, “Art. Poesia visual i muntatges”, *Lluc* no. 661, July-August 1976, 29.

alternate contributions by invited artists or critics, most of them belonging to their close circle in Mallorca and Barcelona, like Damià Ferrà-Pons, Joan Palou, Josep Albertí, Mariscal, Antoni Catany or Antoni Muntadas. The circulation of *Neon de Suro* abroad allowed its the editors to get in touch with foreign artists like or Richard Bruno or Julien Blaine-the latter contributed to the brochure's eighteenth issue from May 1980. Each author was totally free to create his or her own content, within the possibilities of the journal's format and printing options. Its distribution through the mail art network led to an increasing inclusion of the magazine and its editors in lists of diffusion in Western and Eastern Europe, as well as to their invitations to international events and exhibitions.

In September 1976, Bartomeu Cabot, Sara Gibert and Steva and Andreu Terrades were featured in a special issue of the TV program "Tot Art" of the National Spanish Television (TVE) dedicated to culture in the Balearic Islands. To prepare the event, they elaborated an artistic statement that brought to light essential themes or concepts that informed the group's practice.<sup>151</sup> The script identified three of these concepts—the market, the context and circulation—and put emphasis on the magazine's collective and collaborative dimension. In relation to the market, the statement claimed that *Neon de Suro* could keep its independence from economical constriction in part thanks to the gratuity of their publication. In a way that recalls the affirmation of the Collectif d'Art Sociologique on the importance of self-sufficiency, Cabot, Gibert and the Terrades considered self-management as "the only valid way to have total freedom of creation and full control of our own works of art." The statement followed with observations on the magazine's inscription within its context:

- Neon de Suro supports Art decentralization. That is, Art drifting away from those prestigious groups that limit the knowledge of the artistic facts to the elitist and specialized circles.
  
- We also support practicing in our own context, here, the Mediterranean. We mean harmony of practice and work identified with the environment.

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<sup>151</sup> "Neon de Suro: a script for "Tot Art"", in *A l'Entorn de Neon de Suro, col·lecció Rafael Tous* (Palma: Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca/Ajuntament de Palma, 1999), 113. The text in the catalogue is dated 1976. However, since it refers to the conference in Warsaw (as already done) and to Neon de Suro's exhibition at the St:Petri Gallery, this date is incorrect and the text was probably written in the second half of 1977.

- We value the daily facts of our own city and not the genial and mythic image given by artists belonging to the big con of Art.<sup>152</sup>

The group's clear positioning in favour of the decentralisation of art and its desire to anchor its practice in its specific environment echoes, here too, the concerns of contextual and sociological artists. The strategy aiming at challenging the place and importance of the centre, be it geographical (capitals as nodes concentrating power and services), economic (capitalism as the system that dominated the art sphere) or cultural (artistic centres and their spheres of influence), was not so much implemented through the dilution or massive dissemination of cultural artefacts—mail art would be a good example of such a decentralising action—, but rather by a reinforcement of the awareness of spatial, historical and cultural coordinates of the reality in which they operated. In the case of the group around *Neon de Suro*, but also in the case of contextual artists and the CAS, the claim for decentralisation involved a sort of relocation, with the establishing of a privileged relation with the human, cultural and intellectual resources of a particular place. For them indeed, decentralisation—away from the center—operated as a centrifugal force of relocation. For *Neon de Suro*, this place was Mallorca and the Mediterranean. The process of decentralisation through relocation implied being no longer afraid of being provincial—i.e. being backward, obsolete in relation to a dominant model, far from the sphere of influence of an hypothetical centre—, but on the contrary, to assume their origins as an affirmative point of anchorage and strength of their own practice that could be projected within an extended realm made up of other localities.

*Neon de Suro*'s script for "Tot Art" mentioned the magazine's participation in various international events dedicated to artists editions and alternative publications, like the Small Press Festival in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and Amsterdam; Newspaper Art in Amsterdam; Kunst als Komunikate in Utrecht and Art Publishers/Art Periodicals in San José, California. It also referred to an invitation by the group "Contextual Art of Warsaw" to a meeting at the Remont Gallery "where East and West ideas about Art were confronted".<sup>153</sup> The presence of the Mallorcan collective in

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<sup>152</sup> "Neon de Suro: a script for "Tot Art"", 113.

<sup>153</sup> "Neon de Suro: a script for "Tot Art"", 113.

Warsaw in 1977 is attested by photographic records, as well as by a poster created by Bartomeu Cabot. Cabot's poster, realised through the technique of silk-screen, was not included in any issue of *Neon de Suro* and was probably created to finance the group's activities. Under the title *Neon de Suro a Polska*, it displayed a semi-circle with the words "Juliol 77" (July 77) with, above, what looked like two tentacles seeming to get ready to make contact. [Fig. 2.27] Under the frame of this image was the script "Remont Gallery–Warszawa" and on a side, the term "llunàtic", referring to the collective Taller Lluàtic (Lunatic workshop) from Mallorca, of which Cabot was also a member.<sup>154</sup>

Steva Terrades retrospectively highlighted the affinities between the program his comrades and himself were trying to implement and the Polish artists they met on this occasion:

They [referring to the Polish artists] were against the individualist character of the artwork and they defended art as a social reality. A work of art should reflect the connections between the artist's conscience and social reality of his context. They questioned the market and the idea of unique work, and they considered *Neon de Suro* a good support, because it was free, it opposed to the market and the work was a publication. Another common aspect was the feeling of decentralisation.<sup>155</sup>

Decentralisation, as said before, implied to reaffirm a local anchorage. While contextual and sociological artist found in communities living in rural environments or in the outskirts of the cities (often considered in opposition, or in dialectical relation with urban centres) a field terrain for activating such local anchorage, in the case of *Neon de Suro* the field was constituted by Mallorca and the Mediterranean, to which several issues of the publication directly referred. The tenth issue, realised by the artist Mariscal, was titled "Mediterraneo".<sup>156</sup> In a style close to comics, with a

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<sup>154</sup> Taller Lluàtic was created by Cabot and involved artists like Josep Albertí and Miquel Barceló. Cabot and Albertí are still active under this name. See Teresa Grandas, "The phlegm of Taller Lluàtic", in *The Long 1980s* (Amsterdam: Valiz/L'Internationale, 2018), 86-88.

<sup>155</sup> Steva Terrades cited in Reus, "Ludic Aggression", 105.

<sup>156</sup> Mariscal "Mediterraneo", *Neon de Suro* no. 10, December 1977. The painter and graphic artist Mariscal (for Javier Mariscal), at that time close to *Neon de Suro* and Miquel Barceló, would become internationally famous one decade later as the inventor of "Cobi", the emblematic symbol of the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992, an early example of visual "branding" related with a city.



clear line, the pages were decorated with motifs that evoked travel and leisure: a huge cruise ship landing on a coastal town, a plane crossing Europe, people on a beach, snapshots of sunsets or sunrises, views of typical resort buildings with their balconies facing the sea. The postcard vision on display showed the Mediterranean as a highly attractive destination for international travelers.

The phenomenon of mass-tourism was also addressed in *Neon de Suro*'s twelfth issue, published on the occasion of its exhibition at the Galerie St. Petri in Lund, from 28 April to 10 May 1978. This time, only Sara Gibert travelled to set up the exhibition, which included various issues of the magazine, a poster made by Bartomeu Cabot and documentation on the group's activities.<sup>157</sup> The twelfth issue of *Neon de Suro* was a collective work including contributions from Josep Albertí, Miquel Barceló, Andreu and Steva Terrades, Bartomeu Cabot, Damiá Ferrá-Ponç, Sara Gibert, Mariscal and Joan Palou.<sup>158</sup> Its central thematic, tourism, was contemplated from the angle of a cultural (mis)encounter between the Swedish and the Mallorcan (but also the Spanish, and Mediterranean) contexts:

TOURISM was chosen. It was the most representative example of manipulation suffered both by Swedish—as visitors—(tantalized by the sun, the beaches, the welfare, and the peaceful resorts) and by Spaniards—as receptors—(also tantalized by Sweden's highly mystified tolerance, sexual freedom, high life standards...).<sup>159</sup>

The magazine contemplated the misunderstandings based on the perpetration of cultural stereotypes—often conveyed by official communication channels and means—, drawing a map of expectations and preconceptions from north to south and vice-versa. [Fig. 2.28] The authors' contributions had been brought together and juxtaposed without names, in a way that accentuated the issue's collective authorship. Several images were recurrent, such as small portraits of native people with tattooed or made-up faces realised by Andreu Terrades. They addressed the reader—or rather, beg him or

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<sup>157</sup> Reus, "Ludic Aggression", 105.

<sup>158</sup>"Neon i Sverige", *Neon de Suro* no. 12, April 1978. Since the contributions were not assigned to or signed by the artists, I rely here on Jaume Reus' text in which the author were identified. Reus, "Ludic Aggression", 102-110.

<sup>159</sup> "Gratuitousness is an aggression", in *A l'entorn de Neon de Suro, 1975-1982* (Palma de Mallorca: Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró: Ajuntament de Palma, 1999), 112.

her—in various languages: “Please, don’t go to spend your holidays in Majorca”. Near to them were historical images of motives typical of the island and Spanish culture (such as bullfighting/corrida) that resulted particularly attractive and exotic for foreign tourists but were also victims of massification. In her contribution, Sara Gibert addressed the notion of trajectory by introducing photographs of transportation means that evoked the distance between Sweden and Barcelona (the city was, at that time, among the few gateways to Mallorca for international and national travelers), 2003 km.<sup>160</sup> In his easily recognisable style, Bartomeu Cabot reappropriated and declined in several versions an original touristic advertisement for the Bahamas, in which a man in a suit and tie posed, visibly satisfied after a holiday in the sun. Cabot turned the original slogan “It’s better in the Bahamas” into “It’s better than fiction”, suggesting a discrepancy between the fantasies provoked by an object of desire and its disappointing obtention. Cabot’s drawings transformed the figure of the man, showing him as a transvestite or including references to a transgressive and provocative sexuality, as well as hair and sexual organs.<sup>161</sup>

Despite its aesthetic heterogeneity, the tone of this issue of *Neon de Suro* was unequivocal in denouncing the damages inflicted by a mass tourism in constant growth and revealing the feeling of colonisation experienced by the natives, as well as their reticence, or even their rejection of this invasive presence. This project cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the campaign carried out in the 1960s by the Spanish Ministry of Tourism and Information led by Manuel Fraga, which sought to attract tourism to Spain with a simplistic slogan (“Spain is different”) and the dissemination of a “corporate” identity that has endured to this day, as a mix of sun and festivities, folklore and modernity. Although this hypothesis has not been verified, it is likely that the artists around *Neon de Suro* were aware of *Spain is different* (1975-1977), a series from Joan Rabascall that mocked Fraga’s slogan and strongly criticised this operation of exportation of Spain’s image abroad. In any case,

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<sup>160</sup> Several works of the artist from that time addressed the notion of directionality and orientation, and questioned the normalisation of spatial conventions, like her conceptual action *North, West, South, East* (1978) and the second issue of *Neon de Suro* “Juegos y situaciones límites. Límites y situaciones de juego” from December 1975.

<sup>161</sup> Reus, “Ludic Aggression”, 106.

the simple fact of living in Mallorca situated them already on the front line to experience the consequences of such undesired mass tourism.<sup>162</sup>

On the occasion of the exhibition at the Galerie St: Petri, Steva Terrades, who had the greatest affinities with theory among the editors of *Neon de Suro*, wrote a programmatic text titled “Gratuitousness is an aggression” (“La gratuïtat és una agressió”), signed by all the members of the group. “Gratuitousness is an aggression” is in fact fundamental to understand the aims and interests of *Neon de Suro*, as well as its possible connections with artists and collectives who longed for similar achievements in the artistic field. It provides a clear explanation of the group’s position, as well as biographical and historical elements to understand why Cabot, Gibert and the Terrades decided to create a free publication and what they expected from this collective project. In the same way Świdziński and the CAS explained their positions without intermediaries, the artists who composed *Neon de Suro* were the main theoreticians and promoters of their own practice.

“Gratuitousness is an aggression” started by identifying the terrain in which contemporary art operated, divided between those “artists who envision Art as an experience compartmentalized by tradition and history” and those “who want to have a bearing on a broader context” related to intellectual and social concerns, i.e. avant-garde art.<sup>163</sup> Terrades pointed out the problematic ambiguity created by the tension between, on the one hand, the experimental and revolutionary character of avant-garde art and, on the other, its constant adaptation and integration to the system. For him, “[a]rt should be constantly questioning: institutionalisation and culture distortion.” *Neon de Suro* showed its mistrust of an avant-garde art easily convertible into “a cultural and politic [sic] religion bound to ideologically propping up myths as

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<sup>162</sup> The issue of tourism and culture in Francoist and post-Francoist Spain is being studied through the research project “La modernidad paradójica: experiencia artística y turística en la España desarrollista (1959-1975)” carried out at the Universidad de La Laguna in the island of Tenerife under the direction of José Díaz Cuyás and Vicente Benet. The contemporary artist Rogelio López Cuenca (also involved in the above-mentioned project) had dedicated an important part of his production to this issue. See also Eugenia Afinoguénova, ed., *Spain Is (Still) Different: Tourism and Discourse in Spanish Identity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

<sup>163</sup> “Gratuitousness is an aggression”, 111.

“national unity” and “gradual awakening” imposing to society similar cultural uses.” It refused to validate and contribute to such process:

If we believe that truly creative Art could not be separated of its context, for it is an unquestionable political fact, we could not accept as valid an artistic practice in which the artist is forced to assume ideological and political stances that are not related with that activity but only to the “production line.” We have to understand as ours, the assertion that the opposite of creation is the integration of a work of art and its values within the laws of society and consumption.<sup>164</sup>

As “artists involved in their socio-cultural context”, the editors of *Neon de Suro* were committed in creating “creative alternatives” they wanted to control—in particular, through self-sufficiency—and disseminate appropriately and without self-contradictions. “Gratuitousness, format and daily use—voluntary, modest—, and free distribution” were principles through which they could escape the fetishism and speculative operations of the “unique work of art.” At the same time, they insisted that the brochure was “not a gathering of drawings but a work, a totality made using a dynamic process, as if [it] was a comic strip.”<sup>165</sup>

The text also reiterated the importance of “receiving.” *Neon de Suro* was conceived as an intermediary “to receive those elements of external cultures identifying with its own views about Art’s market” and fighting “against old-fashioned myths.” In this process of connecting with other initiatives, they reiterated the consequences of their own geographical, cultural and linguistic condition of insularity: “Mallorca is an island, a geographical fact involving isolation. Our language: a dialectal variation of Catalan—entailing our culture—deeply Mediterranean—that has been alienated and oppressed along the time by dictatorial regimes.” And also: “Lately, tourism is the fact that makes up for the island image.”<sup>166</sup>

Questioning Mallorca’s social and cultural transformations and the mechanisms of construction, dissolution and subversion of local identities they implied, *Neon de Suro*

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<sup>164</sup> “Gratuitousness is an aggression”, 111.

<sup>165</sup> “Gratuitousness is an aggression”, 111.

<sup>166</sup> “Gratuitousness is an aggression”, 111.

also showed the necessity to rediscover and resignify the visual elements present in their island's landscape. Through its playful, accessible tone and its visual narratives based on popular or well-known forms and expressions, the publication undoubtedly contributed to opening up Mallorca's closed artistic field.

At the same time, the conclusion of the text seemed to formulate a dark prophecy:

As time went by, these predictions came true. The collapsing of the tourism due to the economical crisis, forced us to open our eyes to a reality in which urban development disasters, progressive degradation of landscape, unemployment...were evident and irreversible facts.

Facing this catastrophic situation, however, art as a social practice embedded in reality was still envisaged as a possible answer and a hope: "As a consequence, new generations started to worry about the environment and to favor the practice of an art willing to value and to question those socio-cultural aspects they identify with".<sup>167</sup>

#### **4.2 Local activities in rural environments**

Some of the issues raised in "Gratuitousness is an aggression" resonate with concerns expressed by the CAS and contextual artists. Such concerns led them to investigate rural environments and to reflect on the social, economic and ecological changes caused by urbanisation processes in distinct areas.

The fixation of these questions in the form of localised actions and works are, in my opinion, the most interesting and productive counterpoint to the abstractness of the theories expressed during the various encounters examined over this chapter. The interventions in the field realised by both the CAS and the contextualist artists seemed to report the end of a world—rural, isolated, "islanded" (in the sense of turned into an island)—many other cultural practitioners did not notice or showed no interest for. This attention to non-urban environments under transformation can also be read as the search for an alternative to the sphere of influence of this international art world the members of the Third Front sought to confront, with its centres of power and its

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<sup>167</sup> "Gratuitousness is an aggression", 112.

cultural, social and educational areas of influence. Before concluding this chapter, I would like to briefly evoke two of these actions.

In June 1975, the CAS participated to a symposium in Neuenkirchen, a small village of one thousand eight hundred inhabitants located between Hannover and Hamburg, in Germany. The initiative surged from the Office Franco-Allemand pour la Jeunesse (OFAJ) in collaboration with the gallery owner Ruth Falazik, who had been running since 1966 the Springhornhof art project, dedicated to art in landscape and site-specific practice. The symposium brought together artists residing in France and Germany under the title “Photo-Film-Vidéo”.<sup>168</sup> Among the participants from the French side was a significant number of foreign artists established in the country between the late 1960s and the early 1970s.<sup>169</sup> Various artists, including Tomek Kawiak, Lea Lublin and the CAS, based their intervention in Neuenkirchen on a direct interaction with the inhabitants, who were invited to participate in actions or to exchange with the artists. All the actions were presented at the end of the year at the A.R.C.2 in Paris, under the title “A socio-ecological experience: photo-film-vidéo: Neuenkirchen’75” (“Une expérience socio-écologique: photo-film-vidéo: Neuenkirchen’75”).<sup>170</sup> In introduction to the exhibition catalogue, the conservator Susanne Pagé recalled that the project aimed at creating “an art-village communication” and she celebrated the experience, which had allowed to a public unfamiliar with contemporary art to discuss the functioning of the relationship art/society/art.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Participating artists were Gerhard Büttbender, Hawoli, Wolf Kahlen, Edmund Kuppel, Ingeborg Lüscher, Erika Magdalinski, Siegfried Neuenhausen, Klaus Ritterbusch, Manfred Saul, Fritz Schwelger, Helmut Schweizer, Gerhard Trommer, Timm Ulrichs, Roland Baladi, Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, Richard Gilles, Tomek Kawiak, Lea Lublin, Miloslav Moucha, Ernest Pignon-Ernest, Fabrizio Plessi, Patrick Poirier, Anne Poirier, Joan Rabascall, Sosno, Jean-Paul Thenot and Nil Yalter. The symposium—actually more an artists residency—took place From 31 May to 21 June 1975.

<sup>169</sup> The Spanish Joan Rabascall, in Paris since 1962; Polish-born Lea Lublin, who had lived in Buenos Aires and left for Paris in 1965; the Polish Tomek Kawiak, in Paris since 1970, the Czech Miloslav Moucha, in France since 1968, and the Turkish Nil Yalter, who settled in France in 1965.

<sup>170</sup> The exhibition was held from 13 November to 14 December 1975 at the ARC 2. *Une expérience socio-écologique: photo - film - video: Neuenkirchen'75*, (S.l.: Office franco-allemand pour la jeunesse, 1975), unpaginated.

<sup>171</sup> Susanne Pagé, untitled, in *Une expérience socio-écologique: photo - film - video: Neuenkirchen'75*, (S.l.: Office franco-allemand pour la jeunesse, 1975), unpaginated.

In the catalogue, the CAS delivered a sort of glossary of the terms and concepts that informed its practice: “sociological practice”, “pedagogical work”, “socio-critical work”, “animation and perturbation”, “inquiry and experiment”, “communication”, “critique to avant-gardism”, “critique to the art market”.<sup>172</sup> The collective’s project for Neuenkirchen consisted in carrying out a survey with its inhabitants, who were asked to answer the question “Is Neuenkirchen a Paradise?” While most of them declared to be happy, the presentation of the video in a café opened a series of discussions regarding their living conditions and expectations. Observing that “[t]he survey carried out by the collective revealed fairly quickly that most of the inhabitants of Neuenkirchen said they had no problems and lived very happily”, the CAS concluded that “this statement of principle actually reflected a very conscious desire to live in Neuenkirchen as a refuge from the problems of the world.”<sup>173</sup> However, the interrogation addressed to the villagers eventually brought up issues such as unemployment, the lack of professional opportunities for young people, as well as other issues related in particular to the living conditions in a rural environment aftermath and, also, to the traces of the Second World War in people’s mind. In addition to the joint action, Hervé Fischer installed his *Pharmacy*, Jean-Paul Thénot established a *Socio-therapeutic contract* with volunteers, and Fred Forest realised a *Vidéo-gazette action de dynamisation sociale*.

The following year, the issue of life in rural environment was briefly addressed during the symposium at the CEAC in Toronto. While talking about the specificity of the Polish context regarding art education and the reception of traditional and modern art, Jan Świdziński was asked by Joseph Kosuth if he saw a difference between the type of art preferred by people in urban environments and in the countryside. Kosuth specified that he wanted to know if there were differences between inhabitants from the cities and the countryside, or, as another participant specified, the working class

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<sup>172</sup> The CAS was the only participant who published a text in the catalogue. It was a direct reaction to the publication of an essay by Bernard Teyssède in the same catalogue. For the collective, it was crucial to insist on its independence and on the possibility for artists to express themselves. Fischer, Forest and Thénot, “Mise au point du Collectif d’Art Sociologique”, unpaginated.

<sup>173</sup> “L’enquête menée par le collectif a fait apparaître assez rapidement que les habitants de Neuenkirchen déclaraient pour la plupart n’avoir pas de problème et vivre très heureux. Cette déclaration de principe reflétait en fait le désir très conscient de vouloir vivre à Neuenkirchen comme dans un refuge, à l’abri des problèmes du monde.” Fischer, Forest and Thénot, “Mise au point du collectif d’art sociologique”, unpaginated.

and the peasantry. In his answer, Świdziński insisted on the recent changes in the Polish society and on the increasingly rapid assimilation of urban culture by the people from the countryside, who were trying “to catch up as quickly as possible.” One of the consequences of this process was that modern art was associated with urban culture and modern patterns and languages were being adopted—reflecting “snobbish attitudes towards art”, Świdziński observed—as a way to better assimilate the cities’ cultural trends and mentality.<sup>174</sup>

These interrogations surged again one year later, in the context of a collective project carried out in the Kurpie, a rural region situated northeast of Warsaw and known for its traditional way of life. From 16 to 20 November 1977, Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera, Jan Świdziński and Leszek Mrożek—who was not physically present but had participated in the organisation of the action—realised a *Local Action in the Kurpie Region (Działania lokalne na Kurpiach)*. During what Anna Markowska has compared with a “temporary retreat into the pastoral rural landscape”, the artists lived with a family in the village of Dębniki and accompanied its members in their daily activities.<sup>175</sup> The Olbryś family, whose contact had been provided by the Museum of Łomża, was well known in the region for its dedication to artistic and craft production and most particularly, the fabrication of musical instruments and furniture, part of which was sold by a state company. The aim of the “visiting” artists was to examine the changes that had affected this family, confronted with the necessity to adapt its work to the growing process of industrialisation and standardisation of products implemented by the socialist state. They showed their interest for a small community, whose conditions of life in a rural environment were coupled with a specific relationship with artistic production and creativity.

We are tempted to see in this interest—and that of the CAS in Neuenkirchen—for an authentic and genuine culture a longing for some kind of local exoticism, a nostalgic search for a return to the roots made possible by the supposed greater “spontaneity” of the subjects under study. It is certain that the “socio-critical” or “ethno-critical” (to borrow the expression of Nil Yalter, one of the artists involved in the experience in

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<sup>174</sup> Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art*, 160-161.

<sup>175</sup> Markowska, “This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975–1980) at the Pałacyk Academic Culture Centre”, 272.



Neuenkirchen) approaches promoted in these projects were not free of preconceptions and stereotyped views, and that the relatively short time spent in the field did not allow for a truly in-depth study. However, it is also true that the progressive loss or disappearance of the system of norms and values on which rural society was based was a poorly-addressed issue in the official and alternative spheres of that time, and that projects like *Local Action in the Kurpie Region*, with its possible biases and misconceptions, represented on the other hand a valuable attempt to document and visibilise these questions. Looking retrospectively at this initiative, Świdziński stressed that Anna and Romuald Kutera, Lech Mrożek and himself were

more interested in actions in small towns, often in the countryside, where authentic communities had still been preserved. We were interested in this because the overall system of norms and values had broken down and attention needed to be focused on creating a network of new local cultures. What we were interested in were the phases of direct transition from the old communities to the new reality where old common norms were replaced by new, no less common norms of communist ideology for all.<sup>176</sup>

The intention of the artists was not to introduce a new model that would enable this “delayed” society to resist or transform itself—reflecting a paternalistic or neocolonialist position—but rather to reflect together, through empirical actions (conversations, photographic or oral recordings, observations and their report), on the conditions of these changes and their consequence. They were in fact mostly interested in “the phases of the elimination of the old local identity in favour of a new imposed vision of the world, based on an ideology that did not take into account the realities and interests of individuals.”<sup>177</sup> The history of this action was reconstructed in depth by Anna Markowska, who has also noted important contradictions inherent to the project. For example, she has wondered how could socialist ideology be criticised

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<sup>176</sup> “Nous étions plutôt intéressés à des actions dans de petites agglomérations, souvent à la campagne, où des collectivités authentiques s'étaient encore conservées. Cela nous intéressait en raison du fait que le système d'ensemble des normes et des valeurs avait volé en éclats et qu'il fallait centrer l'attention sur la création d'un réseau de cultures locales nouvelles. Ce qui a retenu notre intérêt, ce sont les phases de transition directe des communautés anciennes à la nouvelle réalité où les normes communes anciennes ont été remplacées par de nouvelles, non moins communes, de l'idéologie communiste pour tous.” Jan Świdziński, “La pratique contextuelle”, *Inter* no. 93, 2006, 10.

<sup>177</sup> Świdziński, “La pratique contextuelle”, 10.

for not taking into account individual needs, without questioning the repressive nature of the previous ideology, which “treated peasants like slaves.” She also suggested that the artists’ immersive retreat was very short if compared with other artistic experiences dealing with local populations.<sup>178</sup>

The action in Kurpie is also important, because it marked the beginning of the end of the collaboration between the artists from the RAG and Jan Świdziński, partly because of the opacity of the latter’s intentions regarding the shared authoriality of their joined activities, as well as his distinct manners to connect with the people.<sup>179</sup> If we add these discrepancies to other problems we will address now, appeared during the conference “Art as activity in the context of reality” in Warsaw, we can understand why the separation between Świdziński and the members of the RAG was completed between July and November 1977.

### **4.3. Final observations**

This second chapter has tried to capture the circulation, at a given time, of an ensemble of ideas related with the social function of art and its relation to reality, and their crystallisation within a small group of artists and cultural actors who sought, for a short period of time, to organise themselves collectively. The idea of art as contextual art formulated by Jan Świdziński was far from federating all the persons and it produced a wide range of readings, interpretations and transformations. It operated as a first catalyst for a series of discussions around a problem many artists and cultural practitioners felt concerned with, and to which they were trying to answer in their activities: art’s function in the present and its relation with its close social environment.

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<sup>178</sup> Markowska has cited the example of the Action Group (Grupa Działania) from Lucim. Markowska, “This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975–1980) at the Pałac Akademicki Culture Centre”, 273.

<sup>179</sup> “For Anna and me, interpersonal contact is very important, trying to understand other people’s lives, their attitudes and different aims. But in order to establish deeper contact, it is necessary to ‘open up’, which J. Ś. was unable or unwilling to do (as evidenced by his performative realisations); he would either talk about ‘people’ in general, or sum up his personal situation by saying ‘you know how it is’, which sounded equally evasive.” Anna and Romuald Kutera cited in Markowska, “This glass must be wiped clean. The complicated history of the Recent Art Gallery (1975–1980) at the Pałac Akademicki Culture Centre”, 273 (footnote 98).

While ideas and theory actively circulated, artistic practices established, on the other hand, a particular relation to places and contexts. It is this double relationship that fascinated me, i.e. the ambivalent state of art as contextual art, sociological art and other related practices, with their set of tensions and contradictions. Świdziński's ideas were characterised by their "exportability" and a capacity to dialogue with other theories that contemplated art as a practice anchored in the present, taking distance from any idealism. On the other side, the artworks that engaged with his ideas or dialogued with them referred to the concrete conditions of their realisation and diffusion, including material and social conditionings.

Faced with an increasingly internationalised and interchangeable language (as we will see in chapter five, with the Paris Biennale), contextual and sociological art claimed without complex the right not to be understood by a public unfamiliar with the context of their interventions; for them, this incomprehension was an integral part of the local artistic activity and even a potential source of "negative" communication, to use Fischer's term.<sup>180</sup> Far from asserting a universal view transferable to a multiplicity of places, the practices put their own legitimacy and "usefulness" to the test without being concerned with their exportability or readability elsewhere. In other words, the theory was exportable, but its materialisation or its practical application was, in essence, anti-internationalist, anti-global and deeply anchored in places.

Significantly enough, all these debates concerning contextual art and the question of art as an instrument of social transformation under given circumstances arose from new or recently founded groups or organizations, or from artists who, at that time, had just started to investigate these issues in their individual practice: the CAS was founded in 1974, the CEAC in 1975; The Recent Art Gallery started its activities in 1975 and the exhibition "Contextual Art" in Lund took place at the beginning of 1976; the symposium in Toronto at the end of the same year. *Neon de Suro* was launched in 1975. These groups and organisations emerged concomitantly in different geographies and a few decades after, Jan Świdziński would remember this alliance between artists from different countries as an example of solidarity and comradeship:

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<sup>180</sup> Fischer assimilated sociological art as a "negative utopian practice". Fischer, *Théorie de l'art sociologique*, 165-166.

On the one hand, we were demolishing the existing international structure of the Art World artistic community and, on the other hand, we sought to restore relationships based on new principles: not on mutual competition and hierarchy, but on solidarity.<sup>181</sup>

The project embodied by the Third Front was far from being deprived of calculations and betrayals. The ambition to acquire more visibility and weight on the international scene was hard to combine with the solidarity initially claimed by its members. These contradictions became particularly obvious during the conference “Art as activity in the context of reality” in Warsaw, when some artists were excluded in favour of the inclusion of others. As previously mentioned, the presence among the participants of the Argentinian and CAYC’s cofounder Jorge Glusberg crystallised the desire of part of the Third Front’s members to form a bigger anti-imperialist art coalition (in particular, Jan Świdziński and Amerigo Marras, although the latter was absent from the conference). The inclusion of artists from Latin America in the Third Front would have introduced in fact a new geographical dimension and expanded the scope of this until then exclusively north Atlantic transnational union to the southern hemisphere. However, some of the participants from Poland (in particular, the artists from the RAG) felt excluded from the discussions regarding this expanded alliance, leading to a split—both ideological and generational—between Świdziński and them, a few months after the contextual seminars in Warsaw and Kazimierz. On the other hand, we should also mention the force of attraction of Joseph Beuys and his Free International University, another pole towards which some members of the Third Front looked at and, in the case of the members of the CEAC, contributed.<sup>182</sup> This other intriguing aspect of the story cannot be addressed here as it would open another complex set of connections and geographical links. However, its existence only confirms the centrality of social issues in art practices of that time—expressed in a

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<sup>181</sup> “D’une part, nous démolissions la structure internationale en place de la communauté artistique Art World et, d’autre part, nous avons cherché à remettre en place des relations fondées sur des principes nouveaux: non pas sur une concurrence mutuelle et une hiérarchie, mais sur la solidarité.” Świdziński, “La pratique contextuelle”, 13.

<sup>182</sup> After their participation in the workshop on “Violence and Behaviour” at Documenta 6 the members of the CEAC progressively reorientated their practice towards a model similar to Beuys’ Free International University.

variety of terms—, and the need to open horizontal spaces of debate connected with society, locality, environment, ecology, as well as to be more inclusive with an audience unfamiliar with contemporary art.

Misunderstandings and frustrations, as Świdziński well said, were part of the process of “provoking a situation in which people would be able to express their attitude towards their own reality.”<sup>183</sup> This approach is, in my view, what distinguishes the practices addressed in this chapter from the ones that considered art as an instrument of political struggle in the 1960s and early 1970s. Arising from a desire to transform the relationship between art and reality, artists who identified themselves with contextual and sociological art did not endorse causes removed from their own experience like anti colonial struggles or antiwar claims, but rather endeavoured to act on smaller scales and specific geographical, social and economic coordinates closer to their concerns or those of their audience.

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<sup>183</sup> Świdziński, *Quotations on contextual art*, 102.

## CHAPTER 3

### Criticism-Activity as an arena for dialogue and action

The previous chapter contemplated an ensemble of artists who sought to break free from the shackles of the art system and proposed forms of intervention based on a sociological and contextual approach to reality. They were particularly engaged in creating a theoretical framework for their action and as such, they considered art criticism with a certain amount of mistrust—unless the art critics supported their ideas without seeking to instrumentalise or capitalise on them. Yet art criticism, as a professional field of production of knowledge and conceptual frames for addressing cultural production, played a central role in the configuration and development of the arts in the second half of the twentieth century. In the context of a study devoted to circulations during the Cold War, its role and impact cannot be overlooked.<sup>1</sup>

This third chapter will therefore look more closely at interactions and collaborations woven within and through art criticism, contemplated as a field of practice that facilitated and accompanied transnational dialogues and collaborations.

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<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, the study of art criticism has consolidated itself as a field of study in its own right, at the crossroads of cultural history, social history and the history of ideas. We note the production of collections of essays, as well as conferences and seminars devoted to particular figures: Richard Leeman, ed., *Le demi-siècle de Pierre Restany* (Paris: INHA, Les Editions des Cendres, 2009); Claudio Gamba, Annick Lemoine and Jean-Michel Pire dir., *Argan et Chastel. L'Historien de l'art, savant et politique* (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2014); Giovanna Zapperi, *Carla Lonzi: un art de la vie: critique d'art et féminisme en Italie* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2018); Tomáš Štrauss, *Tomáš Štrauss. Beyond the Great Divide-Essays on European avant gardes from East to West*, Daniel Grůň, Henry Meyric Hughes and Jean-Marc Poinot, eds. (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2020) and the conferences “Chalupecký ve světě”, Moravská galerie, Bratislava, 27 November 2020, and “Pierre Gaudibert: militant, critique, sociologue de l'art, expérimentateur de musée”, INHA, Paris/Musée de Grenoble, 24-26 February 2021. Broader approaches on the history of art criticism in specific national contexts include Richard Leeman, *Le Critique, l'art et l'histoire: de Michel Ragon à Jean Clair, 1959-1972* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010); Paula Barreiro López and Julián Díaz Sánchez, eds., *Crítica(s) de arte. Discrepancias e hibridaciones de la Guerra Fría a la globalización* (Murcia: CENDEAC, 2014); Paula Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017); Claire Leroux and Jean-Marc Poinot, eds., *Entre élection et sélection: la critique face à ses choix* (Paris: Presses du Réel, 2017); Mathilde Arnoux, “Contemporary Polish art seen through the lens of French art critics invited to the AICA Conference in Warsaw and Krakow in 1960”, in *Art in Transfer: Curatorial Practices and Transnational Strategies in the Era of Pop* (Stockholm: Elanders, 2017), 39-61; Antje Kramer Mallordy ed., 1968: *La Critique d'art, la politique et le pouvoir. Séminaire de recherche Art contemporain du program PRISME* (Rennes: Université Rennes 2/Archives de la Critique d'Art, 2018) <https://hal.univ-rennes2.fr/hal-01945791> (Accessed May 2020). The multidisciplinary research program PRISME (Contemporary Society through the Prism of Art Criticism), launched in 2015, has contributed to the visibility and analysis of the role of art criticism through multiple perspectives. <https://acaprisme.hypotheses.org> (Accessed May 2020).

The study of personal and professional connections between art critics, as well as between art critics and artists highlights, on the one hand, the importance and consistency of these ties and, on the other, the highly eclectic nature of projects and realisations that resulted from them. We will examine the way several art critics were committed in defending or supporting causes and projects related with Central European art in a post-1968 context, shedding new light on the—often uneasy—intertwining of their political convictions and their aesthetic vision. If their relations materialised into concrete objects and events that undoubtedly contributed to making the Iron Curtain more porous and permeable, friendship and solidarity should be also taken into consideration as an essential immaterial and affective counterpart to these concrete achievements. Beyond the borders, these feelings fueled a subtle sense of belonging to an invisible, yet strong community of individuals.

## **1. A changing profession. Towards a militant and “active-critique”**

### **1.1 AICA International Congresses in Poland (1960) and Czechoslovakia (1966)**

Any consideration of international relations in the field of art criticism during the second half of the twentieth century cannot disregard the central role played by the International Association of Art Critics (AICA from the French designation Association Internationale des Critiques d’art), an organisation that framed and facilitated a significant number of encounters between professionals from a wide range of countries. AICA congresses gave art critics a crucial opportunity for submitting their ideas to their pairs and discuss specific topics. Held in a multiplicity of national venues since the early 1950s, they represented in fact important opportunities of communication and reciprocal transfer of knowledge, not only between its members, but also between them and actors from the different art scenes they visited. Proceedings from the congresses are a particularly valuable and fascinating source for understanding the topics that concerned this critical and intellectual community, as well as the differentiated opinions of its members and national sections regarding a wide range of issues, from methodological and epistemological problematics to disciplinary crossings (with sciences, philosophy, architecture, among others), from the role and place of contemporary art in national or

regional contexts, to intercultural interactions and the complex equilibrium between local and world-scale actions and influences.<sup>2</sup>

The AICA was created in 1949 in Paris, on the initiative of the President of the French Artistic Press (*Presse artistique française*), Raymond Cogniat, in response to a request from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) created in 1945. Asked by the head of UNESCO's Fine Arts Section, the Czechoslovak Mojmir Vaněk, to form an international association of art critics that would guide the organisation in relation to their professional field, Cogniat set up a first congress aimed at discussing the professional and aesthetic problems faced by artists and critics, and considering the creation of an international association.<sup>3</sup> The congress was held from 21 to 28 June 1948 at the Maison de l'UNESCO in Paris and gathered participants from thirty-four countries under the presidency of the Belgian Paul Fierens. The vice-Presidents were the U.S. critic James-Johnson Sweeney, the Italian Lionello Venturi, the British Herbert Read, the French Jean Cassou and the Czech Václav Nebeský. This event resulted in the creation of a federation, the designation of several working groups and a congress, scheduled for the next year. This second congress, held in the same venue from 27 June to 3 July 1949, led to the creation of the association and its structuring into national sections.<sup>4</sup> National sections had the same structure than the whole international association but operated independently; presidents could be regularly elected or remain in their position for a very long time. As for the presidential mandate of AICA International, from 1957 on it was established for three years, renewable once.

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<sup>2</sup> See the chronology established by Lola Lorant in the framework of the Prisme project, "Chronologie des Congrès et Assemblées générales de l'AICA, 1948-2015", Prisme website, <https://acaprisme.hypotheses.org/1224>. The archives of the AICA constitute today a significant part of the Archives de la Critique d'Art (ACA), in Rennes. See Antje Kramer-Mallordy, "Les Archives de l'Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art, une histoire prospective de la mondialisation?", *Critique d'art* [En ligne] 45, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.19187> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of AICA's history, see Hélène Salle, "Historique de l'AICA (1949-1990)", AICA France, accessed October 2020, <https://aicafrance.org/historique-de-laica-1949-1990-de-helene-lassalle/> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>4</sup> The first bureau was presided by Paul Fierens (Belgium), with the vice-presidents Lionello Venturi (Italy) the members James Johnson Sweeney (United States), Raymond Cogniat (France), Eric Newton (Great Britain), Jorge J. Crespo de la Serna (Mexico), Gérard Knuttel (Netherlands), the general secretary Simone Gille-Delafon (France) and the treasurer Walter Kern (Switzerland). As a result of this second congress, the association integrated thirteen national sections. Salle, "Historique de l'AICA (1949-1990)".



Two international AICA congresses were of particular importance for the establishment and consolidation of the relations between socialist Eastern Europe and other regions and countries involved in the association. Held in the cities of Warsaw and Krakow from 6 to 13 September 1960, the VII<sup>th</sup> Congress was the first international event of the association in the Eastern bloc.<sup>5</sup> It was organised by the Polish section, active since 1955, and was attended by fifty participants, half of them Polish.<sup>6</sup> [Fig. 3.1] In his opening discourse, AICA's general president James Johnson Sweeney insisted on the historical character of this meeting between art critics from East and West and celebrated "the occasion for a new development of AICA and [...] the chance of new links with our colleagues from the East and even from the Far-East".<sup>7</sup> The congress was organised around a central topic, modern art, addressed through two main sub-themes proposed by the president of the Polish section Juliusz Starzyński during the association's last congress in Palermo, in 1957: "Modern art as an international phenomenon" and "Modern art as the outcome and expression of various tendencies in different parts of the world". Modern art, Sweeney suggested, not only occupied a central position in AICA's interests, it also reflected its structure as "a strictly international and non political body, the membership of which is fed and kept vital th[r]ough its national sections".<sup>8</sup> This optimistic statement promoted the

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<sup>5</sup> The only event of the association previously organised in a socialist (yet non-aligned) country was the association's Eighth General Assembly in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, in 1956. Lorant, "Chronologie des Congrès et Assemblées générales de l'AICA, 1948-2015". The VII<sup>th</sup> AICA Congress has been extensively analysed by Mathilde Arnoux, especially from the side of the reception and perception of Polish informal art by French art critics. See Mathilde Arnoux, "Divergence. Pierre Restany face à la peinture abstraite polonaise en 1960", in *La réalité en partage. Pour une histoire des relations artistiques entre l'Est et l'Ouest en Europe pendant la Guerre froide* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris, 2018), 75-109; also Arnoux, "Contemporary Polish art seen through the lens of French art critics invited to the AICA Conference in Warsaw and Krakow in 1960", 39-61.

<sup>6</sup> Participants from France included Jean Clarence Lambert, Jacques Lassaigne and Pierre Restany ; from Italy, Umbro Apollonio, Giulio Carlo Argan, Palma Bucarelli and Angelo Dragone. Also present were members from Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, while Hungary entered in the AICA on this occasion. See *Actes. VIIe Congrès de l'AICA, Varsovie-Cracovie, 6-13 September 1960*. Rennes, Archives de la critique d'art, Fonds AICA, Varsovie 1960. Ref. FR ACA AICAI BIB IMP002.

<sup>7</sup> "Varsovie qui nous accueille va donc être l'occasion d'un nouveau développement de l'AICA et nous offrir la chance de nouveaux liens avec nos confrères de l'Est et même de l'Orient". James Johnson Sweeney, opening discourse (untitled) in *Actes. VIIe Congrès de l'AICA, Varsovie-Cracovie*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Sweeney, opening discourse (untitled), 4. Sweeney started his discourse in French, then shifted to English and then to French again.

AICA as an inclusive organisation far removed from the Cold War's bipolar configurations, eager to give space to national idiosyncrasies.

Sweeney's insistence on AICA's apolitical position was more a wishful thinking than a reality. In fact, the VII<sup>th</sup> Congress was permeated with strategies aimed at giving visibility to social-cultural models which, in reality, reflected political agendas. As Mathilde Arnoux has pointed at, the program centered on modern art elaborated by the AICA's Polish branch "aimed to showcase the liberalisation of cultural life that Poland had enjoyed since the death of Stalin, during the period known as the Thaw".<sup>9</sup> At a time when the doctrine of socialist realism was no longer imposed, Juliusz Starzyński and his colleagues wanted to demonstrate indeed that socialist culture could endorse different styles and even express a "national path towards socialism" through modern art.<sup>10</sup> The AICA's VII<sup>th</sup> Congress thus manifested the end of the binary opposition abstraction *versus* realism as exclusive systems of representation of two antagonistic blocs. However, it also made evident a difference in the way internationalism and art informel were approached by, on the one hand, Western European and North American critics and, on the other, their Central European—in that case, mostly Polish—counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond these divergences, however, the event gave Western art critics the occasion to cross the Iron Curtain and visit socialist Central Europe for the first time. And not only Poland: after the conference in Warsaw and Krakow, a four-days tour to Czechoslovakia was organised and attended by several of them. Several studies have already shown that this additional trip was for the French art critic Pierre Restany an important opportunity for meeting Czech and Slovak artists and intellectuals and establish a network he would continue to develop and expand over the following

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<sup>9</sup> Arnoux, "Contemporary Polish art seen through the lens of French art critics invited to the AICA Conference in Warsaw and Krakow in 1960", 43.

<sup>10</sup> Starzyński cited in Arnoux, "Contemporary Polish art seen through the lens of French art critics invited to the AICA Conference in Warsaw and Krakow in 1960", 45.

<sup>11</sup> Arnoux, "Contemporary Polish art seen through the lens of French art critics invited to the AICA Conference in Warsaw and Krakow in 1960," 48-52; Arnoux, "Divergence. Pierre Restany face à la peinture abstraite polonaise en 1960", 75-109.

decades.<sup>12</sup> To mention only a few aspects of his relations with the Czech and Slovak scenes, we can recall that Restany was nominated in 1964 permanent correspondent for the weekly magazine *Výtvarná Práce* and the monthly *Výtvarná Umění*.<sup>13</sup> The same year, his encounter with the Slovak artist Alex Mlynárčik in Paris resulted in a durable friendship and an active involvement in each other's projects.<sup>14</sup> We will shortly see, however, that the promoter of Nouveau Réalisme was not the only French art critic to maintain close relations with Central European artists in the 1960s and 1970s. So did his colleague Raoul-Jean Moulin, whose exchanges with the Czech art critic Jindřich Chaloupecký will be examined further in this chapter.

Six years after the AICA's first incursion in the Eastern bloc, the cities of Prague and Bratislava hosted its XI<sup>th</sup> Congress from 25 September to 3 October 1966. It was presided by the Italian art critic Giulio Carlo Argan—in function since 1963, he was substituted by French Jacques Lassaigue after this congress. **[Fig. 3.2]** We will take a closer look at this event and some of the critical interventions realised in its context, since they provide key elements to engage in a reflection on the role of art criticism at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s and its contribution to the diffusion and understanding of artistic practices from Central Europe.

In his opening speech, the president of the Czechoslovak section Miroslav Míčko recalled that Czechoslovakia was “a country which is usually said to be at the heart of Europe and which really has the ambition to be so because it lives fully from the pulse of our continent, it swings from its agitations, it is sensitive to its destiny”. Leaving aside the aspects of socialist culture, Míčko signaled Czechoslovakia's European roots and anchorage and highlighted points of connection rather than separation between

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<sup>12</sup> Henry Meyric Hughes, “Pierre Restany, l'AICA et l'aventure est-européenne,” in *Le demi-siècle de Pierre Restany*, Richard Leeman ed. (Paris: INHA, Les Editions des Cendres, 2009), 387-401 ; Zuzana Bartošová, “Pierre Restany et la Slovaquie. L'œuvre d'Alex Mlynárčik,” in *Le demi-siècle de Pierre Restany*, 269-282; Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018), 17-20.

<sup>13</sup> This collaboration lasted until 1972. Hughes, “Pierre Restany, l'AICA et l'aventure est-européenne,” 393.

<sup>14</sup> While in Prague, Restany met Jiří Kolář and the neo-dadaist group Smidrové, as well as artists from the circle of Jan Kotík and Mikulas Medek including Stanislav Kolibal and Ales Vesely. In Poland, he met Tadeusz Kantor, Alina Szapocznikow and Ryszard Stanislawski. Hughes, “Pierre Restany, l'AICA et l'aventure est-européenne”, 390.

this “ancient land of European culture” and the rest of the continent.<sup>15</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan’s perspective, on the other hand, remained closer to the logic of Cold War binarism, claiming at the same time for dialogue and understanding. For him, the event was aligned with the 1960 congress in Poland as it consolidated the spirit of collaboration of both sides of the Iron Curtain:

Through congresses such as the one in Warsaw in 1960 and this one, a completely constructive dialogue has been opened between critics from the West and the East of Europe: it has expanded here, with the presence this year of the new sections from East Germany and Romania and a delegate-observer from the Soviet Union. On this side, therefore, all perspectives are open to us.<sup>16</sup>

This desire for openness was accompanied by a need for self-reflection visible in the congress’ central topic: art criticism itself. The event was divided in fact in three sessions, chaired by Argan and the presidents of the Czechoslovak and Dutch sections, Miroslav Míčko and Hans Jaffé. The first session was dedicated to the essence of art criticism, the second addressed its function and the third one dealt with its methods and techniques. The presentations and discussions reported in the proceedings reveal a rich range of concerns and differentiated ways to envision the profession and its role. They are particularly useful for identifying the position of art critics who were actively involved in exchanges across the Iron Curtain.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “[...] un pays dont on dit d’habitude qu’il est au cœur de l’Europe et qui réellement a l’ambition de l’être du fait qu’il vit pleinement de la pulsation de notre continent, qu’il oscille de ses agitations, qu’il est sensible à sa destinée.[...] terre ancienne de la culture européenne [...]”. Miroslav Míčko, welcoming address (untitled), in *XIe Congrès International des Critiques d’Art*, booklet, 7. Archives Raoul-Jean Moulin, MAC VAL, Vitry-sur-Seine. Ref. MOUL.TA/001.

<sup>16</sup> “Par des congrès tels que celui de Varsovie en 1960 et celui-ci, un dialogue tout à fait constructif s’est ouvert entre les critiques de l’Occident et de l’Orient d’Europe: il s’est élargi ici, avec la présence cette année des nouvelles sections de l’Allemagne de l’Est et de la Roumanie et d’un délégué-observateur de l’Union Soviétique. De ce côté, donc, toutes les perspectives nous sont ouvertes”. Giulio Carlo Argan, “La notion et la conception de la critique,” in *Actes. XIe Congrès de l’AICA “Art et critique”, Prague, 1966, 25 September-3 October 1966*, 174. Rennes, Archives de la critique d’art, Fonds AICA, Prague 1966. Ref. FR ACA AICAI BIB IMP005.

<sup>17</sup> The notion of militant art criticism was consolidated in the 1960s around a core group of mainly Italian, French and Spanish critics. Significant analyses of this notion in the Cold War transnational context can be found in Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*, 149-163 and 233-272; Regarding the participation of militant art critics in the AICA’s Prague Congress, see, in the same book, 145-149.

## 1.2 Militant criticism and criticism-activity

In his introduction to the first session focused on the essence of art criticism, Giulio Carlo Argan distinguished two main approaches:

For some, criticism is above all and almost exclusively a judgment—a detached, objective, reasoned and inconsequential judgement, obviously insofar as a judgement of value may not have practical consequences. Others, on the contrary, maintain that criticism is an activity that begins even before the work of art is finished, that is to say, it begins by influencing the very production of the work of art and, above all, it can influence the second moment of the fruition of the work of art.<sup>18</sup>

The second approach Argan assimilated with an action or an activity moved away from the idea of the art critic as a historian, to insist on his participation and direct involvement in the development of the visual arts of his time. This approach, Argan stated, started with “an act of total appropriation of the artwork, of deep identification of the critic with the artist”; it implied that both assumed the responsibility of the work, turning the critic’s act into “an act of total solidarity”.<sup>19</sup>

By asserting that “art is not complete without criticism”, Argan sustained the integral vision of a cultural binomial in which critical work opened up to new forms that were “not necessarily oral or written”.<sup>20</sup> Such conception of criticism as an action and an “act of solidarity” produced hybrid and mobile forms of intellectual and artistic collaboration that blew the boundaries between the roles of critic, artist and spectator. This perspective went hand in hand with the idea of artist as the author of an open, unfinished work:

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<sup>18</sup> “[...] pour les uns la critique est avant tout et presque uniquement jugement—un jugement détaché, objectif, motivé et sans conséquences, évidemment dans les limites où un jugement de valeur peut ne pas avoir les conséquences pratiques. Les autres, au contraire, soutiennent que la critique est une activité qui commence même avant que l’œuvre d’art soit terminée, c’est-à-dire qui commence par influencer la production même de l’œuvre d’art et qui surtout peut influencer le moment second de la fructification de l’œuvre d’art”. Giulio Carlo Argan, “L’essence de la critique”, in *Actes. XIe Congrès de l’AICA “Art et critique”, Prague, 1966, 25 September-3 October 1966*, 11. Rennes, Archives de la critique d’art, Fonds AICA, Prague 1966. Ref. FR ACA AICAI BIB IMP005.

<sup>19</sup> “Au début de l’activité du critique il y a un acte d’appropriation totale de l’œuvre, d’identification profonde du critique avec l’artiste qui vient d’accomplir et proposer son œuvre, comme ayant une valeur absolue d’art, une valeur esthétique”. Argan, “L’essence de la critique”, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Argan, “L’essence de la critique”, 12-13.

[...] the artist no longer aims to establish values or to give concrete form to fundamental ideas by giving them visual evidence. Rather, he aims to insert into the context of images elaborated by the information system of contemporary society other privileged images that have the meaning of symbols or, at least, of symptoms and indexes. Immersed himself in existential reality, where he takes meaningful samples, he is keen to leave his work “open”, unfinished. [...] In his work he doesn't ask to be separated from reality in order to pose his historical or even eternal value; on the contrary, he asks it to act directly on reality.<sup>21</sup>

Following this creative logic, the art critic did not judge but verified “the impact of the work in a specific situation” and its capacity to intervene in a given social reality. Yet the critic's action was never generic, but responded to a particular time and environment, providing a room of echo for questions raised by the artist. Affirming that it was “up to the critics to *play* [my emphasis] the works of artists in the concrete situation of contemporary society”, Argan evoked the task of the musician or the actor.<sup>22</sup> The critic not only gave life to the artwork by projecting it in the social sphere, he also left an imprint on it through interpretation (like the musician performing a score or the actor reciting a role) and, in definitive, co-creation. If the artist was the “technician of images and communication through images”, then the critic was, Argan stated, the “technician of aesthetic fruition” who endorsed the responsibility for art in the eyes of the world. In order to do so, the critic had to have access to information and communication means, not only as channels for spreading knowledge but also as means through which the artwork's full inscription in the contemporary world could be achieved.

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<sup>21</sup> “[...] l'artiste ne vise plus à établir des valeurs ou à concrétiser des idées fondamentales, en leur donnant une évidence visuelle. Il vise plutôt à insérer dans le contexte d'images élaborées par le système d'information de la société contemporaine des images privilégiées, ayant une signification de symbole ou, au moins, de symptôme et d'indice. Plongé lui-même dans la réalité existentielle, où il prélève des échantillons signifiants, il tient à laisser son œuvre “ouverte”, inachevée. [...] À son œuvre il ne demande pas de se séparer de la réalité pour se poser e valeur historique ou même éternelle; au contraire, il lui demande d'agir directement sur la réalité”. Argan, “L'essence de la critique”, 14-15. Umberto Eco's book *Opera aperta (The Open Work)* had been published in 1962, generating a great deal of debate among Italian and foreign intellectuals. Eco's reflections were articulated around the idea that “the work of art is a fundamentally ambiguous message, a plurality of meanings coexisting in a single signifier” (“l'opera d'arte è un messaggio fondamentalemente ambiguo, una pluralità di significati che convivono in un solo significante”). Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta. Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milano: Bompiani, 1962), 16.

<sup>22</sup> “[...] c'est aux critiques de jouer les œuvres des artistes dans la situation concrète de la société contemporaine”. Argan, “L'essence de la critique”, 15.

The ideas outlined by Argan in Prague were not exactly new for him and some of his peers attending the congress. Since the early 1960s, the Italian art historian and critic had endorsed the exercise of a “militant criticism”, promoted through various exchanges and encounters with Italian and foreign intellectuals, especially from France and Spain.<sup>23</sup> Besides Argan, representatives of such approach in Italy were Umbro Appollonio and Palma Buccarelli; in France, Pierre Restany and Michel Ragon; in Spain, Vicente Aguilera Cerni, Antonio Giménez Pericas and Moreno Galván.<sup>24</sup> While the idea of “militant criticism” had previously appeared in post-World War two Europe and in the United States, its particular implementation in the 1960s by this small group of European critics was permeated by a leftist discourse which, on the one hand, criticised the idea of the autonomy of art as promoted by U.S. critic Clement Greenberg and on the other hand, considered with suspicion art’s direct instrumentalisation for direct political propaganda, like in the case of socialist realism.<sup>25</sup> “In general,” Paula Barreiro observed, “militant critics coincided in their search for a non-aligned lineage in the artistic avant-garde—linking Western Europe to the East and Latin America—in order to distance themselves from the American, but

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<sup>23</sup> A central event for the articulation of this positioning was the XII Convegno Internazionale Artisti, Critici e Studiosi d’Arte in the cities of Rimini, Verucchio and San Marino, 26-29 September 1963. It generated a debate on the function of art criticism and its “right” to exercise itself creatively, a position that was questioned by a group of Roman artists in statements in the periodical publication *Avanti. Oltre l’Informale. IV Biennale Internazionale d’Arte*, exh. cat. (San Marino: Ente Governativo per il turismo, lo sport e lo spettacolo, 1963); Federica Boragina, “Il convegno di Verucchio del 1963 e il dibattito critico nel mondo dell’arte contemporanea,” in *Arte Italiana 1960-1964 Identità culturale, confronti internazionali, modelli americani*, proceedings of the research seminar held in Milan, Museo del Novecento and Gallerie d’Italia - Piazza Scala, 25 October 2013 by Flavio Fergonzi and Francesco Tedeschi (Milano: Scalpendi Editore, 2017), 151-163; Lara Conte, ““La critica è potere”. Percorsi e momenti della critica negli anni Sessanta”, in *Carla Lonzi: la duplice radicalità. Dalla critica militante al femminismo di Rivolta*, Lara Conte, Vincia Fiorino and Vanessa Martini, eds. (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2011), 89-93; Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*, 141-145.

<sup>24</sup> Most of them participated in the AICA Congress in Prague and Bratislava and presented papers: Umbro Appollonio, “La critique devant le nouveau”, 38-43; Antonio Gimenez Pericás and Vicente Aguilera Cerni, “Liberté de la critique”, 90-99 ; Pierre Restany, “L’aspect sociologique du devenir d’un critique”, 108 ; Palma Buccarelli, “Le musée et la communication des masses”, 137-139, all in *Actes. XIe Congrès de l’AICA “Art et critique”, Prague, 1966*. The continuity between discussions held in Rimini, Verucchio and San Marino, and the AICA Congress of 1966 have been stressed in Paula Barreiro López, “La critique militante: culture et revolution”, in Claire Leroux and Jean-Marc Poinot, eds., *Entre élection et sélection: la critique face à ses choix* (Paris: Presses du Réel, 2017), 214-215.

<sup>25</sup> Barreiro López, “La critique militante: culture et revolution”, 204-205.

also Soviet, cultural model”.<sup>26</sup> The political dimension of art criticism was thus reaffirmed in the 1960s as a sort of non-aligned activism who fervently backed anti-imperialist struggles, without renouncing at the same time, as Argan’s discourse in Prague clearly showed, to express the critic’s own individuality and creativity in the process of accompanying the artists.

We should insist however on the fact that there were notable differences in the intensity of such militancy or engagement, depending on the critics’ working context and background. Those whose Marxist position was most loudly exposed and transposed into action were, without doubt, the Spanish critics who were driven by a situation of repression that justified such bold positioning—at the risk of suffering consequences from the Francoist regime. For them, the challenge of this practice was all the more important as it involved a collective work of resistance and transformation of the sociopolitical system.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, Argan’s political position was more ambiguous and his political choices, as Frédéric Attal has suggested, were conditioned by his cultural commitment, and not the contrary. Initially close to the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), Argan gradually moved away from it and adopted a position of left-wing independence (more left than the socialists), before joining the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in 1979.<sup>28</sup> As for Pierre Restany, his adhesion to gaullism led him, in the 1960s, to exacerbate his optimistic perception of a period of prosperity marked by consumption and an increase in the standard of living of

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<sup>26</sup> “En général, les critiques militants s’accordaient pour chercher un lignage non aligné dans l’avant-garde artistique—qui reliait l’Europe de l’Ouest à l’Est et à l’Amérique latine—pour se distancier du modèle culturel américain, mais aussi soviétique”. Barreiro López, “La critique militante: culture et revolution”, 216.

<sup>27</sup> Spanish art critic Vicente Aguilera Cerni affirmed that militant criticism resided in the “search for living values and active meanings”, in contrast with that of those critics who worked closely with museums on the “historical fixation of those same values” (“Así, se dividen las funciones : la crítica militante, como hallazgo de valores vivos y significados activos; los críticos en función rectora de museos, como fijación historia de esos mismos valores.”) Vicente Aguilera Cerni, in *Oltre l’Informale. IV Biennale Internazionale d’Arte*, exh. cat. (San Marino: Ente Governativo per il turismo, lo sport e lo spettacolo, 1963), 13. “[...] for Aguilera Cerni art criticism was to a great extent about ideologizing artistic activity”. Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*, 157. See also Paula Barreiro López, “La sombra de Marx. Vanguardia, ideología y sociedad en la crítica militante del segundo franquismo”, in Paula Barreiro López and Julián Díaz Sánchez eds., *Crítica(s) de arte. Discrepancias e hibridaciones de la Guerra Fría a la globalización* (Murcia, CENDEAC, 2014), 253-274.

<sup>28</sup> Frédéric Attal, “Le parcours intellectuel et politique de Giulio Carlo Argan,” in *Argan et Chastel. L’Historien de l’art, savant et politique*, Claudio Gamba, Annick Lemoine and Jean-Michel Pire, eds. (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2014), 53-66.



citizens. This vision, as Jill Carrick pointed out, led him to avoid any attitude of social criticism and confrontation.<sup>29</sup> We can thus appreciate the heterogeneity of this left-oriented spectrum of militant art criticism.

In his preface to Restany's book *Les Nouveaux Réalistes* (1968), the French art critic Michel Ragon proposed a description-definition of the figure of the militant art critic Restany embodied for him: "a companion of struggle within a clan, even a gang leader [...]"<sup>30</sup>. He also introduced an important element, immateriality, that recalled Argan's ideas exposed in Prague. Ragon insisted on the fact that militant criticism manifested itself not only through writing, but above all by "making" things. Sometimes, there was no trace left of this process of "making"—the same happened in the case of dance, also an immaterial art form, observed Ragon:

Writing, organising, highlighting, grouping, defining, these are some of the tasks of the art critic, activist and theorist. Catalysing scattered movements, bringing together artists working in the same direction who, without the critic, would have had no chance of meeting, calming the dissensions that arise, brandishing a manifesto like a flag, finally living the adventure of art, of a moment in art, in all its fullness, with all the passions and injustices it implies, does not mean sticking to the already seductive role of "friends of painters" as Carco defined it, but being much more exigent and more ambitious. At the level we stand, the critic is not merely a companion of the artist. He helps him to be himself.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Jill Carrick, "Vers un art de l'intégration?", in *Le demi-siècle de Pierre Restany*, Richard Leeman, ed. (Paris: INHA, Les Editions des Cendres, 2009), 77-88. Cited in Arnoux, *La réalité en partage. Pour une histoire des relations artistiques entre l'Est et l'Ouest en Europe pendant la Guerre froide*, 107-108.

<sup>30</sup> "Le critique militant, compagnon de lutte d'un clan, voire chef de bande [...]". Michel Ragon, "De la critique considérée comme une création", in Pierre Restany, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes* (Paris: Éditions Planète, 1968), 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> "Écrire, organiser, souligner, grouper, définir, voilà quelques-unes des tâches du critique d'art, militant et théoricien. Catalyser des mouvements épars, réunir des artistes travaillant dans le même sens et qui, sans le critique n'auraient eu aucune chance de se rencontrer, apaiser les dissensions qui surgissent, brandir un manifeste comme un drapeau, vivre enfin l'aventure de l'art, d'un moment de l'art, dans toute sa plénitude, avec toutes les passions et les injustices que cela comporte, ce n'est pas là s'en tenir au rôle, déjà fort séduisant d'"amis" des peintres" tel que le définissait Carco, mais être beaucoup plus exigeant et plus ambitieux. Au niveau où nous nous plaçons, le critique ne se contente pas d'être un compagnon de l'artiste. Il l'aide à être lui-même". Ragon, "De la critique considérée comme une création", 11.

We could compare the action of “playing” proposed by Argan with that of “revealing” suggested by Ragon: “the critic will not only be a revealer in the sense of “he who raises awareness”, but above all in the way the word is used in photography: “he who makes the latent image appear”. He is able to express before them what they felt confusedly. This is where criticism comes up to creation”.<sup>32</sup>

Although Argan did not use the expression “militant criticism” in his interventions in the Prague Congress, the “criticism-activity” he referred to—and he also insisted on its participatory and didactic dimensions—was close to it, since it reflected a practice strongly committed to supporting artists on the one hand and, on the other, embedded in a specific social and cultural environment. At the same time, the idea of “criticism-activity” seemed more inclusive than “militant” or “activist criticism”, especially for those critics who were supporting artists of their time, but were reluctant to embrace militantism for its political resonance. We could even suggest that in order to adapt his speech to the socialist environment in which it was articulated, Argan may have avoided to use the term. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the idea of “activity”, in contrast, had a more positive connotation in a socialist context, as an action with a concrete aim and function in the social system.

It is with this notion of criticism-activity or criticism-action in mind that we will now address several dialogues and interactions between art critics. In particular, the case of the correspondence between Jindřich Chalupecký and Raoul-Jean Moulin will show how the “active criticism” evoked by Argan could manifest itself in the context of transnational exchanges across the Iron Curtain.

We already mentioned that not all the critics who had connections East of the Iron Curtain adopted a deliberately militant and political stance. This doesn’t mean that they operated neutrally. On this respect, less than two years after the AICA Congress in Czechoslovakia, the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troupes in August 1968 represented a pivotal moment for many Western intellectuals who became more

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<sup>32</sup> “Le critique aura été un révélateur non pas seulement révélateur dans le sens de “celui qui fait connaître”, mais surtout tel qu’on emploie ce mot en photographie: “qui fait apparaître l’image latente”. Il a su exprimer avant eux, ce qu’ils ressentaient confusément. C’est là où la critique s’élève à la création”. Ragon, “De la critique considérée comme une création”, 11.

acutely aware of their role and responsibility of intermediaries. After the strong repression of the Prague Spring and during the normalisation period in Czechoslovakia, the discussions regarding the social and political function of art criticism held during the 1960s took on a different meaning and tended at leaving the theoretical domain. In fact, we will try to highlight now how certain art critics reconsidered their form of engagement and redirected it on a different, more pragmatic level. Rather than provocative statements calling for direct political action, they gave primacy to personal interaction and sustained a subterranean action of defense and promotion of artists from Czechoslovakia and, more generally, from the Eastern bloc. I suggest that Raoul-Jean Moulin and Jindřich Chalupecký embodied, each in their own way but with important points of confluence, such discrete but persistent commitment.

## **2. Dialogues across the Iron Curtain. Jindřich Chalupecký and Raoul-Jean Moulin**

### **2.1. Chalupecký at the AICA Congress in Prague (1966)**

The 1966 AICA congress in Prague was attended by a significant number of Czech and Slovak art critics—the program distributed to the participants listed twenty six members, a number only exceeded by the French and Italian delegations with their twenty-seven and thirty members.<sup>33</sup> Among them, fifty-six years old Jindřich

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<sup>33</sup> Members of the Czechoslovak section included Jindřich Chalupecký, Jiří Kotalík, Miroslav Lamac, Miroslav Míčko, Jiří Padrta, and Jiří Setlik, among others. *XIe Congrès International des Critiques d'Art*, unpaginated.

Chalupecký was already an eminent art theorist, critic and curator with a large trajectory behind him.<sup>34</sup>

Chalupecký studied philosophy, aesthetics and art history at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague—although he did not get his diploma and never became a “doctor”. He started publishing literary and art critique in the 1930s, then longer essays, and organised exhibitions in the 1940s. In 1942, he cofounded and became the main theoretician of the multidisciplinary group Skupina 42 (Group 42), inspired in the avant-gardes (cubism, futurism, constructivism, surrealism) and interested in human experience in an urban context. The group lasted until in 1948, when the Communists came to power in Czechoslovakia and banned its activities.<sup>35</sup> Chalupecký’s proximity to the avant-garde and his moderate position in the eyes of the authorities—he was not actively involved in political propaganda or in the promotion of the socialist realist doctrine—made it impossible for him to publish from 1948 until the 1960s. He was seen as a “cosmopolitan element” whose interest for art from different origins made suspicious.<sup>36</sup> After this period, however, the years between 1963 and 1968 opened a time of release during which Czechoslovak art

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<sup>34</sup> For an approach to the first years of Chalupecký’s activity, see Zdeněk Brdek, *Obhájce moderního umění: Jindřich Chalupecký v kontextu 30. a 40. let 20. století*, (Prague: Akropolis, 2017) (including an English resume). Publications in English-language regarding Chalupecký include Tomáš Pospiszyl, “A modernist crossroads: Jindřich Chalupecký versus Clement Greenberg”, in Tomáš Pospiszyl, *An Associative Art History: Comparative Studies of Neo-Avant-Gardes in a Bipolar World* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier; Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2018), 16-37; Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, Chapters 1, 2 and 14; Lola Kantor-Kazovsky, “The Moscow Underground Art Scene in an International Perspective”, in Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski, eds., *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 31-44; Johana Lomová, “The Production of Art. Jindřich Chalupecký on Textiles and Means of Artistic Production”, online publication, “Trips” section, *Institute of the Present*, 2020, [https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2019/11/15/the-production-of-art-jindrich-chalupecky-on-textiles-and-means-of-artistic-production/#\\_ftn4](https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2019/11/15/the-production-of-art-jindrich-chalupecky-on-textiles-and-means-of-artistic-production/#_ftn4) (Accessed December 2021), Juliane Debeusscher, “Dialogues engagés au travers du Rideau de fer: Raoul-Jean Moulin et Jindřich Chalupecký”, in Antje Kramer-Mallordy ed., *1968: La Critique d’art, la politique et le pouvoir. Séminaire de recherche Art contemporain du program PRISME* (Rennes: Université Rennes 2/Archives de la Critique d’Art, 2018), 148-163. English translations of his texts include Jindřich Chalupecký, “The Intellectual under Socialism” (1949), in Tomáš Pospiszyl and Laura Hoptman ed., *Primary Documents. A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 29-37.

<sup>35</sup> The group was constituted by the theoreticians Jindřich Chalupecký and Jiří Kotalík, the poets Jiří Kolář, Ivan Blatný, Jiřina Hauková, Josef Kainar and Jan Hanč, the writers Zdeněk Němeček, the painters František Hudeček, Kamil Lhoták, Karel Souček, Jan Kotík, Jan Smetana, Bohumír Matal and František Gross, the sculptor Ladislav Zív and the photographer Miroslav Hák. See Marie Klimešová, *Věci umění, věci doby. Skupina 42* (Prague and Plzeň: Arbor Vitae and Západočeská galerie, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> This aspect was highlighted in Tomáš Pospiszyl, “The duality of Jindřich Chalupecký’s domestic and foreign interests”, conference in the framework of the online symposium “Chalupecký ve světě”, Moravská galerie, Jindřich Chalupecký Society, 27 November 2020.

critics, historians and more generally intellectuals could travel and exchange internationally. Chalupecký's writings could circulate again in Czechoslovakia and he was able to travel to Paris in 1964, to Moscow in 1965. In 1965, he became the manager of the Václav Špála Gallery in Prague, a position that allowed him to exhibit a significant number of Czech and Slovak, as well as international artists—including the Japanese group Gutai in 1967 and a retrospective of Marcel Duchamp in March 1969. In the Czechoslovak context, Chalupecký operated as an expert in international contemporary art and contributed to numerous magazines and books. At the same time, his contributions to magazines and publications abroad (*Studio International*, *Art Monthly*, *Flash Art*, *Domus*, *Opus International*) dispensed precious information not only on contemporary Czech and Slovak art, but also on practices from other socialist countries, including the Soviet Union.

Between the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops and the arrival to power of Gustav Husak as the new secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party on 17 April 1969, Chalupecký's situation remained ambiguous and he was still able to publish a few articles. Afterwards, as a consequence of the restoration of order, the critic and art historian was banned again and could not publish or work for public institutions. The Václav Špála Gallery was closed in May 1970. In 1971, Chalupecký made a last official trip to the Soviet Union, after which he was definitively forbidden to travel or participate—at least in an official way—in international events like AICA Congresses or the Venice Biennale.

Chalupecký's contribution to the 1966 AICA Congress in Prague consists in two papers, written in French language. The first one, titled "Criticism must be a philosophical discipline" ("La critique doit être une discipline philosophique"), was read during the first session on the essence of art criticism, chaired by Argan. [Fig. 3.3] The Czech critic started by observing the resistance of certain forms of art to the usual art historical and aesthetic methods of analysis—he cited Duchamp, the Dadaists, the Futurists and artworks like the early monochromes of Malevich and Rodchenko.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, "La critique doit être une discipline philosophique", in *Actes. XIe Congrès de l'AICA "Art et critique"*, Prague, 1966, 25 September-3 October 1966, 48. Rennes, Archives de la critique d'art, Fonds AICA, Prague 1966. Ref. FR ACA AICAI BIB IMP005.

In Chalupecký's view, this kind of art belonged to an "archaic timelessness" in which the methods of historical criticism couldn't be applied, since artworks of this kind went "beyond the limits imposed on art by our society" and were even assimilated to non-art or anti-art. He referred to Allan Kaprow and Dick Higgins as two examples of this expansion of boundaries. How, then, could such unprecedented yet persistent artistic phenomena be addressed and classified, if "scientific" criticism inevitably failed in this task, wondered the Czech art critic?

[t]hese works are addressed to me, they demand something from me, they call me, they look within me for an ally for a certain spiritual effort that must be made at this very moment. Little or nothing can be grasped and analysed in Fontana's torn canvases or in the latest Lichtensteins, but they encourage me to make strange experiences, to await through them the possibilities of my existence that have escaped to me until now, that is to say, experiences that are historically new in our civilisation. [...] Art criticism cannot transpose these experiences into a literary language: the work of art is untranslatable. Something completely different is necessary. It is necessary to think about this experience in order to turn this fugitive experience into a new knowledge of the dimensions of our existence in the world.<sup>38</sup>

For Chalupecký, the task of art criticism was not to understand or explain, but rather perform an "ontological meditation" aimed at "deepen[ing] and broaden[ing] the new spiritual space opened up by the work of contemporary artists". By doing so, they acquired a method "firm enough to be able to discern in the tumultuous history of the avant-garde the valuable works from the worthless ones" on one hand, and, on the other, adopted a position of "Socratic birth-giver" that could facilitate "the birth of

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<sup>38</sup> "Ces œuvres s'adressent à moi, exigent de moi quelque chose, m'appellent, cherchent en moi l'allié pour un certain effort spirituel que l'on doit accomplir en ce moment précis. Il n'y a rien ou presque rien [de] saisissable et d'analysable dans les toiles déchirées de Fontana ou dans les derniers Lichtensteins; mais elles m'incitent à faire des expériences étranges, à attendre à travers elles les possibilités de mon existence qui m'échappaient jusqu'alors, c'est-à-dire des expériences qui sont dans notre civilisation historiquement nouvelles.[...] La critique ne peut pas transposer ces expériences dans un langage littéraire: l'œuvre d'art est intraduisible. Quelque chose de tout à fait autre est nécessaire. Il faut penser cette expérience pour faire de cette expérience fugitive un nouveau savoir des dimensions de notre existence dans le monde". Chalupecký, "La critique doit être une discipline philosophique", 49-50.

new and true works”.<sup>39</sup> Chalupecký thus considered that the discipline of art criticism had to offer keys to approach not the meaning of individual works, but rather their connection to an artistic essence only “true” artworks allowed to access. Since art was untranslatable, such keys relied on the critic’s proper solitary sensitive and intellectual experience rather than on a grid of reading based on scientific criteria. The critic, however, Chalupecký precised, was not condemned to solitude as far as he lived “in the same confraternity” with the artists, also solitary individuals.

Chalupecký’s second intervention took place in the session dedicated to the function of art criticism, under the title “The dialectic of the historicity and a-historicity of criticism” (“La dialectique de l’historicité et de l’a-historicité de la critique”).<sup>40</sup> Recalling his unsuccessful proposal for a survey aimed at collecting testimonials of AICA members on their own manners to do art criticism, Chalupecký insisted on differencing art criticism and art history (or aesthetics): while the latter belonged to the realm of science and applied scientific methodologies, criticism relied on meditation and philosophical heuristics. Hence the importance for him to endorse an “absolute naivety” in order to remain independent not only from intellectual and scientific theories, but also from ideology. If art did not belong to the world order created by sciences, as a creative act, it nevertheless

[...] integrates itself into this order, extends it, enriches it, develops it and becomes the object of scientific, historical, semiotic, anthropological studies, etc. But before belonging to the order of the world, of history, [art] is an original fact, and the main

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<sup>39</sup> “The ontological meditation of this kind of critic is not an end in itself. It has a precise function, which is to deepen and widen the new spiritual space opened up by the work of contemporary artists. By following this path, the critic gains, I believe, two things. He manages to establish a method firm enough to be able to discern in the tumultuous history of the avant-garde the valuable works from the worthless ones. Moreover, by creating an appropriate intellectual atmosphere, the critic becomes the Socratic birth-giver: he facilitates the birth of new and true works”. (“La méditation ontologique d’un tel critique n’est pas une fin en soi. Elle a une fonction précise qui est d’approfondir et d’élargir le nouvel espace spirituel ouvert par l’œuvre des artistes contemporains. En suivant cette voie, le critique gagne, je crois, deux choses. Il arrive à établir une méthode assez ferme pour pouvoir discerner dans l’histoire tumultueuse de l’avant-garde les œuvres valables des œuvres vaines. En plus, en créant une atmosphère intellectuelle adéquate, le critique arrive à devenir l’accoucheur socratique: il facilite la naissance des œuvres nouvelles et vraies”). Chalupecký, “La critique doit être une discipline philosophique”, 50.

<sup>40</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, “La dialectique de l’historicité et de l’a-historicité de la critique”, in *Actes. XIe Congrès de l’AICA “Art et critique”, Prague, 1966, 25 September-3 October 1966, 103-105*. Rennes, Archives de la critique d’art, Fonds AICA, Prague 1966. Ref. FR ACA AICAI BIB IMP005.

task of a critic is to reveal this originality. Therefore, the methods of criticism cannot be those of science but those of meditation, of philosophical heuristics.<sup>41</sup>

Confronted with a phenomenon which literal meaning remained beyond his comprehension, the critic could at least help to understand its “raison d’être”.

How could this conception relate to Argan’s idea of “active criticism”? If Chalupecký’s vision seemed apparently far from the more materialist vision of his Italian colleague, his deep involvement alongside the artists in a process of co-creation resonated with the role Argan attributed to the art critic. Beyond its philosophical dimension, Chalupecký saw art criticism as a practice that contributed to forge a society more actively engaged in its own development. This connection would be clearly expressed a few years later, when the political situation after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the troupes of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968 led Chalupecký to express his position more directly.

Chalupecký wrote “All power to workers’ committees” (“Všechnu moc dělnickým radám”) on 18 January 1969, the day the student Jan Palach sets himself on fire on Wenceslas Square in Prague to protest against the Soviet intervention. The article, which title was borrowed from Lenin’s revolutionary motto from 1917, “All power to the Soviets”, was published on the first page of the February edition of the weekly magazine *Listy*, published by the Union of Writers.<sup>42</sup> It called for a union for civil rights between intellectuals and, at the same time, argued in favour of the recuperation of art and culture for all, both as a condition and a consequence of life in freedom. For Chalupecký, the modern industrialised civilisation was a civilisation of non-freedom and passivity, in which life had become a product and culture has lost its meaning. This view echoed that of artists and intellectuals who, from both sides of the Iron Curtain, criticised the emergence of a mass culture and a consumer society that deactivated or absorbed any critical or avant-garde gesture, like for exemple the

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<sup>41</sup> “L’art comme tout acte créateur s’intègre dans cet ordre, le prolonge, l’enrichit, le développe et devient l’objet des études scientifiques, historiques, sémiotiques, anthropologiques etc etc. Mais avant d’appartenir à l’ordre du monde, de l’histoire, il est un fait original, et la tâche principale d’un critique est de révéler cette originalité. Donc, les méthodes de la critique ne peuvent pas être celles de la science mais celles de la méditation, de l’heuristique philosophique”. Chalupecký, “La dialectique de l’historicité et de l’a-historicité de la critique”, 104-105.

<sup>42</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, “Všechnu moc dělnickým radám” (“All power to workers’ committees”), *Listy* 2, no. 7, 20 February 1969, 1-3.



Situationists or collectives evoked in Chapter one like the Grupo N. O., the Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana in Spain and the Gruppo 63 in Italy. In this regard, it is certainly not insignificant that Chalupecký's "All power to workers' committees" was translated and published in the Italian magazine *Quindici*, through which the Gruppo 63 diffused its ideas.<sup>43</sup> The Italian editors introduced the article in these terms:

Jindřich Chalupecký is known in his country mainly as an art critic; in recent months, however, he has written a number of articles with a political and social content, linked to the events of the new course and the occupation. He is not a Marxist; his reference to workers' councils is part of an explicitly populist vision. His "libertarian" political conception, inspired by French anarchist and situationist movements, is connected to a pragmatic philosophy of freedom.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the clear leftist orientation of the Gruppo 63 and its members, the authors of this anonymous introduction (*Quindici's* main editor at that time was Nanni Balestrini) fully understood Chalupecký's non-Marxist position and welcomed his contribution to the emergence of "differentiated" (i.e., non-orthodox) positions within the Czechoslovak left—which, they specified, was equated with the extreme right by the ruling communists.

According to Piotr Piotrowski, Chalupecký's existentialist posture "with its emphasis on the individual, subjectivity, inner experience and the problem of freedom considered from an individual rather than collective perspective" reflected the invocation of freedom as "a reaction against the institutionalization of Marxism in Eastern Europe" that "offered a polemic response to the main concepts and, above all,

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<sup>43</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, "Tutto il potere ai consigli operai", *Quindici*, no. 18, July 1969, 27-28. *Quindici* was created in 1967 and published until August 1969, first directed by Alfredo Giuliano and then, by Nanni Balestrini. It represented an important space of expression for the concerns of Gruppo 63, which straddled the line between anti-establishment, counter-culture and political contestation. See *Quindici. Una rivista e il Sessantotto* Nanni Balestrini, ed. (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> "Jindřich Chalupecký è conosciuto nel suo paese soprattutto come critico d'arte; negli ultimi mesi tuttavia ha scritto alcuni articoli di contenuto politico e sociale, legati ai fatti del nuovo corso e dell'occupazione. Non è un marxista: il suo richiamo ai consigli operai fa parte di una visione esplicitamente populista. La sua concezione politica "libertaria" che trae ispirazione dai movimenti anarchici e situazionisti francesi, è legata ad una filosofia della libertà di origine pragmatistica." Introduction to Chalupecký, "Tutto il potere ai consigli operai", 27.

the values of the official philosophy: materialism and collectivism”.<sup>45</sup> If we can agree with this view, the comments of the editors of *Quindici* and the ideas exposed in “All power to workers’ committees” show on the other hand that Chaloupecký’s thinking was deeply embedded in the social field and in the search for collective action. The art critic claimed the right to culture for all as a subjective and creative act, in a context in which factory workers had been trained to be passive at work and were expected to enjoy their time for rest and leisure in a non-creative way. He asked for a restoration of human freedom through the possibility of taking part in social and collective decisions, and insisted on the centrality of culture in this collective process:

The real government of the people can begin only where even those who are not yet free and accustomed to making foreign decisions realize their inner freedom and begin to make their own decisions on the fundamental issues of their lives, not only private but also socially.<sup>46</sup>

While these comments leave no doubt about Chaloupecký’s engagement, at the same time, it is certain that the notion of militancy acquired a completely different meaning and implication for him and, in general, intellectuals who lived under state socialism. Chaloupecký’s engagement resided in his attempt to remain separated–preserved–from the ideology sustained by the state apparatuses. From there, the centrality of the notion of freedom in his writings, not as a state of rejection of politics (understood here as the site of the community), but rather as a condition for recovering what is designated today as “agency”, in other words, a capacity for movement and action inscribed in the social field and, at the same time, acting on it.

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<sup>45</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta. Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe*, trans. Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 73.

<sup>46</sup> “Skutečná vláda lidu může začínat teprve tam, kde i ti, kteří jsou dosud nesvobodní a navyklí se podrobovat cizím rozhodováním, si uvědomí svou vnitřní svobodu a začnou se v základních otázkách svého života, nejen soukromého, nýbrž i společenského, rozhodovat sami”. My translation. Jindřich Chaloupecký, *Tiha Doby. Stati o časových souvislostech a situacích kultury 1968-1988* (*The burden of Time. Articles on time contexts and situations of culture 1968-1988*), Jiřina Hauková and Miroslav Červenka eds. (Olomouc: Votobia, 1997). Available on [https://monoskop.org/images/d/d3/Chaloupecký\\_Jindřich\\_Tiha\\_doby.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/d/d3/Chaloupecký_Jindřich_Tiha_doby.pdf) (Accessed January 2021).

The AICA congress in Prague was the occasion for Chalupecký to strengthen his relations with interlocutors from non-socialist countries. In the case of Italy, he started an active correspondence and collaboration with Giulio Carlo Argan, the first result of which was the exhibition “Arte contemporanea in Cecoslovacchia” on view in 1969 at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna di Roma (GNAM).<sup>47</sup> In the same period and until the early 1970s, Chalupecký collaborated with the Milan-based gallery owner Arturo Schwarz. Schwarz travelled to Prague in 1968 and 1969 to visit artists’ studios and acquired works for his collection. He then exhibited some of them in his gallery in the framework of personal exhibitions by Czech artists (František Janoušek (June-September 1969), Jiří Balcar (December 1969-January 1970), Jiří Kolář (March 1972) and Ladislav Novák (June-September 1974)).<sup>48</sup> Schwarz and Chalupecký had also in common their passion for the work of Marcel Duchamp: almost in parallel, Schwarz directed in 1969 the catalogue raisonné of the artist, who had passed away in October 1968, while Chalupecký organised his retrospective at the Václav Špála Gallery.

During the 1970s, Chalupecký published several articles in Italian art magazines. Another of his Italian interlocutors was Paolo Fossati, in charge of the arts section of the publishing house Einaudi and editor of the magazine *NAC (Notiziario d’Arte Contemporaneo)*. While Fossati invited Chalupecký to contribute to a special issue of *NAC* dedicated to Czechoslovakia, published in 1972, the Czech critic also collaborated with *Flash Art* and its editors Helena Kontova and Giancarlo Politi, and worked also on a project for a monograph on Czech art that should have been

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<sup>47</sup> The project surged after Chalupecký’s meeting with GNAM director Palma Buccarelli at the AICA congress in Bordeaux in 1968, followed by a preparatory trip to Rome. The exhibition held from 17 May to 15 June 1969 presented both historical (from the first avant-garde) and contemporary Czech and Slovak artists. Susanna Horvatovičová, “Corrispondenza di Jindřich Chalupecký con Giulio Carlo Argan: un contributo al superamento delle frontiere nei paesi dell’Est,” in *Argan et Chastel. L’Historien de l’art, savant et politique*, Claudio Gamba, Annick Lemoine and Jean-Michel Pire, eds. (Paris: Mare & Martin, 2014), 211-227.

<sup>48</sup> According to Horvatovičová, it was Schwarz who helped Chalupecký to publish in *Quindici* after the repression of the Prague Spring. Horvatovičová, “Corrispondenza di Jindřich Chalupecký con Giulio Carlo Argan: un contributo al superamento delle frontiere nei paesi dell’Est”, 218-219.

published through Argan's intermediary but was never realised.<sup>49</sup> Despite the impossibility of traveling during those years, these collaborations made possible the diffusion of well-informed perspectives on contemporary Czechoslovak art in the Italian context.

## **2.2 Chalupecký and Moulin. Strategies of communication before and after 1968**

Among Chalupecký's contacts established during the AICA congress in Prague was the French art critic Raoul-Jean Moulin. An example of intellectual friendship across the Iron Curtain, the correspondence between Chalupecký and Moulin not only unveils the broad range of interests shared by the two art critics, but also the committed decisions that have marked their collaboration.

Raoul-Jean Moulin developed a passion for art and culture from an early age and was trained on his own, between his hometown Saint-Etienne and Paris. Between 1953 and 1958, he spent several years in West Africa, particularly in the Ivory Coast (first for his military service, then as a documentary filmmaker and film columnist) and at his return in France, Louis Aragon invited him to join the publication *Les Lettres Françaises*, he was directing. [Fig. 3.4] Moulin was a member of the French Communist Party (PCF) and with Aragon's support, he contributed to the magazine from 1958 until its closure in 1972, after which he joined the communist daily *L'Humanité*. Over the 1960s, the art critic was involved in various collective projects; in 1962-1963, he organised the cycle of exhibitions "Donner à voir" in which art critics were invited to present their selection of artworks.<sup>50</sup> Some of them cofounded then in 1965 the magazine *Opus International*, which first editorial team was composed by Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, Alain Jouffroy, Jean-Clarence Lambert, Jean-

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<sup>49</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, "Il destino di una generazione," special insert "Cecoslovacchia'72. Appunti su una prospettiva", Paolo Fossati, ed., *NAC Notiziario Arte Contemporanea* no. 10, October 1972, 10-14. On Chalupecký's relations with *Flash Art*, see Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981*, 369-382. The monograph on Czech and Slovak art was planned for the collection *Arte dopo il 1945* (Cappelli editions) which included volumes on art from the U.S., Italy, Greece, Spain and, later, Argentina. Horvatovičová, "Corrispondenza di Jindřich Chalupecký con Giulio Carlo Argan: un contributo al superamento delle frontiere nei paesi dell'Est", 224-225.

<sup>50</sup> "Donner à voir" took place at the Galerie Creuze in Paris, in three editions (Donner à voir 1, 15 May-8 June 1962; Donner à voir 2, 1-22 December 1962; Donner à voir 3, 7-29 May 1963). A fourth edition took place at the Galerie Zunini in Montparnasse, in 1966.

Jacques Lévêque and Raoul-Jean Moulin. The magazine's first issue was published on April 1967 and Moulin remained involved in the editorial board until 1972.

Moulin's interest for Czechoslovakia and, more generally, socialist Eastern Europe manifested through different forms: first, his articles and editorial work for *Les Lettres Françaises*, *L'Humanité*, *Opus International* and, later, *Révolution* (which substituted the communist magazine *La nouvelle critique* in 1980)<sup>51</sup>; second, his involvement in the organisation of the Paris Biennale, in particular as a member of its International Commission in the 1970s; finally, from 1966 to 1976, Moulin was in charge of the organisation of the multidisciplinary artistic event "Châtillon des Arts" in the city of Châtillon, belonging to the so-called "red belt", a ring of communist municipalities around Paris.<sup>52</sup> Moulin was in fact a communist member of the municipality of this city south-west of the capital and he didn't hesitate to include artists from socialist countries in his projects, like Alex Mlynářčik and Jana Želibská.<sup>53</sup>

Although he never defined himself as such, Raoul-Jean Moulin's approach was close to that of militant criticism, in the sense of a close accompaniment of artists he felt committed with.<sup>54</sup> Regarding his writing process, Claire Leroux and Marie Castaing have reported that it was essential for Moulin to get to know the artist before writing on his or her work and that writing was for him strongly connected with art making, since he believed that painting was more easily accessible by the

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<sup>51</sup> Moulin's trajectory and writings in relation to East Germany are analysed in Julie Sissia, "Réal, réalité et réalisme sous la plume de Raoul-Jean Moulin", in *Entre election et selection-Le critique d'art face à ses choix* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2017), 122-143.

<sup>52</sup> Moulin's active involvement in local politics led to the creation of the Fond Départemental d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne in 1982, with a collection that would form the basis of the MAC VAL (Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val de Marne) in Vitry-sur-Seine. The MAC VAL was the first museum of contemporary art in the Paris suburbs to receive the endorsement of the Musées de France. In 2007, Moulin gave his personal archive to the museum, where it has been conserved so far. For more on his biography, see Claire Leroux and Marie Castaing, "Archives du "vivant". Le fonds d'archives Raoul-Jean Moulin", in Claire Leroux and Jean-Marc Poinot, eds., *Entre élection et sélection: la critique face à ses choix* (Paris, Presses du Réel, 2017), 76-105.

<sup>53</sup> On Mlynářčik's interventions in Châtillon, see Katarzyna Cytlak, "L'architecture prospective en Tchécoslovaquie. Convergences et divergences entre l'approche du groupe slovaque VAL (1968-1994) et la théorie architecturale de Michel Ragon," *RIHA Journal* 0179, 25 September 2017 <http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2017/0179-cytlak> and Jérôme Bazin, "Brûler le centre. Paris dans la géographie de l'art des années 1959-1985" in *1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris*, Elitza Dulguerova, ed. (Paris: INHA, 2021) (forthcoming).

<sup>54</sup> Claire Leroux and Marie Castaing have observed however that Moulin was more a "militant" than a "partisan". Leroux and Castaing, "Archives du "vivant". Le fonds d'archives Raoul-Jean Moulin", 97.

intermediary of poetry.<sup>55</sup> His position on art criticism was clearly expressed in the context of “Donner à voir” in 1962:

To participate in “Donner à Voir”, for a critic, is to assert oneself as the companion of certain artists. The “art critic”—who is no longer one avatar away—becomes a true companionship [...] Here there is only dialogue—that is to say friendship, that of the mind and of the heart—discussion, lived agreement and living disagreement: one explains, one replies, one is for or against, rightly or wrongly. And above all, we keep doing it.<sup>56</sup>

The term “companionship” recalls Chaluppecký’s idea of brotherhood or “confraternity” (“confraternité”). In the case of Moulin’s relations with Czechoslovakia, companionship manifested itself through a discreet but tenacious solidarity with the local scenes. This positioning and the presence of terms such as fraternity, companionship, comradeship in the language of art critics of that time was obviously not insignificant and reflected the way in which these operators embedded their commitment in socialist values of solidarity, horizontality and internationalism.

Moulin’s first visit to Czechoslovakia took place in the context of the AICA’s VIIth Congress in Warsaw and Krakow, in 1960. He was among the participants to the four-day trip to localities including Prague, Žilina, Brno, Kounice and on this occasion, he met artists, art critics and theoreticians including Jindřich Chaluppecký, but also Miroslav Lamac, Jiří Kotalík, Miroslav Míčko, Jan Kriz and Jiří Padrta.<sup>57</sup> Closer contacts with the local scene, however, were only established during the AICA

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<sup>55</sup> Leroux and Castaing, “Archives du “vivant”. Le fonds d’archives Raoul-Jean Moulin”, 93.

<sup>56</sup> “Participer à “Donner à Voir”, pour un critique, c’est s’affirmer le compagnon de certains artistes. La “critique d’art”—qui n’en est plus à un avatar près—devient un compagnonnage véritable. [...] Ici n’a cours que le dialogue—c’est-à-dire l’amitié, celle de l’esprit et celle du Coeur—la discussion, l’accord vécu et le désaccord vivant: on s’explique, on réplique, on est pour ou contre, à tort ou à raison. Et par-dessus tout, on continue”. Raoul-Jean Moulin, quoted in Leroux and Castaing, “Archives du “vivant”—Le fonds d’archives Raoul-Jean Moulin”, 92-93.

<sup>57</sup> Besides Moulin, the AICA members who travelled to Czechoslovakia included Pierre Restany, Mario Pedrosa, Gerd Schiff and Dore Ashton. According to Lada Hubatová-Vacková, Moulin’s name was mentioned in relation to a meeting with Czech artists in Prague on 18 September 1960, followed by an improvised exhibition organised in the studio of the artist Jiří Valenta and, afterwards, a discussion in a bar. Lada Hubatová-Vacková, “Pierre Restany et Prague entre 1960 et 1970 : le Nouveau Réalisme”, in *Le demi-siècle de Pierre Restany*, Richard Leeman, ed. (Paris: INHA, Les Editions des Cendres, 2009), 253.

congress in Prague and Bratislava, in 1966. While Moulin did not present a paper in one of the three sessions, he did attend the congress. On a program preserved in his archive, he took some notes regarding the critics' role of demystification and the question of independence and freedom from bureaucracy and from the laws of the market.<sup>58</sup> [Fig. 3.5]

Moulin and Chalupecký started to correspond after the Prague Congress, in early 1967. Two early exchanges help us to understand Chalupecký's interest in Moulin, not only as a colleague to collaborate with, but also as an intellectual close to the sphere of the French Communist Party. Chalupecký's first letter to Moulin dated February 1967 was motivated by a concrete issue: the prosecution in the Soviet Union of young artists accused of bourgeois tendencies, in particular because their names had appeared in publications the authorities considered as bourgeois. Chalupecký explained to Moulin that he knew them personally and that they were, in his opinion, excellent artists and modest men, "whose only fault is that they react to the modern world normally, that is to say, in the modern way".<sup>59</sup> He asked Moulin to help him by publishing an article that would help to rehabilitate these artists in the eyes of the Communist regime, insisting on the fact that it should be published in a French or Italian communist newspaper. Chalupecký thus asked Moulin to act as a mediator with communist organisations in the West—the French and Italian Communist Parties were the most important in Western Europe at that time—in order to soften the measures of repression applied by the Soviet authorities.

As a consequence of Moulin's positive answer, Chalupecký's article "Ouverture à Moscou" ("Opening in Moscow") was reproduced in *Opus International*. It described the artistic situation in Moscow and included photographic documentation.<sup>60</sup> In

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<sup>58</sup> Document from "Dossier thématique AICA, Prague, 1966". Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT/001].

<sup>59</sup> "[...] il va de soit que ce sont des artistes excellents et des hommes modestes, dont la seule faute est qu'ils réagissent au monde moderne normalement, c'est à dire de la manière moderne". Jindřich Chalupecký to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 13 February 1967, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT/007].

<sup>60</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, "Ouverture a Moscou", *Opus International* no. 4, December 1967, 22-25. Dedicated to Soviet art ("Vers un nouvel art soviétique") ("Towards a new Soviet art"), this issue of *Opus* was introduced by Moulin and included contributions by the Czech critics Miroslav Lamač and Jiří Padrta. Another active Czech contributor to *Opus International* was František Smejkal ("L'automne tchécoslovaque", *Opus International* no. 10-11, April 1969, 119-120; "Note de Prague" (signed "F.S.", *Opus International* no. 40-41, January 1973, 122-123).

conclusion, Chalupecký defended his vision of art as an existential practice of liberation, detached from any sort of ideological and social conditioning:

Art must return to its proper function, which is not to instruct or to correct life...Its deepest purpose is to glorify life, to create the space where life can glorify itself. Art is to be made so that people may realize why life is worth living fully and entirely. Beyond logic and ethical concerns, this is art's wisdom and mission.<sup>61</sup>

His words implicitly denounced the intellectual paralysis inflicted by a communist power that had merely replaced one form of oppression with another.<sup>62</sup>

In December 1969, Chalupecký submitted a new idea to Moulin: “publishing in France a small book on contemporary Russian art. Composed of essays by Czech theorists introduced by you and Mrs Triolet [he referred to the writer Elsa Triolet, whom was also Aragon’s wife] and published by a communist publisher [these last words were underlined]”.<sup>63</sup> The book never saw the light, probably because of Elsa Triolet’s untimely death in June 1970. However, Chalupecký’s proposal shows, once again, his “use” of Western communists to create spaces of visibility for artists whose work was considered problematic in socialist Eastern Europe or in the Soviet Union. The Czech critic saw collaboration with Western intellectuals involved in communist parties as an opportunity to opening up the cultural curtain while remaining within the limits accepted by the socialist authorities. In this case—just as in the case of the Soviet artists previously evoked—, the involvement of members of the PCF served to guarantee the orthodoxy of these practices and prevent censorship. These manoeuvres of cultural diplomacy in the international communist sphere show that for Chalupecký, what prevailed was the possibility to interfere on the condition of unofficial artists in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, even in a very indirect and

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<sup>61</sup> Chalupecký, “Ouverture a Moscou”, 25. English translation retrieved from Lola Kantor-Kazovsky, “The Moscow Underground Art Scene in an International Perspective”, 41.

<sup>62</sup> On this respect, see also Jindřich Chalupecký, “Moscow Diary”, *Studio International* 185, February 1973, 81-96.

<sup>63</sup> “Une idée: publier en France un petit livre sur l’art russe contemporain. Composé des essais de théoriciens tchèques introduit par toi et Mme Triolet et publié par un éditeur communiste. Qu’en penses-tu? Veux-tu en parler avec Mme Triolet?” Jindřich Chalupecký to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 21 December 1969, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT /007].



limited manner. They also give the measure of the transnational dimension of the critic's activities, which were far from being limited to the promotion of Czech art in his own geocultural space.

Chalupecký's strategic appeal to Moulin for his connection to the French Communist Party was repeated on another occasion, this time for a domestic issue. In 1972, in the midst of normalisation, he wrote again to Moulin and asked his help for two Czech artists, Jan Krejčí and Oldřich Kulháněk. [Fig. 3.6 and 3.7] Both had participated in an exhibition in Japan organised by a Czech "semi-commercial organisation". Their art, described Chalupecký, was "of surrealist origin, but understanding the iconography of modern advertising / commercial, political, pornographic.../, it is on the fringes of pop art. One can also recall Erró. The result is extremely complicated images executed with dazzling virtuosity".<sup>64</sup> The engravings on display had been denounced as counter-revolutionary attacks by an employee of the Czechoslovak Embassy in Tokyo, leading to their authors' arrest and the imprisonment of one of them for one month. Chalupecký insisted:

Neither of them were ever politically engaged and—with the exception of a tiny detail in an engraving by Krejčí in which he quoted the emblem often seen on the walls of Prague in 1968, the five-pointed star combined with the swastika—there was no overt or hidden political tendency in their engravings. It was only because of his ignorance of modern art that this employee of the Embassy and after him the investigating body of the Ministry of the Interior could think that these engravings should be read as rebus and that hidden and possibly criminal solutions should be discovered. It goes without saying that works of this type can be interpreted indefinitely and in all directions—all of which are inadequate.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "Leur art est d'origine surréaliste, mais en comprenant l'iconographie de la publicité moderne / commerciale, politique, pornographique.../, il se situe aux confins du popart. On se souvient aussi a [sic] Erró. Il en résulte en images extrêmement compliquées et exécutées avec une virtuosité éblouissante". Jindřich Chalupecký to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 30 January 1972, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT /007].

<sup>65</sup> "[...] ni l'un ni l'autre ne se sont jamais engagés politiquement et—avec l'exception d'un détail minuscule d'une gravure de Krejčí où il citait l'emblème qu'on a vu souvent sur les murs de Prague en 1968, l'étoile aux cinq points combinée avec la svastika—il n'était dans leurs gravures aucune tendance politique soit manifeste soit cachée. Ce n'est que par l'ignorance de l'existence de l'art moderne que cet employé de l'Ambassade et après lui l'organe du Ministère de l'Intérieur chargé de l'instruction pouvaient penser qu'il faudrait lire ces gravures comme des rébus et découvrir les solutions cachées et sans doute criminelles. Il va sans dire qu'on peut interpréter les œuvres de ce type indéfiniment et dans tous les sens—dont tous sont inadéquats". Chalupecký to Moulin, 30 January 1972.

The letter clearly exposed Chalupecký's concern about the danger and the insidious character of a systematic "disinterpretation" ("desinterprétation", in the original text) of contemporary artworks. For him, the regime's politics of mistrust and suspicion were potentially harmful for those who stood on an "apolitical" position: in fact, any artist or intellectual who did not show his or her support to the regime could be accused of being its enemy. Following this logic, surrealism, abstraction and more generally any kind of experimental expression could be subject to a politicised reading leading to censorship and punishment. Well conscious of the risks incurred by the accused artists and their families, Chalupecký once again asked Moulin to intervene in order to help them and also to avoid a scandal which, according to him, would also "affect the Communist Parties of the West and that of France in particular".<sup>66</sup>

In addition to the all but neutral symbol combining a swastika and a five-pointed star evoked by Chalupecký, a quick look at the production of the two artists invite to further nuance his comment on the apolitical position of Jan Krejčí and Oldřich Kulháněk. Their works referred explicitly to events like the Nazi exactions during the second World War, the bombing of Hiroshima or the Vietnam war. In particular, a series of etchings created by Kulháněk in 1972 evoked recent man-caused disasters in history, with explicit titles: *Requiem for Lidice*, *Requiem for Hiroshima* [Fig. 3.8], *Requiem for Vietnam*, *Requiem for Auschwitz*, 1972.<sup>67</sup> Kulháněk was also the author of a piece dedicated to the afro-American activist and member of the Black Panther Party Angela Davis that denounced her imprisonment in the United States after having been charged for murder, in 1970. [Fig. 3.9] In one corner of this work was the Black Panther Party's slogan "All power to the people", alluding to the civil rights struggles of African-Americans. Davis was in fact an icon of anti-imperialism in various Eastern European countries and her imprisonment led to the mobilisation of

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<sup>66</sup> Chalupecký to Moulin, 30 January 1972.

<sup>67</sup> Lidice was a village in Bohemia (now Czech Republic) which population was murdered and deported in retaliation for the assassination of the Nazi official Reinhard Heydrich, in 1942.

many groups who manifested in solidarity with her and demanded her release.<sup>68</sup> Even if this particular cause was supported by the socialist regimes, it was certainly not an apolitical gesture and we can wonder whether Chalupecký's insistence of the apolitical character of the artists' work aimed at convincing Moulin to act for the defense of creative freedom, or at escaping the postal censors.

Interestingly, the solution proposed by Chalupecký to help Krejčí and Kulháněk was not public. He distanced himself from the use of the press to put pressure on the authorities, specifying that this type of action was "international politics" and he didn't want to play that game. The point for him in fact was not to make the news public and denounce a violation of freedom of expression. We should recall that in 1972, the Helsinki Agreements had not been signed yet and that until the famous Third Basket on human rights of the Agreements wouldn't be subscribed by the leaders of the Eastern bloc, public denunciation in the name of the freedom of expression was not a viable option.<sup>69</sup> Quite significantly, Chalupecký compared the situation in Czechoslovakia with the Soviet Union by suggesting that the situation in the first was worst. He observed in fact that despite his political positioning, the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was not being "dragged before the courts", while young Czech artists who had done nothing were judged for being "apolitical". The situation would be radically different a few years later, when the author of *The Gulag Archipelago* started to embody the figure of the dissident intellectual persecuted in his country and defended by the Western public opinion.

Chalupecký insisted: "It's art that interests us—these two engravers, me, my artist friends" and asked Moulin to intercede on the two artists' behalf in a private manner, by talking to an important French Communist writer or artist whose name would be

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<sup>68</sup> Regarding the interest and solidarity for the Black liberation movement in Eastern Europe, a research project is currently carried out by Kata Krasznahorkai, "Black Power in Eastern Europe: Angela Davis Between Socialist Heads of State and Artists" (ongoing since September 2020, supported by the Gerda-Henkel Foundation).

<sup>69</sup> The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe was held in Helsinki in August 1975 with the participation of 35 countries. In exchange for the recognition of national sovereignty and the inviolability of their borders, the Soviet Union and the European Communist states (except Albania) ratified the contents of the Final Act's "Third Basket" on human rights. See The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Aug. 1, 1975, 14 I.L.M. 1292 (Helsinki Declaration), <https://web.archive.org/web/20160525015726/http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/osce/basics/finact75.htm> (Accessed May 2020).

fairly well known in Prague.<sup>70</sup> Chaluppecký was convinced that a word from this personality to the First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Gustáv Husák, would help to calm things down and even “erase the affair” and he suggested to ask to Louis Aragon himself, being an influential figure well known to both Eastern and Western Communist Parties. The letter concluded as follows: “You have already done a lot for Czech and Slovak artists. So, my dear Raoul, all our hopes rest on you. This time, don’t forget to tell me that you have received this letter and if you can commit yourself. To you, friendly, Jindřich”.<sup>71</sup>

This episode reveals how important for Chaluppecký was Moulin’s position within the French Communist Party and his privileged contact with Aragon. The issue of political engagement and party membership was invoked here as a means to unblock an intolerable situation. Faced with the urgency of a situation that really affected the lives of individuals, Chaluppecký acted pragmatically. The same pragmatism would lead him, a couple of weeks later and probably without having received Moulin’s answer, to ask him in a short note to cancel any reference to Jan Krejčí in an article he had already sent to *Opus International*.<sup>72</sup> Chaluppecký’s secret commitment in favour of censored artists in his country did not prevent him from being cautious in his public actions. Only at the cost of a neutral attitude in public, he was able to pursue his subterranean work of support and defense of persecuted artists.

As far as dissidence is concerned, Chaluppecký never identified himself with this position, nor used it as a way to capture the attention of a Western audience for himself or for the artists he supported. He acted more as a lobbyist than as a political activist, taking into account however that he suffered himself in first person from marginalisation, which makes his gesture all the more significant. When the Czech artist Milan Knížák was arrested and imprisoned in 1973 for being in possession of a pamphlet written in 1968, Chaluppecký informed the organisers of the Paris Biennale

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<sup>70</sup> “C’est l’art qui nous intéresse—ces deux graveurs, moi, mes amis artistes.” Chaluppecký to Moulin, 30 January 1972.

<sup>71</sup> “Tu as déjà fait beaucoup de choses pour les artistes tchèques et slovaques. Alors, mon cher Raoul, toutes nos espérances reposent sur toi. Cette fois, n’oublie pas de me répondre que tu as reçu cette lettre et si tu peux t’engager. A toi, amicalement, Jindřich”. Chaluppecký to Moulin, 30 January 1972.

<sup>72</sup> Jindřich Chaluppecký to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 11 February 1972, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT /007].

(through a contact in Stuttgart), to which Knížák was supposed to participate.<sup>73</sup> Again, he tried to mediate without publicly denouncing the situation, using instead the name of the Biennale as an international organisation to put pressure on the Czechoslovak authorities and speed up Knížák's release. At the same time, he also specified in a letter to the Biennale's general delegate Georges Boudaille that he was complying with legal procedures and had been interrogated on this issue in Czechoslovakia, just as other artists who participated in the Biennale this year, Jana Želibská and Zorka Ságlová.

The type of actions and methods used to counter state censorship and repression in socialist Central Europe would change after the Helsinki Agreement in 1975. In 1977, Chalupický was among the signatories of the Chart 77. This time, he didn't hesitate to have his name published alongside those of other intellectuals, artists and citizens from Czechoslovakia who protested against the regime's non-respect of human rights. More than explicit activism though, Chalupický's attitude can be identified with what Václav Havel designated as "living in truth":

When I speak of living within the truth, I naturally do not have in mind only products of conceptual thought, such as a protest or a letter written by a group of intellectuals. It can be any means by which a person or a group revolts against manipulation: anything from a letter by intellectuals to a workers' strike, from a rock concert to a student demonstration, from refusing to vote in the farcical elections to making an open speech at some official congress, or even a hunger strike, for instance. If the suppression of the aims of life is a complex process, and if it is based on the multifaceted manipulation of all expressions of life, then, by the same token, every free expression of life indirectly threatens the post-totalitarian system politically, including forms of expression to which, in other social systems, no one would

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<sup>73</sup> An exchange of letters from 1973 to 1975 between Chalupický and the Paris Biennale report on this situation. They stated that Milan Knížák was sentenced to prison in 1973 for pamphlets dating from 1968, found among paintings sent to the Sohm Archives gallery. In 1974, he was finally placed in preventive detention on the grounds that he had sent works to the Biennale de Paris which contained outrageous texts. Through a contact in Stuttgart, Chalupický asked the organisers of the Biennale (Georges Boudaille, and he also wanted to inform Raoul-Jean Moulin, who was a member of the International Commission) to intervene with the Czechoslovak Minister of Culture. His last letter explains the prosecution and his own interrogation. FR ACA BIENN COM COR018. FBP INHA/ACA. This episode of Knížák's imprisoning has been examined in detail by Klara Kemp-Welch, see Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, 59–61.

attribute any potential political significance, not to mention explosive power.<sup>74</sup>

We can suggest that the “free expressions of life” that went beyond the officially established framework were visible, in the case of Chalupecký, in his support of artists and his tireless subterranean endeavour to make their practice safer and freer.

Invited in 1979 by Moulin to collaborate with the new magazine *Révolution*, Chalupecký answered that even if he was not allowed to travel to the West—he was referring in this case to his inability to attend the AICA Congress the same year in Dublin—, no one could prevent him from writing and publishing—his own form of “living in truth”. He also insisted, however, that he was not looking for scandal: “To present oneself as a “dissident” seems very cheap to me and one is put into connections that I don’t like. It goes without saying that I always sign my writings (my trademark!)”.<sup>75</sup> Despite the fact that in 1979, the situation and image of dissidence had deeply changed and the media frenzy around the phenomenon was at its high—as we will see in Chapter six, Solzhenitsyn had turned into an iconic figure of dissent, and the Venice Biennale from 1977 had greatly contributed to polarise Western positions on this issue—, Chalupecký was never attracted by the possibility of embodying a heroic figure in resistance. He pursued the less spectacular, yet essential, endeavor of supporting contemporary art and artists through his writing.

### **2.3 Refusing compromises. Collaborating with *Opus international* and the Paris Biennale**

The correspondence between Chalupecký and Moulin we have just focused on show a facet of their collaboration that could be designated as pragmatic; especially on Chalupecký’s side, they reveal his search for useful alliances in the Western

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<sup>74</sup> Václav Havel, “The power of the powerless” (1978), in Jan Vladislav, ed., *Václav Havel or Living in Truth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 59-60. The resonance of Václav Havel’s ideas in the field of visual and performing arts the idea and most particularly the idea of “living in truth” has been discussed by Klara Kemp-Welch, in particular in relation to the artists Ivan M. Jirous and Jerzy Bereś. Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989* (London: IB Tauris, 2014), 185-186 and 242-245.

<sup>75</sup> “De se présenter comme “dissident” me paraît très bon marché et on est mis dans des connexions que je n’aime point. Il va sans dire que je signe toujours mes écrits (ma marque de fabrique!).” Jindřich Chalupecký to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 18 Février 1980, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT /007].

communist and philo-communist sphere. Beyond this strategic aspect and its intertwining with party politics, however, I suggest that both Chalupecký and Moulin shared a broader compromise with artists from Czechoslovakia and socialist Europe, expressed through material and moral support. Chalupecký regularly sent names of artists to follow and gave Moulin's contact to his friends coming to Paris. He acted as a facilitator, opening up perspectives on art from Czechoslovakia to which Moulin was totally free to react, without any professional or ideological constraint.

An example of such intermediation was the exchange between Moulin and the poet and artist Ladislav Novák who, on Chalupecký's recommendation, started to send information on his work. The artist's first short type-written letter to Moulin, in October 1968, left no doubt on his perception of the situation in Czechoslovakia: "Every contact with Paris is a real remedy against my sadness".<sup>76</sup> While Novák's poetic and sound creations, already evoked in Chapter one, were characterized by an economy of means typical of concrete poetry, his visual creations were also influenced by surrealism—as an "heretic surrealist", in Chalupecký's words—and dadaism.<sup>77</sup> His *Alchimages* realised in the 1960s, of which he sent reproductions to Moulin, were a fascinating combination of collages and photographs, melting anthropomorphic figures, texts and images retrieved from different media. Novák did not hesitate to cut them out to introduce his own body into the image. [Fig. 3.10 and 3.11] At the end of 1970, the Czech poet and artist informed Moulin about his presence in Paris for an exhibition at the gallery "Les Mains Libres", directed by Jean Petithory.<sup>78</sup> Soon after, he sent his "Manifesto of Zoological Art" translated into French, as well as a series of photographs of his action "Versement d'une ligne".<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> "Chaque contact avec Paris est un vrai remède contre ma tristesse". Ladislav Novák to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 5 October 1968, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT/043].

<sup>77</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, *Na hranicích umění* (Munich: Arkýř, 1987).

<sup>78</sup> Ladislav Novák to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 16 December 1970, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT/043]. Les Mains Libres was a library-bookshop-gallery ran by Jean Petithory between 1968 and 1974—he died that same year, aged 43. It promoted the work of avant-garde artists close to surrealism, lettrism, as well as sound and voice poetry. Petithory also produced artists books and contributed to the introduction of photography in literary books.

<sup>79</sup> Ladislav Novák to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 21 January 1971, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT/043]. Including Ladislav Novák, "Premier manifeste de l'art zoologique" ("První manifest zoologického umění"), translated by J. Látal, dated 26 April 1970. Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT/043]. A second manifesto was redacted in March 1971.

[Fig. 3.12] These materials constitute a lesser known part of Novák’s production, more connected with the rural environment in which he lived. The artist had grown up in Třebíč, a small town in the Bohemian-Moravian region where he returned to live in 1954, after a decade spent in Prague for his studies. During the rest of his life until he retired, Novák worked as a Czech professor at the Gymnasium. The materials sent to Moulin showed his interest, at the turn of the decade, for exploring new forms of action in and with natural elements. “Zoological art” consisted in arranging geometrical figures “formed of nourishing or nutritive materials” on a delimited surface, and introducing animals (“possibly with an empty stomach”, Novák specified) and observe their movement on the terrain and the decomposition of those abstract figures while eaten by the animals. According to Novák, “these few minutes of contemplation” made possible “to know the very essence of the human intellect, the only one capable of abstract reflection in the midst of a universal entropy. The human intellect will appear before us as materialized by zoological art”.<sup>80</sup> What appeared to be a simple action with predictable consequences was the occasion for Novák to formulate an abstract reflection on art’s capacity to reveal the essence of things. While these actions recall other experiments in the countryside carried out by Czech and Slovak artists in the 1970s, in the case of Novák they were accompanied by a reflection on art’s capacities of “presentation” of reality, even under the immaterial form of the “human intellect”, that recalled Chalupecký’s reflections on art criticism as an ontological meditation.

Novák’s zoological art involved the participation of animals on a large, unprecedented scale.<sup>81</sup> The “Manifesto of Zoological Art” described his intention to bring an anthill into a gallery and let the ants trace paths determined by the pouring of sugar and restricted by the application of a powerful insecticide in the exhibition space. At the end of the exhibition, the ants would be brought back to their natural

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<sup>80</sup> “Ces quelques minutes de contemplation nous feront connaître l’essence même de l’intellect humain, seul capable de réflexion abstraite au milieu d’une entropie universelle. L’intellect humain apparaîtra devant nous comme matérialisé par l’art zoologique.” Novák, “Premier manifeste de l’art zoologique”.

<sup>81</sup> A few years later, Petr Štembera realised experiments with ants in a more intimate setting, like in *Joining (with Tom Marioni)* (1975) or *3:1 Possibilities* (1976). See Juliane Debeusscher, “Traveling images and words: Czech action art through the lens of exhibitions and art criticism in Western Europe”, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* vol. 27, 1, 2019, 29-46.



habitat. The project was cancelled after a first try in April 1970: while observing the anthill, the artist concluded that the insects were not ready for this displacement and that bees were not good candidates either.

Novák and his helper—mentioned in the Manifesto as Dr. Rudolph Hlavka—experimented also with hens. Near an Agricultural Cooperative in the village of Přebyslavice, they drew geometrical forms on the ground with wheat and liberated the hens. The result was more conclusive—Novák decreed that “the larger the figure, the more suitable it is”—but the bad weather forced the two men to abandon the experiment. While he presented it in a serious manner, Novák’s idea of zoological art was not deprived of irony, as the tone of his letter to Moulin demonstrated. The manifesto introduced in fact this new form of art through a series of (pseudo-)scientific observations on the relations between humankind and animals over the times. According to Novák, the passage from a purely practical relation to the progressive introduction of an aesthetic dimension had started with animal training (“dressage”) and was culminating with zoological art. Only through the latter, he argued, the level of “an aesthetic pleasure consciously spared, felt in front of a MULTITUDE of animals perfectly tamed and submissive to man” could be reached.<sup>82</sup> Although this idea was not formulated explicitly by Novák and cohabited with his interest for the generation of automatic forms and drawings close to the tradition of surrealism, one can be tempted to see in this enterprise of domination and control of animals a hint (more in the tone of black humour than of criticism) to the administration of bodies under totalitarian regimes and their subjection to the designs—in this particular case, the drawings—of a dominant ideology.

Novák’s materials on zoological art were never published or exhibited by Moulin. However, he included one of Novák’s poems in the ninth issue of *Opus International* and referred to his work in an article dedicated to the practice of collage in Czech

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<sup>82</sup> Novák, “Premier manifeste de l’art zoologique”. The graphics realised by Novák in the snow or in different terrains, as well as his characteristic drawings, recall a “cartón” realised by the member of *zaj* Walter Marchetti, in which he documented the itinerary of a fly. If we consider that Novák was in contact with the Spanish scene and received documentation from *zaj*, this shared interest for documenting the aleatory or guided paths of animals may not be accidental. Walter Marchetti, “*zaj* desea a todos sus amigos un año especial de meditación 1968 con la observación hecha por Walter Marchetti de los movimientos de una mosca sobre el cristal de una ventana [...]”, cartón, 1967.

art.<sup>83</sup> This special issue on Czechoslovakia, edited by Moulin and released in December 1968, was of particular importance for the diffusion of information on the Czech and Slovak art scenes. **[Fig. 3.13]** It provided a plural and well-documented view on recent art in Czechoslovakia, with contributions by Jindřich Chaloupecký, Jiří Kotalík, Miroslav Lamač, Miroslav Míčko, Jiří Padrta and František Šmejkal. The articles evoked numerous artists including Josef Šíma, Jiří Kolář, Endre Nemes, Jiří Balcar, Jaroslav Vožniak, Ladislav Novák and Alex Vesely, and trends such as happenings, concrete art and collages. Czech music and cinema were also documented.

The organisation of this special issue had started long before the military intervention in Czechoslovakia and while most contributions had been written before this episode, Moulin's introduction expressed a strong statement in defense of the Czechoslovak people and a virulent denunciation of the military intervention against the Prague Spring.<sup>84</sup> "As long as this night of August 21 lasts" ("Aussi longtemps que durera cette nuit du 21 août") reflected the anger of an engaged communist intellectual who still believed in socialism as a motor of social transformation and emancipation, but refused to validate the action of a party he considered an accomplice in repression. **[Fig. 3.14]** Recalling Alexander Dubček's reformist program of action, Moulin highlighted the latter's commitment against administrative and bureaucratic methods in cultural policy and compared them with a resolution from the Central Committee of the PCF in 1966, according to which the creators' right to research and experimentation couldn't be denied or limited without damaging the development of culture and the human spirit itself. The question of the autonomy of culture and the arts in the face of an established power was central in his critique and resonated with Chaloupecký's conception of art as an exercise of freedom that couldn't be subject to ideological and political conditioning.

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<sup>83</sup> The article also confirms his knowledge of the work of artists such as Jaroslav Vožniak, Jan Kotík, Alex Mlynářčik and Stano Filko, with whom he also corresponded. Raoul-Jean Moulin, "Les mutations du collage", *Opus International* no. 9, December 1968, 48-50; Ladislav Novák, "Éléments", *Opus International* no. 9, December 1968, 19-20.

<sup>84</sup> Raoul-Jean Moulin, "Aussi longtemps que durera cette nuit du 21 août", *Opus International* no. 9, December 1968, 13-14.

A few pages further on, Chalupecký's article "Inside physical reality" ("À l'intérieur de la réalité physique") focused on artistic expressions close to new figuration, including pop art, nouveau réalisme and narrative figuration. [Fig. 3.15] Referring to the synchronic emergence of works characterised by similar methods and themes in different places (New York and Moscow), the Czech critic saw in this phenomenon "the expression of a necessity that results not only from an autonomous evolution of art, but even more so from the place that art and the artist occupy in the modern world".<sup>85</sup> For Chalupecký, the new figuration couldn't be a pretext for those who were nostalgic of "Old realism"; in fact, instead of a "representation" of the human being and his or her actions, it operated its "presentation": "Modern art wants to introduce us in reality and not in front of the image of reality". The critic then cited artists like Jiří Balcar, Eva Kmentová, Rudolf Nemeč or Ladislav Novák who "strive to penetrate an objective space and time".<sup>86</sup> At the same time, in a manner reminiscent of the critic's texts cited above, art's strong connection with the physical reality of the modern world was combined with a metaphysical and humanist dimension. This kind of art, Chalupecký argued, "rips the mechanical consciousness of this reality, it introduces the presence of man, of the being who knows this world because he reaches it from elsewhere, from its infinite origin".<sup>87</sup>

This reference to reality reflects the notion's central place in the debates around art and artistic representation during the Cold War period.<sup>88</sup> Regarding Moulin's approach to reality, in particular in his writings on German art (East and West), Julie Sissia has observed that while in the early 1960s, Moulin's critical production (in particular his articles in *Les Lettres Françaises* and *l'Humanité*) referred to the notion

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<sup>85</sup> "[C]'est sans doute l'expression d'une nécessité qui résulte non seulement d'une évolution autonome de l'art, mais encore davantage de la place que l'art et l'artiste occupent dans le monde moderne". Jindřich Chalupecký, "À l'intérieur de la réalité physique", *Opus International* no. 9, December 1968, 40.

<sup>86</sup> "L'art moderne veut nous introduire dans la réalité et non devant l'image de la réalité". Chalupecký, "À l'intérieur de la réalité physique", 40.

<sup>87</sup> "Il déchire la conscience mécanique de cette réalité, il y introduit la présence de l'homme, de l'être qui connaît ce monde parce qu'il y accède d'ailleurs, de son origine infinie". Chalupecký, "À l'intérieur de la réalité physique", 40.

<sup>88</sup> See the project "To Each His Own Reality" and its related publications <https://dfk-paris.org/en/ownreality> (Accessed May 2020). Also Arnoux, *La réalité en partage. Pour une histoire des relations artistiques entre l'Est et l'Ouest en Europe pendant la Guerre froide*.

of “realism” or “real” as a positive concept, anchored in Marxist thinking but at the same time disconnected from a concrete form of political engagement or from socialist realism, towards the end of the decade he started to get closer to the idea of a “réalisme sans rivages” articulated by the communist philosopher Roger Garaudy, insisting on its independence from figuration and politics.<sup>89</sup> According to Sissia, this attitude was a reaction to the developments of the “figuration narrative” in France between 1960 and 1972. I suggest that this change was also a consequence of the political events in Prague in 1968, which certainly influenced Moulin’s relation to the concept of reality and its des-anchoring from an orthodox Marxist approach.<sup>90</sup> Although the analysis of the notion of reality is not the main object of this study, it is important to take into account its importance and its mutations according to the different contexts in which it was convoked, also in the regions we are focusing on, Central Europe and Southern Europe. From that perspective, Sissia’s reading of Moulin’s approach to the real as “the expression of a third way: between engaged art and art’s autonomy” is particularly useful, since it comes close to one of the key ideas this doctoral research proposes, i.e. that the autonomy of art claimed by Central European artists and critics was a way to inscribe art and its action in reality without involving politics.<sup>91</sup> As such, it did not operated as a total withdrawal but, instead, as an active presence and questioning of the social field. If for the contextual practices evoked in the previous chapter, reality appeared as a place to be recodified and reinvested through art, art criticism and writing were, was Moulin and Chalupěcký, another way to address this problematic.

In a first moment, the troubled period following the repression of the Prague Spring did not seem to slow down Chalupěcký’s willingness to collaborate with *Opus*. Observing in December 1969 that the magazine had two correspondents in

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<sup>89</sup> Julie Sissia, “Reel, réalité et réalisme sous la plume de Raoul-Jean Moulin”, in Claire Leroux and Jean-Marc Poinot, eds., *Entre élection et sélection - Le critique d’art face à ses choix* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2017), 122-143.

<sup>90</sup> Sissia also signaled the year 1972 as a turning point in Moulin’s practice with the closing of *Les Lettres Françaises* and the Documenta 5 dedicated to the notion of Reality (“Befragung der Realität. Bildwelten heute”). Sissia, “Reel, réalité et réalisme sous la plume de Raoul-Jean Moulin”, 131-132.

<sup>91</sup> Sissia, “Reel, réalité et réalisme sous la plume de Raoul-Jean Moulin”, 131.

Czechoslovakia—their names were mentioned in the first pages of the journal—but no actual correspondence, he offered to collaborate regularly by sending “Letters from Prague”.<sup>92</sup> However, his banning from any public function in his country in 1970, as well as Czechoslovakia’s increasing isolation made this regular contribution impossible. When his name appeared—erroneously, in his opinion—in the magazine’s list of international correspondents in April 1973, he immediately asked for the withdrawal of this information and the publication of a corrective communicate. “I am not the author of the mischievous short stories about Czechoslovakia [...] and I was appointed correspondent without my knowing it”.<sup>93</sup> A brief note published in *Opus* in November 1973 eventually admitted the error of the magazine, stressing the inconvenient nature of this collaboration: “It was as a result of a misunderstanding that we indicated Jiří [sic] Chalupický as correspondent in Prague. The information published in our previous issues does not come from him, but from reading the newspapers and official documents sent to the artists...”<sup>94</sup> The author of the note stressed the inconvenient nature of having collaborators from a territory under strict control: “Moreover, the situation in Prague prevents us from naming a correspondent in this city until further notice”.<sup>95</sup>

When reading Chalupický’s letters and private communications from the 1970s, one is constantly prompted to wonder to what extent were his comments strategically staged in order to emphasise or on the contrary minimise his collaboration with

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<sup>92</sup> Jindřich Chalupický to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 21 December 1969, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT /007].

<sup>93</sup> “[...] je ne suis pas l’auteur des petites nouvelles malicieuses sur la Tchécoslovaquie [...] et je fus nommé correspondant à mon insu”. Jindřich Chalupický to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 14 February 1974, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT /007]. The same request was expressed in another letter dated 20 October 1973.

<sup>94</sup> *Opus International* no. 43, April 1973. At that time, Raoul-Jean Moulin was not a member of the editorial committee anymore (he stopped collaborating in 1972 due to disagreements within the committee). Contrary to Chalupický’s assertion, he was not the only critic from Czechoslovakia whose name was cited as a correspondent. František Smejkal and Jiří Padrta’s names appear as correspondents from Prague in the issues 10-11 (April 1969) and 23 (March 1971). This last issue of *Opus International* included correspondents from Abidjan, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Belgrade, Bruxelles, Lausanne, London, Milan, New York, Rome and Warsaw.

<sup>95</sup> “C’est à la suite d’un malentendu que nous avons indiqué, comme correspondant à Prague, Jiří [sic] Chalupický. Les informations publiées dans nos précédents numéros de proviennent pas de lui mais de la lecture des journaux et des documents officiels envoyés aux artistes...D’ailleurs la situation à Prague nous interdit jusqu’à nouvel ordre d’avoir dans cette ville un correspondant nommé désigné”. “Prague”, *Opus International* no. 7, November 1973, 96.

international interlocutors, knowing that his letters would probably be read by censors. Even if these elements can be hardly disentangled, this particular situation should be kept in mind when we consider exchanges, particularly epistolary ones, between agents from socialist Europe and their contacts on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

The Czech art critic seemed to appreciate the format of the “Letters”, as several of his contributions to publications West of the Iron Curtain show. His “Letter from Prague” appeared several times in *Studio International* and, adopting another specific format of writing, his “Moscow Diary” was published in the same magazine.<sup>96</sup> At a time when mail art was turning correspondence into a creative act for which the “medium [was] the message”, to borrow Marshall McLuhan’s famous formula, Chalupický’s production of letters and diaries stuck to the traditional framework of epistolary communication, placing him in the position of a reporter and a storyteller. We are tempted to compare them with those missives coming from a distant country and reported on strange customs and events—one could well imagine such letters being read aloud to a curious audience. The letters operated as persistent signs and testimonies of existence addressed to an international audience, aiming at making art produced East of the Iron Curtain more visible.

Chalupický’s collaboration with *Opus International* ended in 1972. His disagreement with the director of the publication, Georges Fall—who, as he complained, never answered nor confirmed the reception of his articles, and never paid—led him to stop contributing.<sup>97</sup> The break-up was consummated in November in a letter to Fall, also sent to the editors of the magazine, to Mrs Duchamp and to the artist Adriena Šimotová, widow of the recently deceased artist Jiří John who was a close friend of Chalupický. The absence of answer to an obituary in homage to John was the ultimate event that prompted Chalupický to cancel his previous agreements

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<sup>96</sup> This collaboration with the British magazine was negotiated by the Czech artist Eugen Brikcius, Chalupický’s former assistant at the Václav Špála Gallery, who lived in England from the late 1960s until 1970. Jindřich Chalupický, “Letter from Prague,” *Studio International* vol. 181, no. 934, June-July 1971, 253-257; “Czech Letter,” *Studio International* vol. 185, no. 956, June 1973, 263-268; “Moscow Diary,” *Studio International* vol. 185, no. 952, February 1973, 81-96.

<sup>97</sup> Moulin was often late in answering letters, which conduced Chalupický to ask the help of other member of the editorial board of *Opus International*, Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, apparently more responsive. Jindřich Chalupický to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 30 October 1972, Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT /007].

for the publication of his articles.<sup>98</sup> He would then regret this lost opportunity to expose his ideas on contemporary art and promote artists from his country in the French magazine, without however changing his mind.

The rupture with *Opus* also marked a suspension of his personal correspondence with Raoul-Jean Moulin, although not necessarily for the same motive. We understand by reading Chalupecký's letters that Moulin was a less assiduous correspondent and that his answers were irregular. Chalupecký repeatedly invited him to Prague and proposed to organise a series of studio visits for him, unsuccessfully. In the early 1970s, the French critic was appointed commissioner of the French Pavilion for the Venice Biennale of 1972, a responsibility that may explain his lesser availability for exchanging and traveling to Czechoslovakia in those years.

The two critics were nevertheless in contact in the more institutional context of the Paris Biennale, dedicated to young artists. While Moulin was a member of the International Commission of the eighth and tenth editions of the Biennale (1973 and 1975), Chalupecký was part of the network of international correspondents in charge of submitting proposals of artists to the Commission (this aspect is further developed in Chapter five). In this context too, Chalupecký remained an active promoter of young artists from Czechoslovakia, and also from Romania and the Soviet Union. On his side, Moulin did not hesitate to send him recommendations about artists whose work might interest the Commission: in 1972, he suggested Chalupecký to send materials from Zorka Ságlová and Jana Želibská, whose work he has discovered through Chalupecký and appreciated a lot.<sup>99</sup>

We won't dwell on these aspects, as organisational and conceptual issues related with the Paris Biennale are dealt with in depth in the second part of this thesis. However, some of Chalupecký's views regarding the manifestation are worth mentioning here

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<sup>98</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký to Georges Fall, letter dated 5 November 1972, copy from the Raoul-Jean Moulin Archives, MAC VAL [MOUL.AT /007].

<sup>99</sup> The Czechoslovak artists Zorka Ságlová, Jana Želibská and Milan Knížák participated in the eighth Paris Biennale in 1973. "I was deeply interested in the works of these artists and I think that they could find their place in the Biennial either as an event or in the form of photographic or audio-visual information." ("les travaux de ces artistes m'avaient vivement intéressé et je pense qu'ils pourraient trouver leur place dans la Biennale soit sous forme de manifestation soit sous forme d'informations photographiques ou audio-visuelles.") Raoul-Jean Moulin to Jindřich Chalupecký, 19 October 1972. Classeur Correspondants 1973-1977. Fonds Biennale de Paris 1959-1985, INHA-Collection Archives de la critique d'art (FBP INHA/ACA).

because they reflect his positioning on international exhibitions and his reticence in fulfilling a demand based exclusively on artistic originality and avant-garde tendencies. Already in 1974, Chalupecký regretted the Biennale's too exclusive focus on a certain type of conceptual approach, which, he affirmed, did not characterise the contemporary situation of Czech art.<sup>100</sup> He expressed on various occasions his reticence to adapt to the demand of the Biennale's International Commission, conscious that the "moral coordinates of artistic experience" were not the same in Czechoslovakia and in socialist Eastern Europe than in other regions, and he was not disposed to ignore this idiosyncrasy.<sup>101</sup> Invited to renew his collaboration for the tenth Biennale to be held in 1977, he even considered giving up because, in his opinion, the last edition had been unfair to artists from his country. In the end, Chalupecký sent a list of names, the same as in 1975: the hyperrealist painter Petra Oriěšková and the action artist Petr Štembera (this time, in duo with Jan Mlčoch).<sup>102</sup> As Štembera and Mlčoch were selected, Chalupecký was particularly critical towards the elimination of Petra Oriěšková, whose participation had been rejected not only in Paris but also for an official event in Prague he referred to as l'"Exposition des Jeunes": "Here [in Czechoslovakia], she is too modern, and there, at your place, she is not modern enough".<sup>103</sup> He also warned the organisation on the reductive and definitely dangerous practice of limiting contemporary art to "concepts, performance and video". Chalupecký refused to act as a provider of artists belonging to this narrow category which was, as he recalled, far from being inextinguishable: "I tell you frankly that it would be difficult for me to continue my collaboration for the next biennials. We do not have an inexhaustible supply of body artists and other "arteurs"". These exchanges reflected well the stakes of international participation in art and Chalupecký's intransigence towards the filters applied in the context of exhibitions

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<sup>100</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký to Georges Boudaille, letter dated 24 Juillet 1974, Classeur Correspondants 1973-1977, FBP INHA/ACA.

<sup>101</sup> Chalupecký used this expression to to the Russian artist Grobman, who had emigrated to Israel, see Kantor-Kazovsky, "The Moscow Underground Art Scene in an International Perspective", 43.

<sup>102</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký to an anonymous receiver (probably Georges Boudaille), letter dated 4 July 1976, Classeur Correspondants 1973-1977, FBP INHA/ACA.

<sup>103</sup>"Ici, elle est trop moderne, et là, chez vous, elle n'est pas assez moderne." Jindřich Chalupecký to an anonymous receiver (probably Georges Boudaille), letter dated 30 November 1976, Classeur Correspondants 1973-1977, FBP INHA/ACA.



focused on avant-garde art like the Paris Biennale. At the same time, the critic was torn between his disagreement with the Biennale's system and the "irresponsible" act of "not to remain [the Biennale's] Prague correspondent", while he was an essential bridge between artists from Czechoslovakia and the international showcase the Parisian event constituted for them.<sup>104</sup>

#### **2.4. Positioning Czech and Slovak art on the international scene. The case of Fluxus.**

It should not be inferred from Chalupecký's exchanges with the Paris Biennale, however, that the Czech critic did not appreciate or promoted conceptual or performance art. He was in fact also committed with the generation of artists who embraced Fluxus, body-art and conceptual experiments. Still, for him, these contemporary practices remained strongly related to their own context of emergence and had their own reading grid.

Chalupecký's reflexions published in the Italian magazine *DATA* in the mid-1970s testify to his constant effort to identify what differentiated Czech and Slovak representatives of Fluxus (or Fluxus-like practices) from other branches.<sup>105</sup> [Fig. 3.16 and 3.17] He retraced the story of Fluxus-related activities and writings between north America and Europe, situating Czech and Slovak experiments on this map.<sup>106</sup> At the same time as Chalupecký set out his precise historical knowledge on these episodes,

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<sup>104</sup>"Je vous dis carrément qu'il me serait difficile de continuer ma collaboration pour les biennales prochaines. Il n'y a pas chez nous une provision inépuisable des body-artistes et des autres "arteurs". D'autre part, je reste votre seul collaborateur à Prague. [...] Alors il serait probablement presque irresponsable de ne pas rester votre correspondant pragois. Vous voyez que c'est une situation pas facile pour moi." Chalupecký to an anonymous receiver, 30 November 1976. The term "arteurs" referred to an issue of *Opus International* dedicated to the new art forms: "Les arteurs ou le dépassement de l'art". *Opus International* no. 22, January 1971.

<sup>105</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, "Tempo Zero", *Data* no. 18, September-October 1975, 80-87. More discreet and less diffused than *Flash Art*, *DATA* also contributed to the diffusion of artistic practices from Eastern Europe in Italy. The magazine created by the art critic and curator Tommaso Trini intended to open a space for critical debate and experimentation around emerging art, with particular interest in conceptual trends and body art. Between September 1971 and 1978, thirty-two issues were released. The archive of the magazine is accessible online, <http://www.dataarte.it>.

<sup>106</sup> Chalupecký was not writing about Fluxus in quality of external observer; he had been involved in the organisation of two Fluxus festivals in April and October 1966. From these episode, he developed a personal understanding of the network and a critical view on Georges Maciunas. For more of the Fluxus episodes in Prague, see Petra Stegmann, "Fluxus in Prague: the *Koncert Fluxu* of 1966", in Bazin, Dubourg Glatigny and Piotrowski, eds., *Art beyond borders: artistic exchange in communist Europe (1945-1989)*, 241-254.

he insisted on various points without which, according to him, the artistic production from the 1960s and 1970s could not be fully understood: the connection to a “sacred” dimension, the current crisis of civilization, the danger of the avant-garde being recuperated by institutional and commercial circuits and the resistance to this phenomenon of Czech and Slovak artists due in part to their situation of isolation which, in Chalupický’s mind, liberated them from the pressures and problematic of promotion and diffusion.

In his attempt to establish an expanded and geographically inclusive genealogy of the Fluxus network Chalupický insisted on distinguishing its American and European branches—omitting thus practices from Asia, which demonstrates the still profoundly Euro and American-centred character of European art criticism of that time from both sides of the Iron Curtain. According to him, even if they were geographically and culturally closer to European branch, Czech and Slovak artists occupied a position more similar to the original American spirit. They were far, for example, from the “monstrous and vulgar forms” of the happenings carried on by Viennese artists. This difference was, in Chalupický’s view, due to a lack of structures for the market and journalistic promotion of avant-garde art in Czechoslovakia on the one hand and, on the other, to the country’s “traditionally democratic spirit”.<sup>107</sup> He then referred to Dick Higgins’ identification of two types of artistic attitude: the first, associated with the figure of Faust, was characterised by violence, scandal, action, nobility, as well as a claim for “revolution-for-revolution”. In contrast with this Faustean behaviour, another figure was marked by a democratic and anti-elitist attitude: the soldier Švejk, a character from a novel by the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek.<sup>108</sup> Relying on Higgins’ analysis, Chalupický observed that the values of Švejk-related art responded more appropriately to the “deteriorated” social situation in Czechoslovakia: “We like things and activities that are common, everyday, non-productive”. The activities inscribed in this “Švejk trend” (“moda Chveik”) couldn’t be considered a form of nihilism or a

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<sup>107</sup> Chalupický, “Tempo Zero”, 85.

<sup>108</sup> *The Good Soldier Švejk* was an unfinished dark comic satirical novel by the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek, published in 1921-1923, about a good-tempered, simple-minded middle-aged man who was eager to serve Austria-Hungary during the First World War. Considered as an anti-war, anti-establishment and anti-religion novel, it has been adapted many times, notably by Bertolt Brecht, who in 1943 wrote *Schweik in the Second World War*.

desperate acknowledgement of the absurdity of life; “On the contrary”, Chalupecký affirmed, this kind of art was “the manifestation of unlimited openness to the world and a constant source of joy and happiness”.<sup>109</sup> He recognised this carnivalesque and solar spirit in the work of artists like Milan Knížák, Alex Mlynářčík, Jana Želibská and Ladislav Novák. The collective dimension of art and its connection to society was thus further affirmed by the critic, who denounced the avant-garde’s loss of meaning through its integration into the structures of society and its adoption by the elite: “The method of intimate understanding of the cosmos degenerates into narcissism; introspection becomes exhibitionism; and the spiritual discipline sinks into pure commercialism”.<sup>110</sup> Referring to another antithetical pair, he deplored that modern art had become Wagnerian, to the detriment of a lighter Nietzschean approach, faithful to the notion of “gay science”.<sup>111</sup>

Chalupecký’s article also emphasised the centrality and crucial need for communication. Observing that many creators connected to Fluxus had moved towards an aesthetic of silence and emptiness—to which the title of his article, “Time Zero”, referred—, he affirmed that “the work of art [could] only have its roots in the world and for the world” and that in case of not being supported by “the imperative need to communicate, to divide, to offer itself”, it was “nothing more than a private pastime”.<sup>112</sup> While this last situation of narcissistic closure could be observed in current Fluxus productions, especially around Maciunas, Chalupecký stressed instead the importance of communication and collective process as the only way of regaining “civilisation”. He affirmed once again that complete withdrawal was not a solution. If

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<sup>109</sup> “Amiamo cose e attività comuni, di tutti i giorni, non-produttive.” [...] “Al contrario: è la manifestazione dell’apertura senza limiti al mondo e fonte costante di gioia e allegria”. Chalupecký, “Tempo Zero”, 84. For the comparison between Faust and Švejk, Chalupecký cited Dick Higgins, *Postface* (New York: Something Else Press, 1964), 4.

<sup>110</sup> Chalupecký, “Tempo Zero”, 85.

<sup>111</sup> Chalupecký named the artist Ben as an example of European creator close to the spirit of American Fluxus. For him, Ben’s distancing from the “heavy and pompous” manners of Joseph Beuys and Wolf Vostell could be compared with the motives that had led Nietzsche to break up with Wagner. Chalupecký, “Tempo Zero”, 85.

<sup>112</sup> “Ma l’opera d’arte non può avere le sue radici che nel mondo e per il mondo, nella storia e nella società come sono e per esse. Se l’opera non è sostenuta dal bisogno imperativo di comunicare, di dividere, di offrirsi, non è altro che un passatempo privato. Questo è sfortunatamente un caso frequente per la produzione attuale di Fluxus o di quello che ne è restato intorno a Maciunas”. Chalupecký, “Tempo Zero”, 85.

the artist had at some point to “retreat in the desert”, he or she had to go back then to civilisation in order to “maintain, transform and recreate” in the company of others. The crisis of civilization caused by a general apathy and a lack of commitment reinforced by the consumer society had given rise to “the formation of a minority of scattered individuals, who do not know where they come from and who search around the world, in order to escape this apathy and find again a reason for living, the meaning of man’s existence in the universe. Which is”, Chalupecký concludes, “the force with which civilisations are built”.<sup>113</sup>

Chalupecký’s observations in this text show the tenacity of his belief in a culture for all in the service of the common good and in a deeply humanist (a Marxist humanist) vision according to which a humanity in crisis could find a new path only through collective action and efforts.<sup>114</sup> His approach was driven by his belief in art’s potential as a liberating force—art as freedom—and the necessity to keep it deeply rooted in society and the social sphere, as stated in “All power to workers’ committees”.<sup>115</sup> Once again, the question of creative withdrawal or isolation was not seen in terms of individualism and complete rupture with a proper context, but rather as a way of producing “in truth” and without being subject to the official gaze, while at the same time seeking to reproject their practices within international networks of communication and collaboration.

### **3. Reality through the lens of Jiří Kolář’s work**

#### **3.1 From poetry to collage**

This last point focuses on critical approaches to the work of Jiří Kolář, another artist actively supported and promoted by Chalupecký. Relying on writings by Louis

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<sup>113</sup> “Nello stesso tempo queste crisi provocano la formazione di una minoranza di individui sparsi, che non si sa da dove vengano e che si cercano in giro per il mondo, per sfuggire a questa apatia e trovare nuovamente una ragione di vita, il senso dell’esistenza dell’uomo nell’universo. Che è la forza con cui si costruiscono le civiltà”. Chalupecký, “Tempo Zero”, 87.

<sup>114</sup> Zdeněk Brdek, *Obhájce moderního umění: Jindřich Chalupecký v kontextu 30. a 40. let 20. století*, 258.

<sup>115</sup> Lola Kantor-Kazovsky has described Chalupecký’s “philosophy of freedom” in these terms: “Art’s social mission was to provide people with genuine life experience which they, under their given circumstances and constraints, do not really have. Chalupecký saw this as the essential, inner way toward liberation.” Lola Kantor-Kazovsky, “The Moscow Underground Art Scene in an International Perspective”, 41-42.

Aragon, Raoul-Jean Moulin and Jindřich Chalupecký, it examines the critical reception and analysis of Kolář's work in France and Italy from the late 1960s and 1970s, in order to shed light on the way his plastic production furnished a space of projection through which the question of artistic and intellectual engagement before and after 1968 creeps in and became visible.

In much the same way as Chalupecký, Kolář's extended career was marked by ups and downs due to political changes in Czechoslovakia. While producing poetry uninterruptedly (he did so since he was aged twenty, in 1934), Kolář worked as an editor in a Prague publishing house, before he lost his job during the hardest times of Stalinism. In 1953, he was sentenced to prison because a manuscripts of his poems was found at his home by the secret police. From the end of the 1950s on, Kolář progressively abandoned verbal poetry and started to experiment with visual motives and develop his practice as "evident poetry", first visible in his anthology entitled *Básně ticha* (*Poems of silence*, 1959-1961). He started at the same period to create assemblages with images and objects, elaborating multiples techniques for these visual experiments.<sup>116</sup>

During the period we are focusing on, Jiří Kolář's poetic and visual work was already well known and had circulated in Europe and internationally. His presence in Italy and France from the mid-1960s can be retraced through several exhibitions and publications. In Italy, his work was mostly present in the context of activities and debates at the crossroads of experimental literature or poetry and visual languages, with his first personal exhibition at the Galleria-club d'arte Carabaga in Genoa in 1965.<sup>117</sup> Kolář's works were also exhibited at the Studio di informazione estetica in Turin and the Centro Proposte presso Feltrinelli in Florence. In the following years,

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<sup>116</sup> Jiří Kolář's long professional and artistic career has been the subject of numerous publications and exhibition catalogues. For this section, I had mainly focused on his two monographs published in 1972, that also include detailed biographical elements. *Jiří Kolář* (Paris: Georges Fall, 1973); *Jiří Kolář : l'arte come forma della libertà = l'art comme forme de la liberté = art as the form of freedom*, exh. cat. (Milan: Galleria Schwarz, 1972). Also *Jiří Kolář: objetos y collages*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 1996).

<sup>117</sup> The gallery was founded by the Gruppo Studio, a collective made up of verbal-visual poets, intellectuals and painters that referred to Dadaist irony and irreverence. The collective published a magazine, *Trerosso* (*3 rosso*), in the first issue of which Kolář's "evident poems" were reproduced and introduced by a short text written by the art critic Jiří Padrta. Jiří Padrta, "Jiří Kolář", *3 rosso*, Genova, no. 1 (April-May 1966).

he participated in various collective exhibitions dedicated to visual and experimental poetry and in the “Mostra d’arte cecoslovacca contemporanea” that circulated to several cities.<sup>118</sup> Although his work was less visible in France, Kolář nevertheless had a personal exhibition at the Galerie Riquelme in Paris (“68 collages”, 1966) and was also included in a collective exhibition, the same year (“Homard cosmographique”).<sup>119</sup> Jiří Kolář and Chalupecký belonged to the same generation, they had met during the Second World War and were both co-founders of the group Skupina 42 in Prague.

The years 1968-1969 marked a change of orientation in Kolář’s practice. Collage was consolidated as his main expression and declined in a wide variety of forms and experiments that would be at the centre of art critics’ analyses from now on. In 1968, the artist participated in Documenta 4 in Kassel and exhibited objects covered with small cut letters: a can opener, a spoon, a salt shaker, a penknife, a clothespin. It was a time of intensification of his international career, particularly overseas: Kolář had his first solo exhibition in a New York gallery (Willard Gallery) and participated in the Sao Paulo Biennale in 1969, being one of the award-winning artists. He was also present at the Salon de Mai in Paris in 1969. Due to the normalisation in Czechoslovakia, his international movements were considerably reduced in 1970 and during the whole following decade, until he emigrated to France and settled in Paris, in 1980.

Despite these circumstances, or perhaps precisely because of them, we notice a significant interest for exhibiting and disseminating information on Kolář’s work in France and Italy from the early 1970s on. The phenomenon of translation and republication of critical texts, or texts signed by himself or by other authors was particularly significant in both countries and shows the vivacity of the transalpine exchange, accentuated by the mobility of art critics and editors in the context of international exhibitions and professional encounters such as the AICA congresses.

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<sup>118</sup> The exhibition was promoted and organised by the Piedmont section of the National Federation of Artists, Painters and Sculptors under the aegis of the Turin Provincial Administration in collaboration with the Union of Czechoslovak artists and included thirty-six artists. It took place in Turin in March 1967 at the Castello del Valentino (exhibition catalogue published by the Società Promotrice di Belle Arti with texts from Jaromír Zemina and Emilio Pampiglione).

<sup>119</sup> With regard to Kolář’s presence in Spain at that time, see Chapter one of this dissertation, on the dissemination of Czechoslovak concrete and visual poetry in Spain.

Jiří Kolář's first personal exhibition in a French institution took place from May to June 1971 at the A.R.C. in Paris, with works coming exclusively from Western collections and institutions. It was titled "Collages" and was accompanied by a catalogue with a text by Raoul-Jean Moulin. [Fig. 3.18 and 3.19] The same year, the artist had also a personal exhibition ("Collages à la Hune") at the historical library-gallery La Hune, located on the Boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris. The catalogue was prefaced by Louis Aragon and on this occasion, *Les Lettres Françaises* published an article about the Czech artist by Georges Boudaille.<sup>120</sup> At that time, one of his collages was also included in a group of works gathered in the Louvre Museum around Ingres' painting *Turkish Bath*—reproductions of works of art were among Kolář's favourite materials and he had already "cited" various paintings by the nineteenth-century French painter in his previous works. "Jiří Kolář is famous today", affirmed René Micha the *Chroniques de l'Art Vivant*, confirming that the interest for the Czech artist went far beyond the sphere of Communist intellectuals.<sup>121</sup>

Meanwhile, Kolář's first Italian retrospective "Jiří Kolář: Art as the form of freedom" ("Jiří Kolář: l'arte come forma della libertà") was held in March 1972 at the Galleria Arturo Schwarz in Milan. It came with an important catalogue including texts by Vladimír Burda and Jindřich Chalupský, and a text by Kolář dated from 1965. [Fig. 3.20] The trilingual publication in Italian, French and English contributed to the dissemination of the artist's work and the critical readings elaborated by himself and the critics who were close to him. We should also mention the crucial contribution of Kolář's wife, the artist Béla Kolářová, who provided on this occasion an extensive biographical note and a bibliography.

The programmatic text "Perhaps nothing, perhaps something" written by Kolář in 1965 and reprinted in the catalogue, is essential for understanding the transformation

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<sup>120</sup> Georges Boudaille, "Kolář, le délire du collage", *Les Lettres Françaises*, 19 May 1971.

<sup>121</sup> "Jiří Kolář est aujourd'hui célèbre". René Micha, "Visite à Jiří Kolář", *Chroniques de l'Art Vivant* n°34 (November 1972), 12-13.

of his work and his particular approach to the world through the medium of art.<sup>122</sup> The text described Kolář's journey from poetry, then "poésie évidente" and objectual poetry, to collage and assemblage. In particular, the artist explained the foundational character of his visit to the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the impact the objects and remains of exterminated people visible in showcases had on his manner to envision art. Kolář saw in this particular moment of confrontation with objects marked with an "effroyable destiny" the origin of his scepticism towards any attempt to provoke, impress or shock through art. His comments recalls Chalupecký's reticence towards gratuitous provocation in art in relation to Fluxus:

I don't like Fluxus. I have various numbers of *TRE V*, and I'm rather disappointed by them. These big collages—what a difference between them and those of Hausmann and Baader, dated 1920! Basically these were aggressive, offensive, but I have the impression that those of Fluxus are something ornamental. The latter antiart is basically awfully awfully artistic. To shock? What can shock us now! After the second world war, after Auschwitz and Hiroshima—are we really to be shocked by a pissing contest?...sure, for the snobs,—but for me?<sup>123</sup>

Kolář's experience in Auschwitz brought him closer to artists "who have been able to stand aside, behind their work" and "reject any debate with the world and with themselves", while refusing at the same time to escape or take refuge into fictitious emotions. He refused to see the world in terms of opposed states and values that require a precise self-positioning and self-definition from the artists.

I felt close to creators who knew that the field of art was neither private nor public, neither political nor poetic, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither everyday nor absurd, neither raw nor symbolic, but that art aimed at a totality in which were indissolubly linked and the private and the public, the political and the poetic, the beautiful and the

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<sup>122</sup> The title referred to Mallarmé's sentence "Peut-être rien, peut-être quelque-chose à la manière de l'art" in his preface to the publication of his poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard", published in the magazine *Cosmopolis* in May 1897. Jiří Kolář, "Peut-être rien, peut-être quelque-chose", *Jiří Kolář : l'arte come forma della libertà = l'art comme forme de la liberté = art as the form of freedom*, exh. cat. (Milan, Galleria Schwarz, 1972), 48-49. First published in *Literární noviny*, Prague, September 1965.

<sup>123</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, "Letter to Dick Higgins" (1965), cited in Stegmann, "Fluxus in Prague: the *Koncert Fluxu* of 1966", 251-252.



ugly, the everyday and the absurd, the raw and the symbolic, beauty and death, history and nature, fantasy and reality, dream and memory.<sup>124</sup>

These words, written in 1965, had a particular resonance in the early seventies, while the traumatic experience of the crushing of the Prague Spring was being progressively replaced by the repetitive experience of life in times of normalisation. More than ever, the distinction between realms such as the public and private, everyday life and absurdity, to borrow Kolář's expression, were increasingly blurred.

### 3.2 Aragon on Kolář. Poetry and politics

Kolář's text "Peut-être rien, peut-être quelque-chose" was reprinted in his first monograph in France, published by Raoul-Jean Moulin in 1973. Moulin was among the French critics who most extensively wrote on Kolář and sought to give visibility to his work in France. The monograph included essays by Louis Aragon and Moulin himself, twelve poems translated by Irina Paslariu, a biography and a bibliography.

Titled "An art of the present" ("Un art de l'actualité") Aragon's essay was an article already published in *Les Lettres Françaises* in May 1969. Its inclusion by Moulin in Kolář's monograph was a sort of homage to the French poet, while *Les Lettres Françaises* had definitely stopped its publication, in October 1972.<sup>125</sup> The closing of the literary journal, founded in 1942 as a clandestine publication in the Resistance and directed since 1953 by Aragon with the financial support of the French Communist Party, was due in part to Aragon's stand against the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968.

A convinced communist engaged in the PCF since 1927, Aragon had defended Stalinism and embraced socialist realism. In the early 1930s, Elsa Triolet and himself spent one year in the Soviet Union and Aragon's poems from that time were marked

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<sup>124</sup> "Je me sentais proche des créateurs qui savaient que le domaine de l'art n'était ni le privé ni le public, ni le politique ni le poétique, ni le beau ni le laid, ni le quotidien ni l'absurde, ni le brut ni le symbolique, mais que l'art visait une totalité dans laquelle étaient indissolublement liés et le privé et le public, et le politique et le poétique, et le beau et le laid, et le quotidien et l'absurde, et le brut et le symbolique, la beauté et la mort, l'histoire et la nature, la fantaisie et la réalité, le rêve et le souvenir." Kolář, "Peut-être rien, peut-être quelque-chose", 49.

<sup>125</sup> Raoul-Jean Moulin, footnote dated 13 November 1972, in Aragon, "Un art de l'actualité", in *Jiří Kolář* (Paris: Georges Fall, 1973), 6. Aragon's text was first published in *Les Lettres Françaises*, 7 May 1969.

by his adhesion to the orthodox line. In 1956, as a member of the Conseil National des Écrivains (founded by the PCF), he refused to condemn the harsh repression of the Hungarian revolution. At the same time, he defended two writers that had been condemned to death in Hungary and obtained their grace. From the mid-1960s, his position progressively evolved and he started to pay more attention to dissident writers, denouncing the trials to intellectuals in the Soviet Union. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia in the night of 20-21 August 1968, Aragon took a clear stand and set his position out in his preface to the French edition of the novel *La Plaisanterie* (*Žert/The Joke*) written by the young Czech writer Milan Kundera. In this text published at the end of 1968, Aragon deplored the loss of the future and its substitution for a continuous “restart”, denouncing the “voice of falsehood that claims to speak on behalf of what has been for half a century the hope of humanity”.<sup>126</sup> His most striking statement would have a strong impact on French and foreign intellectuals, communists and non communists. Aragon stated: “I refuse to believe that there will be a Biafra of the spirit there”, thus comparing the situation of culture in the Eastern bloc with the crisis and the famine that was decimating the African country in full view of the international community. Also published in *Les Lettres Françaises*, Aragon’s preface caused the anger of Moscow, who froze all the institutional subscriptions to the magazine in socialist countries. Since universities, libraries, schools were an important source of financing for *Les Lettres Françaises*, this decision gave a major blow to its economy, leading to the publication’s closure, in 1972.

Aragon’s text on Jiří Kolář, written in 1969 and republished in 1973, was thus imbued with a melancholic and post-utopian spirit.<sup>127</sup> What is particularly interesting to us here is that it opened a space of comparison between the situation of French politics which, for the communist writer, did not promise anything good, and Czechoslovak condition that seemed hopeless and gloomy. “Un art de l’actualité” expressed all the disillusionment and sadness of the aging poet and intellectual who

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<sup>126</sup> “Cette voix du mensonge qui prétend parler au nom de ce qui fut un demi-siècle l’espoir de l’humanité”. Aragon, cited in Sibylle Vincendon, “Printemps de Prague: la contrition d’Aragon”, *Libération*, 31 août 2018. online version: [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/08/31/printemps-de-prague-la-contrition-d-aragon\\_1675791](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/08/31/printemps-de-prague-la-contrition-d-aragon_1675791) (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>127</sup> Aragon, “Un art de l’actualité”, 6-9.

was facing at the same time the impasse of a universalist social and political project he had fought for during his whole life and the reshuffling of his country's political landscape. Aragon's text and his reading of Kolář's work was thus informed by this double experience.

Combining personal commentaries, digressions and political analyses, "Un art de l'actualité" evoked with subtlety but firmness the dangers of a political practice exclusively focused on gaining power and reaffirmed the importance and the courage of "opposition" as an uncomfortable, yet essential place. Aragon's reflection was inspired by a recent cultural event in France that had been suddenly caught up with politics. He referred in fact to an event at the theatre of the Comédie Française, during which the reading of a text titled "Poésie et Politique" was performed, the night of 28 April 1969. The author of the text, whose name was silenced in Aragon's text, was the politician Georges Pompidou. Pompidou reflected in "Poésie et Politique" on the relation between two activities apparently separated from each other: poetry and politics.<sup>128</sup> While Pompidou himself was supposed to perform the reading, he had to be replaced at the last minute by the actor and member of the Comédie Française Jacques Toja. This unexpected replacement was due to the resignation of the General de Gaulle's from his function of President and the great political effervescence that followed.<sup>129</sup> Visibly affected by the event and by the perspective of upcoming elections in June 1969 (on the occasion of which Pompidou would be elected President of the Republic), Aragon cited a passage from "Poésie et Politique", in which the politician exposed his vision of political engagement. Pompidou insisted on the importance of getting to leadership:

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<sup>128</sup> Georges Pompidou, "Poésie et politique" (1969), available on the website of the Institut Georges Pompidou since October 2016: [http://www.georges-pompidou.org/sites/default/files/pompidou\\_oeuvres-choisies\\_4\\_poesie.pdf](http://www.georges-pompidou.org/sites/default/files/pompidou_oeuvres-choisies_4_poesie.pdf) (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>129</sup> Charles De Gaulle, who was the president since 1959, resigned as a consequence of the results of the referendum held on 27 April 1969, in which French people was asked if its accepted the fusion of the Senate and the Economic and Social Council, and if it recognised the regions as territorial authorities. The majority answered no, with more than 20% abstention, a result that was interpreted as a rejection of De Gaulle. He announced his resignation on the night of 28 April 1969. Georges Pompidou was elected president on 15 June 1969, with 57.58% of the votes. In the first round, the high score of the communist candidate Jacques Duclos (21.52%) contrasted with the historically low score (5.07%) of the socialist Gaston Defferre.

[...] he who accepts the inconveniences of political life, its servitudes, its responsibilities, its dirt and sometimes its risks, does so in order to act, to leave his mark on events, in a word to govern. To spend one's life in opposition is for a politician what it would be for a poet to condemn himself to read and judge the verses of others. In short, the opponent is doomed to make anthologies.<sup>130</sup>

In Pompidou's text, opposition was clearly equated with failure, with the impossibility of guiding one's own destiny. Aragon noted this "curious conception of success and failure", and observed that the need to govern at all costs was also called "opportunism". He evoked without naming it the shadow of totalitarianisms, under which poets and artists were "invited" to create in accordance with the established order if they wanted to "succeed" in their career, and he also recalled that a few years earlier in France (between 1939 and 1944), such opposition was called "Résistance"—he implied of course that without the existence of this opposition and its allies, France could not have been liberated from the Nazi grip.<sup>131</sup>

Coming to Jiří Kolář, Aragon noted that his collages placed the Czech artist "in an opposition that has little prospect of "success"". <sup>132</sup> Opposition was thus understood, for Aragon but also for Kolář and, I suggest, for Chalupický and Moulin, as a form of refusal to give in to the injunctions of a present full of ephemeral opportunities—precisely seized by all kinds of opportunists, be they artists, writers or politicians. While on one side Chalupický related this form of opportunism with the "evils of modern art—snobbery, futility and facileness", Aragon evoked more directly the danger of the seduction of political power as an end in itself.<sup>133</sup> In both cases, opposition countered these seductive yet ephemeral trends with its condition of a-temporality. Such defiance in relation to power for power's sake strongly resonated

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<sup>130</sup> "[C]elui qui accepte les inconvénients de la vie politique, ses servitudes, ses responsabilités, ses salissures et parfois ses risques, le fait pour agir, pour imprimer sa marque aux événements, en un mot pour gouverner. Passer sa vie dans l'opposition est pour un homme politique ce que serait pour un poète se condamner à lire et à juger les vers des autres. En somme, l'opposant est voué à faire des anthologies." Georges Pompidou, "Poésie et Politique" (1969), cited in Aragon, "Un art de l'actualité", 7.

<sup>131</sup> Aragon, "Un art de l'actualité", 7.

<sup>132</sup> Aragon, "Un art de l'actualité", 8.

<sup>133</sup> Jindřich Chalupický, "For Jiří Kolář", in *Jiří Kolář : l'arte come forma della libertà = l'art comme forme de la liberté = art as the form of freedom*, exh. cat. (Milan, Galleria Schwarz, 1972), 28.

with Kolář's previously mentioned affinity with those "artists who have been able to stand aside, behind their work" and "reject any debate with the world and with themselves".<sup>134</sup> In Aragon's reading, Kolář's work escaped a literal representation of reality and through this, he not only managed to evoke (or "present", as Chalupecký would say) events that occurred in the present, but also to connect them with other past events, or yet to come. **[Fig. 3.21 and 3.22]** As an example, Aragon described the collage realised by Kolář in the "twenty-ninth week of 1968", that was part of the visual diary the artist had kept throughout that year. Kolář's compositions realised on a weekly basis gave a precious testimony of a creative practice that never represented historical events literally, but referred to them through the association of images and texts. The collage that had captured Aragon's attention did not represent the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the troupes of the Warsaw Pact, but the French poet and writer suggested that a veiled reference to this event could be detected in a sober sentence in German, translatable as "The attacks will never end" and signed by "Cézanne". For Aragon, this sentence acquired a particular meaning in the French context, while De Gaulle's withdrawal foreshadowed the coming to power of Georges Pompidou, a politician who, for the communists party, embodied the bourgeoisie that had contributed to crush the workers' movement of 1968.<sup>135</sup>

However, while he examined Kolář's work through the lens of perishability and timelessness, Aragon also reaffirmed his confidence in a better future and in collective resistance. If certain "political feelings" were perishable, he considered that the symbols born out of the dramas of humanity were timeless and ended up imposing themselves. They pointed at "unity", the resemblance of human suffering, the solidarity of challenges thrown down to ready-made thinking, ready-made societies,

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<sup>134</sup> "Ceci me rapprocha encore davantage des artistes qui avaient su se tenir à l'écart, derrière leur oeuvre, des artistes qui avaient su rejeter tout débat avec le monde et avec eux-mêmes [...]." Kolář, "Peut-être rien, peut-être quelque-chose", 49.

<sup>135</sup> The PCF refused to support Pompidou in the second round of the elections and actively campaigned for a blank vote.

ready-made powers that seemed unshakeable”.<sup>136</sup> From this perspective, Kolář’s work was, as the title of Aragon’s text made clear, “an art of the present” of constantly renewed topicality—the French title “un art de l’actualité” also evoked the news and information channels, referring more directly the primary matter of Kolář’s work. Precisely because Kolář’s works did not refer to a single event, a single temporality and a single historicity, they helped to uncover an underlying collective consciousness that surfaced again in times of crisis.

### **3.3 Moulin and Chalupický on Kolář. A demystifying rereading and a game**

Raoul-Jean Moulin’s long essay in Kolář’s monograph reflected his good knowledge of the artist’s trajectory and practice, completed by references to Czech authors such as Miroslav Míčko (who had written on Kolář for *Opus International*), Jindřich Chalupický and Kolář himself.

Moulin insisted on the anchoring of Kolář’s work in a “socially lived” reality and on his journalistic approach to it, and affirmed that the artists’s “sociological environment” transpired through his poetic writing. Regarding the method of reproduction of works of art (anticollages, rollups, etc.), he recalled that “the world of art” had “never been the only reality explored by Jiří Kolář”, who had also investigated urban culture and artificial folklore, in accordance with the interests of Skupina 42. Moulin cited the artist, according to whom collage seemed “the most appropriate means of portraying” a situation in which the world (as a different reality from the world of art) “assails you, devastates you, and regenerates you”.<sup>137</sup> Recalling Kolář’s shock while visiting Auschwitz, Moulin observed that assemblage-collage was more than an appropriate method, it also demonstrated “the human dimension of

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<sup>136</sup> “Car, même si tout le monde a oublié les drames les plus sanglants de l’humanité, les symboles qui en sont nés dans la suite des temps, il vient toujours des jeunes gens pour les réveiller dans la forêt des siècles, il viendra d’autres hommes qui trouveront dans ce qui vous semble dérisoire les éléments d’exaltation de leur propre cause parce qu’ils reconnaîtront dans la nuit derrière eux “l’unité”, la ressemblance des souffrances humaines, la solidarité des défis jetés à la pensée toute faite, aux sociétés toutes faites, aux pouvoirs ready-made qui semblaient inébranlables.” Aragon, “Un art de l’actualité”, 9.

<sup>137</sup> “[...] le monde de l’art n’a jamais été la seule réalité explorée par Jiří Kolář”. I retranslated the text since the notion of reality disappeared in the original English translation. Raoul-Jean Moulin, “Une démystification de la parole et de l’image/The world and the image unveiled” in *Jiří Kolář* (Paris: Georges Fall, 1973), 31.

this choice”.<sup>138</sup> Kolář’s collages and assemblages, without representing a given reality, were nevertheless a sort of seismograph of it, in a fragmented, multiplied form that melted different references, temporalities and spatialities. [Fig. 3.23] Referring to the Prague Spring and the return to order that followed, Moulin insisted that the artist’s collages gave an account of his life caught between personal and historical events:

During the explosive Prague spring of 1968, and the terrible ordeal that followed, history and daily events merged into a single profound utterance, that of an entire people. I maintain that this type of collage—my words are carefully chosen—became the visual testimony of the flow of history, the collective memory recording every event by its printed manifestations and therefore of a significance beyond description. Aragon wrote, “Jiří Kolář’s great 1968 calendar is an insistent reminder written on the world’s conscience”.<sup>139</sup>

Concluding his essay, what Moulin retained from Kolář’s practice of collage was thus the idea of a “demystifying rereading”, conducive to the multiplication of “virtualities” (in the sense of a wide field of possibilities). The image of the world deconstructed and reconstructed by means of collages drew attention, not to its constituent elements, but to “the syntactic order that organise[d] them”. An order which, in the case of Kolář, concluded Moulin, invited to use our imagination, “to invent new reading patterns and to decipher new interrelationships of meaning”.<sup>140</sup>

The question of atemporality as a path towards universality vs contextual anchorage was recurrent in Moulin’s analysis of Kolář’s work, as well as in Aragon’s. It seemed to reflect the difficulty for these communist critics and writers to address the artist’s work without falling into a discourse of political denunciation that would instrumentalise it and reduce it to the mere dramatic representation of a given situation. Hence the recourse to universal values and timelessness as a guarantee of the work’s transposability to a broader variety of spaces of reception and, to borrow

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<sup>138</sup> Here I quote the English translation. Moulin, “Une démystification de la parole et de l’image/The world and the image unveiled”, 31.

<sup>139</sup> Moulin, “Une démystification de la parole et de l’image/The world and the image unveiled”, 39. An earlier version of the text was published as Raoul-Jean Moulin, “Jiří Kolář. Une démystification de la parole et de l’image”, *Opus International* no. 24-25, May 1971, 87-89.

<sup>140</sup> Moulin, “Une démystification de la parole et de l’image/The world and the image unveiled”, 42.

Moulin's words, "virtualities". I suggest that this refusal from the part of both intellectuals to use Kolář's production for political purposes cannot be understood without taking into consideration their engagement with communism and the crisis it was ongoing in the late 1960s and 1970s, while the PCF had decided to maintain the line of the PCUS and not criticise the situation in Czechoslovakia.

Chalupecký, on his side, compared Kolář's visual poetics of fragmentation and crossing to a game, which rules and limits were established by the artist himself. In the catalogue of Kolář's retrospective at the Galleria Arturo Schwarz, the critic's text soberly titled "For Jiří Kolář" evoked art's transformation into a game which purpose was, however, nothing less than freeing "man from his burden and from the servitude of his time".<sup>141</sup> Here again, as in Moulin and Aragon, Chalupecký evoked a kind of generic human condition without specifying exactly its coordinates. The title of the exhibition "Art as the form of freedom" clearly reflected the centrality of freedom as an aspired condition that could be achieved through art, in a way that recalled, once again, Chalupecký's crucial statement expressed in "All power to workers' committees". At the same time, Chalupecký specified that "the aesthetics of the game were not arbitrary", since they required discipline and willingness, respect to the order of the game, even when it was determined by chance.<sup>142</sup> Only this way, art could perform the "discovery of new systems" making possible "to represent the game on which the reality of the world rests".<sup>143</sup> Some rules Kolář himself seemed to have endorsed well:

His own play remains strictly enclosed in its artificiality and does not move outside the boundaries of its own microcosm. The aggressive aesthetics of the happening are foreign to him. He does not want to do away with the frontiers between art and life, and he makes no attempt to interfere with the world's course. He does not look for controversy, nor does he wish to persuade or lure anyone. His art—and herein lies its

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<sup>141</sup> Chalupecký, "For Jiří Kolář", 24-41.

<sup>142</sup> Chalupecký, "For Jiří Kolář", 36. The original text (in Czech) was translated to Italian, French and English. While the French and Italian versions respectively use *jeu* and *gioco*, the English translation alternates the words *play* and *game*.

<sup>143</sup> Chalupecký, "For Jiří Kolář", 36-38.



strength—does not aspire to a position in the heart of the modern world and its turmoil, but outside this world, which, in a way, it mirrors and attempts to explain.<sup>144</sup>

While rejecting the connections with happening, Chalupecký placed Kolář within a tradition of avant-garde artists who placed game and chance at the core of their practice. The name of Marcel Duchamp did not appear in the text but it was implicitly associated with the genealogy Chalupecký wanted to draw, regardless of geopolitical divisions and ideological distinctions: a family of artists whose work embraced chance, game and casual combinations as methods for producing unexpected relations that addressed reality, albeit indirectly. Chalupecký's approach is all the more important as it didn't refer to national identity or to socialist aesthetics. The Czech author rather situated Kolář's work in a universal framework and a European field of inscription.

A few years later, another article by Chalupecký in the Italian magazine *DATA*, discussed Kolář's visual work again, taking up some of the ideas expressed in the catalogue of the Milanese exhibition. He affirmed again that Kolář's artistic practice of assemblage never endeavoured to represent the world or its contents, but reflected instead its structure. The structure of assemblage allowed to refer to different human experiences, while keeping them at a distance: "In Kolář's work the modern world is reduced to a form of consciousness", explained Chalupecký; it was not the object or the material that was important but its treatment, which revealed "the orders and modes through which the universe can exist".<sup>145</sup> At the same time, the idea of game was also interesting to Chalupecký for its autonomy and the possibility of developing internal mechanisms that remained independent from the external context.<sup>146</sup>

Another aspect of Chalupecký's analysis that deserves to be mentioned is that he situated the roots of Kolář's practice in the European culture, or to be more precise, in the criticism of such culture seen as a breeding ground from which modern art and

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<sup>144</sup> Chalupecký, "For Jiří Kolář", 38.

<sup>145</sup> "[...] nell'opera di Kolář il mondo moderno è ridotto a una forma di coscienza.[...] Giacché il gioco è tutto sommato autonomo : l'importante non è il materiale ma piuttosto il trattamento del materiale ; non rappresenta alcunché nell'universo, ma rivela ordini e modi in cui l'universo può esistere". Jindřich Chalupecký, "Jiří Kolář: "L'estetica del gioco"", *DATA* # 26, April-June 1977, 28.

<sup>146</sup> Chalupecký, "Jiří Kolář: "L'estetica del gioco"", 28.

culture nourished themselves, often uncritically. Chalupecký compared Kolář's use and destruction of texts—through the operation of chiasmage, which consisted in cutting and assembling fragments of printed text—with “a destruction of the principles of modern European thought” that confronted the audience with “a world in which words and language are no longer of any use to anyone”.<sup>147</sup> Again, Chalupecký's reference to “European civilisation” made no distinction between East and West and emphasised instead common philosophical and intellectual roots. To him, the elements of a European identity in crisis were shared across geopolitical boundaries. In the context of the circulation and reception of Central European art during the Cold War, this aspect is particularly important since it highlights the fact that in Chalupecký's eyes, as we already stressed, Central European and more precisely Czechoslovak art was far from embodying an identity linked to a socialist condition, but rather refers to more ancient values.

Chalupecký thus explained that Kolář's rollages (another technique consisting in cutting images into vertical or horizontal strips and assembling them to form a new image), mostly based on images of European art from the Renaissance or successive periods, served to question a model of “coherence” conditioned by rationalist European thought, in a manner recalling that of mannerism that sought to destroy the conception of space in Renaissance compositions.<sup>148</sup> **[Fig. 3.24]**

This reference to mannerism is even more significant if we recall Chalupecký's words in the catalogue of the exhibition “Arte contemporanea in Cecoslovacchia” held in 1969 at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome—in which Kolář's work was included. Addressing the issue of cultural independence, Chalupecký stressed the necessity for Czech and Slovak artists to affirm an artistic idiosyncrasy that could be connected to other traditions and dialogue with them. To do so, he pointed out international cultural traditions spread across Europe long before the

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<sup>147</sup> “La sua distruzione dei materiali scritti è una distruzione dei principi del moderno pensiero europeo: ci confrontano con un mondo in cui la parola e il linguaggio non servono più a nessuno.” Chalupecký, “Jirí Kolář: “L'estetica del gioco””, 28.

<sup>148</sup> Chalupecký, “Jirí Kolář: “L'estetica del gioco””, 29. The same technique has been earlier compared by Raoul-Jean Moulin with a “syncopated anamorphosis of the image” that “de-realizes the subject.” This comparison is all the more significant if we consider that the figure of the anamorphosis was also present in the art of the late Renaissance. Moulin, “Une démystification de la parole et de l'image”, 26.

Soviet period which, according to him, were still present in contemporary artistic practice:

Both the Czech and Slovak nations are in an extremely delicate geographical situation in the frames of Europe—they often defend their political independence in vain. Cultural independence is one of the most important for them. For this reason, it is necessary to attribute their strong connection to international styles such as Gothic, Mannerism and Baroque.<sup>149</sup>

Artistic independence—although Chalupecký did not precise from which model, we can interpret this both as a veiled reference to a Soviet authority but also to the canon of Western modern art—could be only achieved by returning to a glorious artistic past related to the production of painters and sculptors from Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia (constituents of the “Bohemian Crown”). Seen in this light, Jiří Kolář’s avant-garde mannerism seemed to be at the same time a way of returning to an earlier form of internationalism and of reaffirming art’s independence from hegemonic influences, be they political or cultural. If Chalupecký’s appeal to an art produced between the medieval and late renaissance may seem anachronistic at the very least and even conservative, it confirms once again the singularity of the Czech critic’s references, in contrast with the art criticism of his time. It also shows his attachment to a field of historical antecedents that did not correspond to Cold War’s national and ideological divisions, but rather to a European culture and identity envisaged as a spatial and temporal continuum, fueled by local practices that intersected and influenced each other.

### **3.4. Conclusions of the chapter**

We have seen in this chapter that while in the 1960s, the climate favourable to social and political reforms in Czechoslovakia enabled artists and art critics to establish fruitful collaborations across the Iron Curtain with pairs from France and Italy, the country’s occupation by the troupes of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968 and the period

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<sup>149</sup> Quote retrieved from the presentation of Zuzana Wagner, “Jindřich Chalupecký and his activities in Italy”, at the online symposium “Chalupecký ve světě”, Moravská galerie, Jindřich Chalupecký Society, 27 November 2020. See also *Arte Contemporanea Cecoslovacca*, exh. cat. (Rome: De Luca, 1969).

of normalisation that followed throughout the 1970s transformed their interest into an imperious need for new arenas to express and disseminate practices and ideas that remained banned or marginalised in their country. It is precisely this change that we have tried to examine here, showing the way art critics who were already in contact before 1968 reacted and faced this new situation.

In this changing context, Jindřich Chalupecký was perceived by his foreign interlocutors as a cosmopolitan intellectual, strongly committed to the arts of his country. While in the 1960s and the early 1970s, Chalupecký invested a lot of energy in organising exhibitions at home (at the Václav Špála Gallery in Prague) and abroad (in particular in Italy, thanks to the intermediation of Giulio Carlo Argan, Palma Buccarelli and Arturo Schwarz), from 1972 onwards his activity focused on writing, in part due to his banning from the official sphere and the difficulty to maintain institutional ties and collaborations in such conditions. Intellectuals like Argan, Tommaso Trini or Raoul-Jean Moulin, among others, supported him by offering him spaces in their publications. At the same time, while Chalupecký's strong engagement to support contemporary art and artists was constantly acknowledged, the terms of his engagement differed clearly from those of a politically engaged, or militant criticism as articulated by his peers in Spain, France and Italy. We have suggested that this difference was due to a different approach to political culture in socialist societies.

Chalupecký's choices and interests were far from being limited to one style or language. On the one hand, his support to Jiří Kolář reflected his interest in an art strongly rooted in the tradition of an artistic and literary avant-garde that pushed back the limits of representation to compose new worlds. On the other hand, his interest in the younger generation of Czech and Slovak artists who privileged happening, performance and action art reflected his openness to new languages and his understanding of their relevance not only in his own country, but also in a broader context—even if, and this should be highlighted, Chalupecký's worldview remained limited to a European (East and West), Soviet and North American reality and hardly integrated non occidental or Third World components.

The critic's exchanges with his peers, his statements at AICA congresses and his writings published in France and Italy reveal a personal approach to art that

emphasises freedom and authenticity, not only in the face of a Western art world controlled by large institutions and commercial galleries, but also in the face of state socialism and artists' temptation to adopt a deliberately victimising or heroic attitude in relation to this political context. In Chalupecký's mind, authenticity was related with autonomy and freedom which, in the case of Czech and Slovak artists, paradoxically resulted from their situation of isolation. Isolation thus appeared in Chalupecký's reflections under an idealised and even romanticised angle, as a factor of preservation of authenticity and freedom from both the constraints of Western capitalism and state socialism.

"Art in Bohemia", written at the end of the 1980s and first published in the United States, synthesised such views.<sup>150</sup> Chalupecký compared the role of the businessman in capitalist societies with the one played by officials in socialist societies: in his view, both of them operated as facilitators for "the path to fame and fortune." Art's commercialization in the first case and its bureaucratization in the second were very similar, Chalupecký observed, insofar as they both resulted in its manipulation from outside and entered the realm of production instead of creation. In contrast, he believed that true creation was the essence of freedom and as such, totally incompatible with any kind of authority and imposed function. In a way that, here again, was not devoid of romanticism, Chalupecký insisted on the position of Czechoslovak artists who, isolated and out of touch with the two above-mentioned systems, had nevertheless "dedicated their lives to their art". He suggested that it was precisely this condition of isolation that had enabled them to gain freedom and remain far from the pressure of modernity (in particular, the necessity of being in tune with one's time). For Chalupecký, art's significance lied beyond the categories and references established by our civilization, it couldn't be explained through predetermined interpretative schemes, whether of rational or moral type. "What makes the artist an artist" was, precisely, his or her perception of such lack and art somewhat pointed at what was missing in the structure of our civilization. Following

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<sup>150</sup> Jindřich Chalupecký, "Art in Bohemia: its Merchants, Bureaucrats, and Creators", *Cross Currents*, no. 9, 1990, 147-162. The text was published as a translated part of a book published later in Czech, *Nové umění v Čechách (New Art in Bohemia)* (Prague: H&H, 1994). Instead of Czechoslovakia, Chalupecký significantly used the term Bohemia, which designated the Western part of Czechoslovakia with its capital Prague. Bohemia was a realm until 1918, when it became a province of Czechoslovakia.

this logics, modern art was obviously transcendental and tended towards what couldn't be experienced or approached rationally in known forms. Chaluppecký affirmed that it “overstepped”.<sup>151</sup>

This abstract and idealistic vision left completely aside the problem of the livelihood of those artists who “devoted their lives to art”. Indeed, while Chaluppecký's words provided the heroic vision of an art that didn't accept any compromise with political and cultural systems, he also seemed to overlook the pragmatic conditions of artists' lives, their way of earning a living and the need for many of them to work for official structures or organisations. This is perhaps the limit of his thinking, which focuses on art at a very idealistic level but not on the material conditions of its emergence. Such views were, for example, far from the considerations of the artists mentioned in the previous chapter, who tried to achieve self-management and self-sufficiency.

Autonomy and freedom were also present in the writings of intellectuals like Aragon and Raoul-Jean Moulin, whose reading of Czech and Slovak art oscillated between a search for universal principles that would bring historical experiences of oppression together, and the temptation to be more direct and call for Czech and Slovak people's liberation and emancipation from the Soviet grip.

Julie Sissia has affirmed that Moulin wanted “to advocate a third way, between the autonomy of art and commitment, where art in itself possesses a revolutionary character that does not need to be expressed by a content that can be identified as “political””.<sup>152</sup> The same could be said on intellectuals and artists who were deeply disappointed by the real side of a social and political utopia in which had wanted to believe, and yet, remained committed at preserving contemporary art from any political or ideological instrumentalisation. In his text for the catalogue of the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1972, of which he was the commissioner, Moulin

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<sup>151</sup> Chaluppecký, “Art in Bohemia: its Merchants, Bureaucrats, and Creators”, 160.

<sup>152</sup> “[...] la notion de réel permet donc de comprendre que Moulin se veut partisan d'une troisième voie, entre autonomie de l'art et engagement, où l'art possède en soi un caractère révolutionnaire qui n'a pas besoin de s'exprimer par un contenu identifiable comme étant “politique”.” Sissia, “Réel, réalité et réalisme sous la plume de Raoul-Jean Moulin”, 135.

claimed his suspicion towards a too close relation between art (in this case, painting) and politics:

Some artists, believing that they are accelerating the movement of history, rush into a headlong rush to escape any attempt to recuperate, either to deny the object of their work, to deny themselves their creative capacity, or to substitute it with the artifices of a pseudo-political activism tending to reduce it to the necessities of ideology. In fact, for many of them, their common recourse to the “revolutionary phrase” only serves to mask the absence, impotence or mediocrity of their artistic practice.<sup>153</sup>

Such position against a purely political and militant use of art led Moulin to engage with art’s materiality and creative process. While he did not deny the importance of context in the formation of a work, he nevertheless sought to avoid any simplistic determinism or any reading that sees art as a literal representation of historical circumstances.

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<sup>153</sup> “Certains artistes, croyant accélérer le mouvement de l’histoire, se précipitent dans une fuite en avant qui les porte, pour échapper à toute tentative de recuperation, soit à nier l’objet de leur travail, à se démettre de leur capacité de creation, soit à lui substituer les artifices d’un activisme pseudo-politique tendant à le réduire aux nécessités de l’idéologie. En fait, pour grand nombre d’entre eux, leur commun recours à la “phrase révolutionnaire” sert seulement à masquer l’absence, l’impuissance ou la médiocrité de leur pratique artistique.” Raoul-Jean Moulin, in *Viseux, Hernandez, Titus-Carmel, Boltanski, Le Gac. France, 36<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Venise*, exh. cat. (Venice: Biennale di Venezia, 1972), unpaginated. cited in Sissia, “Réel, réalité et réalisme sous la plume de Raoul-Jean Moulin”, 132. Moulin’s last phrase significantly resonates with the opinion expressed by Giulio Carlo Argan a few years later, also in the context of the Venice Biennale, in relation to dissident art. See Chapter six.





## **PART 2**



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Cultural dialogue or missed encounter? Czechoslovak artists at the Pamplona Encounters (1972)**

The first part of this dissertation focused on the circulation of Central European art, discussing how exchanges across the Iron Curtain influenced the trajectory of authors from socialist countries and sometimes crystallised into temporary communities that shared similar ideas and methodologies, while remaining on the fringes of the institutional sphere. From an approach focused on the multiple coincidences resulting from interpersonal relationships and informal networks, this second part moves to the a priori more tangible and defined, but no less complex framework of exhibitions. Through exhibitions, art acquires a public condition. What did such condition imply in terms of acknowledgement, recognition and interpretation for Central European artists and their production? My aim here is to better understand the implication of art's public disclosure and its consequences on subsequent readings, taking into consideration the differentiated contexts in which it happened.

Drawing on three case studies, this second part will thus to identify and analyse some of the meanings and narratives produced around Central European art while it was “being exposed” in international exhibitions and biennials in Francoist Spain, France under the presidencies of Georges Pompidou and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and Italy during the “years of lead” (“anni di piombo”).

#### **1. Genesis of a controversial event**

##### **1.1 A blind spot in the history of the Pamplona Encounters**

From 26 June to 3 July 1972, the city of Pamplona in Northwestern Spain was literally taken over by a multidisciplinary festival held in a multiplicity of locations

and freely accessible to all.<sup>1</sup> More than three hundred artists participated in the Encuentros de Pamplona (Pamplona Encounters, PE), attended by a large number of visitors from Spain and abroad, as well as by the city's inhabitants. Unusual scenes altered the tranquillity of the capital of the Navarra region, starting with an incongruous structure made of several connected pneumatic domes installed in the periphery of the city to host part of the event—the “Cúpula neumática” conceived by the architect José Miguel de Prada Poole. Activities held over the eight days included exhibitions, performances, concerts, conferences, screenings, public poetry. First circumspect, the inhabitants of Pamplona eventually immersed themselves in the celebration and became the protagonists of this unprecedented event. At the same time, this festive initiative was marked by unexpected actions and protests directly connected to local (Basque) and national politics: the terrorist group ETA planted two bombs that exploded without causing any injuries and distributed flyers denouncing the initiative, also strongly criticised by the extreme right. Participants in the exhibition of contemporary Basque organised as part of the festival withdrew their works to protest against the censoring of a political painting.

Almost forgotten during the Spanish transition—the process of restoration of democracy that started with Franco's death in November 1975 and lasted, approximately, till the victory of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) at the general elections in 1982—, the Pamplona Encounters started to recapture the interest of art historians in the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the event has been subject to various attempts of reconstruction and analysis by the means of exhibitions, publications and conferences. These initiatives have contributed to affirm its singularity and establish it

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<sup>1</sup> The end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s saw various kinds of protests arise in Spain: students, workers, as well as the radicalisation of the ETA group which members started to use armed violence in 1968, making their first victims among the Guardia Civil corpse. In 1969, Franco named as his successor as a Head of State Juan Carlos of Bourbon, who became the King of Spain after Franco's death on 20 November 1975. Another important figure was the dictator's right hand and designated successor Luis Carrero Blanco, Prime Minister from 1967 till December 1973, when he was assassinated by ETA. See Paula Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 107-113.

<sup>2</sup> Juan Francisco Fuentes Aragonés, ““Lo que los españoles llaman la transición””, *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez* 36-1, 2006, 131-149. <https://doi.org/10.4000/mcv.2359> (Accessed March 2021); Germán Labrador Méndez, *Culpables por la literatura. Imaginación política y contracultura en la transición española (1968-1986)* (Barcelona: Akal, 2017).

as a turning point in the cultural landscape of late Francoist Spain.<sup>3</sup> Such position was mainly attributed to several factors. On the one hand, the PE marked the consolidation of avant-garde artistic practices and languages in the national territory and, above all, their visibility in the public space. As seen in Chapter one of this dissertation, however, this phenomenon had been anticipated in the previous decade by cultural agents who operated at the crossroads of experimental poetry, visual arts and music—let’s recall that the group *zaj* was formed in 1964 and that exhibitions of concrete and visual poetry were held from 1965 on. Numerous protagonists evoked in Chapter one participated indeed in the PE (Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, Alain Arias-Misson and the members of *zaj*, among others), which should be envisaged more in terms of continuity than rupture, at least regarding the development of an experimental and avant-garde scene in Spain. On the other hand, it is certain that the Encounters introduced radical changes through their inedited format, their scale and their

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<sup>3</sup> The most comprehensive research on the PE was carried out by the art historian and curator José Díaz Cuyás and resulted in the exhibition “Encuentros de Pamplona 1972. Fin de fiesta del arte experimental”, in view at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid (2009) and at the Museo de Navarra in Pamplona (2010). The catalogue is an essential source including historical and archival documents, as well as analytical texts. Among the important issues it gave visibility to was the fascinating relationship between art and tourism in this particular conjuncture, explored by Díaz Cuyás in the context of posterior projects. *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, exh. cat. (Madrid: MNCARS, 2009). We must also mention the 3-years research project held by the Museo Universitario de Navarra, focusing on the Huarte family and its contribution to the PE. Rafael Llano, coord., María Carbó, Marta García Alonso, Silvia Sábada and Miguel Zozaya, eds., *Los Encuentros de Pamplona en el Museo Universidad de Navarra* (Pamplona: Museo Universidad de Navarra, 2017). Previous publications on the PE also include Fernando Huici and Javier Ruiz’s early first attempt to provide a retrospective view on the event two years after: Fernando Huici and Javier Ruiz, *La comedia del arte: (en torno a los Encuentros de Pamplona)* (Madrid: Editoria Nacional, 1974). After this, two decades passed until *Los Encuentros de Pamplona: 25 años después*, exh. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1997); José Díaz Cuyás and Carmen Pardo, “Pamplona era una fiesta: tragicomedia del arte español”, in *Desacuerdos 1. Sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado español*, Jesús Carrillo and Iñaki Estella Noriega, eds. (Donostia/Barcelona/Sevilla: Arteleku/MACBA/UNIA, 2004), 17-74; Igor Contreras Zubillaga, “Arte de vanguardia y franquismo a propósito de la politización de los Encuentros 72 de Pamplona”, *Huarte de San Juan. Geografía e historia* no. 14, 2007, 235-55; José Díaz Cuyás, “La rarefacta fragancia del arte experimental en España”, in *De la revuelta a la posmodernidad (1962-1982)* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011), 127-141; Jorge-Luis Marzo and Patricia Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939-2015): ideas, prácticas, políticas* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2015), 330-336. The only art historical essay in English language focusing on the Pamplona Encounters was published in the framework of the European inter-institutional project L’Internationale, as part of an anthological publication. José Díaz Cuyás, “The Furor of the Festival”, in *L’Internationale: Post-War Avantgardes between 1957 and 1986* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2012), 261-267.

occupation of the entire space of a city, as well as their ambition to be accessible to a broad audience.<sup>4</sup>

The second element that made the PE special in the cultural context of late Francoist Spain was its function of catalyst of a series of tensions and misunderstandings around art and its relation to politics. In particular, it revealed a significant generational gap between, on one side, politicised artists and cultural agents who promoted a culture of resistance without compromise with the Francoist regime; on the other, a younger generation closer to counter-cultural movements, less interested in confrontation than in the formulation of cultural alternatives on the fringes of the system. In addition to these important debates, the PE were also a loudspeaker for concerns shared with part of the international art scene at that time: the porosity of artistic disciplines, the centrality of communication and participation, the search for a larger audience than the usual elite, as well as the dialogue with non Western cultures and their integration.

This chapter does not pretend to retrace the general history of the PE, which multiple facets have been already approached in the above-mentioned critical, theoretical and curatorial production. Taking this essential corpus into account and incorporating its valuable contributions, it focuses instead on a “blind spot”: the participation of Central European artists in the event and more specifically, the presence of works from Czechoslovakia in one of the exhibitions, “Proposals realisations and plastic assembling” (“Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos”). The fact that this Central European presence has gone unnoticed during the PE, despite the important media coverage that surrounded them, as well as in its their posterior re-examination, has constituted a first motive to investigate the conditions under which these works integrated the event and were presented.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the biographies or

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<sup>4</sup> In contrast, experiences of that sort had been already held in Italy, from the “Terzo Festival” including the exhibition “Luna Park” organised by the Gruppo 70 in Florence (1965), to the Karnhoval in Villa in Rieti (1969), mentioned in Chapter one; in the early 1970s in socialist Yugoslavia, “The city as a plastic happening” in Zagreb (1971) also performed the introduction of experimental art in the urban space. See Ivana Bago, “The City as a Space of Plastic Happening: From Grand Proposals to Exceptional Gestures in the Art of the 1970s in Zagreb”, *Journal of Urban History* Vol. 44 issue 1, 2018, 26-53.

<sup>5</sup> Jiří Valoch’s name was the only one to be cited afterwards. However, regardless of his origin, he was cited as one more international participant associated with the event, along with Ken Friedman and Dick Higgins. *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, 214.

monographs of the artists from Czechoslovakia do not mention their participation in the PE, a fact that raises the question of their awareness of being exhibited in Pamplona. Once again, the total invisibility of this event in art historical studies focused on Eastern European art's international connections seems to confirm the fact that Spain has remained so far largely ignored from the project of mapping artistic exchanges across the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.

We know that artists from socialist Central Europe were represented in the event thanks to the catalogue of the PE.<sup>6</sup> This voluminous and innovative object designed by José Luis Alexanco includes individual posters with the title, date and venue of each activity, as well as the names of its participants. Among them, two exhibitions actually included Central European participants, limited to Czech and Slovak artists. The presence of works by Josef Hiršal, Bohumila Grögerová and Jiří Kolar in the first, “Visual and phonetic poetry” (“Poesia visual y fonética”) is not surprising given the connections between the Spanish and Czech scenes of experimental poetry since the mid-1960s.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the majority of Czech and Slovak artists included in “Propuestas, realizaciones y montajes plásticos”—Eugen Brikcius, Stano Filko, Olaf Hanel, Dušan Klimeš, Jiří H. Kocman, Josef Kroutvor, Petr Štembera and Jiří Valoch—had never exhibited in Spain and had no relations with the country (with the exception of Jiří Valoch who, as seen in Chapter one, was in contact with the Spanish experimental scene, and Petr Štembera who had contributed to the magazine *Revista de Arte*, printed in Spain but diffused in Puerto Rico.<sup>8</sup> [Fig. 4.1]

Why did the presence of these artists from Central Europe go totally unnoticed? For what reason was the event omitted in recent attempts at reconstructing the artistic networks and trajectories connecting socialist Central Europe and Western Europe? Was it by deliberate omission, because it was considered insignificant in the context

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<sup>6</sup> *Encuentros 1972 Pamplona: 26 VI-3VII*, exh. cat. (Madrid: ALEA, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> “Poesia visual y fonética” was in fact organised by Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, who delegated his work to the young poets Javier Ruiz and Fernando Huici, members of the Cooperativa de Producción Artística e Artesana. *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, 294. The exhibition was on view in the pneumatic dome from the 29 June to the 3 July 1972. It presented works from forty-one artists. Jiří Kolar was the only Central European artist whose work was reproduced in the catalogue of the PE (*Gedicht (Poem)*, 1967). *Encuentros 1972 Pamplona: 26 VI-3VII*, unpaginated.

<sup>8</sup> “Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos” was scheduled to take place from 29 June to 3 July 1972. Of the ninety-two artists on view, eight were from Czechoslovakia.

of transnational art history, or because the episode remained undetected, even for the artists themselves?

Before entering this matter, however, it is necessary to recall the origins of the PE and the position occupied by its private sponsors on the one hand, and by its organisers, on the other.

The Pamplona Encounters were initially conceived as a tribute to the patriarch of a wealthy family of Spanish entrepreneurs, the Huartes. Originating from Pamplona, The Huartes have played an active role in supporting progressive arts in the 1960s and the early 1970s, especially in the field of visual arts and music but also in architecture and furniture design. Felix Huarte was a successful entrepreneur—first in the construction sector, then expanding his activities to agriculture, metallurgy and tourism, among others—and a well-known politician in the region. He and his wife Adriana Beaumont initiated an activity in favour of contemporary creation and they were followed by two of their children, Jesus and Juan. The Huarte financially supported artists like the sculptors Jorge Oteiza and Eduardo Chillida, projects such as the experimental music laboratory Alea in Madrid, as well as the magazine *Nueva Forma* (1966-1974), a reference in the field of modern architecture.<sup>9</sup>

At Felix Huarte's death in 1971, his children wanted to pay homage to him and imagined an event involving the Orpheo Pamplones, a choir that was particularly appreciated by their father. The initiative was commissioned to the Estudio Alea, directed by the composer and musician Luis De Pablo. De Pablo, whose activities were already economically supported by the family, rapidly deviated from the idea of the Orpheo Pamplones and proposed to organise a more ambitious interdisciplinary

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<sup>9</sup> On the Huarte family's cultural sponsorship, see Patricia Molins, "Operación H: de la Bienal de Sao Paulo a los Encuentros de Pamplona", in *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, exh. cat. (Madrid: MNCARS, 2009), 62-79; in the same catalogue, the section "Antecedentes", 58-61; Francisco Javier Zubiaur Carreño, "Los Encuentros de Pamplona 1972 Contribución del Grupo Alea y la Familia Huarte a un acontecimiento", *Anales de Historia del Arte* no. 14, 2004, 251-268. Juan Huarte's role as a collector and an art promoter was addressed in María Dolores Jiménez-Blanco, *El coleccionismo de arte en España. Una aproximación desde su historia y su contexto*, 2<sup>o</sup> Cuaderno Arte y Mecenazgo (Barcelona: Fundación Arte y Mecenazgo, 2013), 101 and 136.



festival that would involve the whole city: “something like Alea, but in a big way”.<sup>10</sup> He invited the visual artist José Luis Alexanco to co-organise the event, as Alexanco’s numerous contacts from the visual arts field would contribute to give the event an international dimension. Juan and Jesús Huarte accepted the ambitious proposal, to be realized within nine months.

From the outset therefore, the existence of the PE was closely linked to the will of a powerful sponsor. One might think that this private sponsorship would have removed the event from the heated discussions about state-supported art and the regime’s grip on cultural affairs. On the contrary, despite the fact that the Huartes had never sought to influence the contents of the artistic activities they were backing economically, a large number of Spanish artists and intellectuals accused the PE and their organisers of serving the interests of the oligarchy and being elitist. Was the Huartes’ support an act of good will in favour of the freedom of avant-garde expressions in their country? Or were the PE part of a strategy of absorption and deactivation of avant-garde culture by the ruling class? At the same time, regardless of the event’s actual motivations, how could one enjoy such artistic initiative when the whole country remained under the repressive Francoist regime?

It is still difficult to disentangle the positive impact of their arts patronage from more obscure aspects related with the Huartes’ connection with Francoism and the enrichment of the company at the expense of those who opposed the regime—most particularly in the first decades of the dictatorship. Recent investigations have revealed in fact that the name Huarte was on a list of private and public companies—including the catholic Church—that used political prisoners of Franco’s regime as a workforce in sectors such as mining and construction between 1936 and 1956. This system was a central instrument of the regime’s penitentiary policy and a vector of enrichment for these companies, who took advantage of free labour—equated to slavery—or cheap labour. Prisoners were used to construct railroads, roads, airports, as well as Franco’s own mausoleum, the Valle de los Caídos (Valley of the Fallen), built

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<sup>10</sup> “Si quieres—le dije a Jesus Huarte—, podemos hacer algo como Alea, pero a lo gordo”, interview with Luis De Pablo, in Rafael Llano, coord., María Carbó, Marta García Alonso, Silvia Sábada and Miguel Zozaya, eds., *Los Encuentros de Pamplona en el Museo Universidad de Navarra*, 75-107.

between 1942 and 1959.<sup>11</sup>[Fig. 4.2] Although these actions took place before the period addressed in this dissertation, they deserve to be referred to, in part because they remain unspoken issues that can nevertheless condition certain approaches on the PE.<sup>12</sup> Once again, this raises the issue of the arduous separation between the official and unofficial realms, as well as the strategic or instrumental use of spaces of visibility by cultural agents. Once again, despite the regimes' radically opposed ideologies, it is impossible not to acknowledge some resonances and parallelisms between these dilemmas and the ones at stake in societies under state socialism.

## 1.2. New artistic realities

In a way that intended—unsuccessfully—to remain at the margins of political debates, the Pamplona Encounters conceived by Luis De Pablo and José-Luis Alexanco aimed to show the latest trends in national and international art, from the fields of visual and performing arts, poetry, music and cinema. In introduction to the catalogue, the two organisers evoked a “collective adventure” which, in their opinion, should be a matter for everyone.<sup>13</sup> De Pablo and Alexanco aspired to build a federative event bringing together different and possibly discrepant sensibilities and approaches. They situated dialogue and communication at the centre of the manifestation and on this regard, their decision to name it “Encuentros” rather than “Festival” was not casual:

You will observe that the characteristics of this manifestation are the freedom of creation and a desire for intercommunication and better knowledge between the

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<sup>11</sup> To convert the concentration camps in “working camps”, the regime created the Patronato Central de Redención de Penas por el Trabajo (PCRPT) (Central Patronage for the Redemption of Penalties for Work) on October 11, 1938. Juan Miguel Baquero, “Qué empresas usaron a esclavos del franquismo?”, *El Diario/Andalusia*, online version, 24 April 2014. [https://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/empresas-usaron-esclavos-franquismo\\_0\\_251975222.html](https://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/empresas-usaron-esclavos-franquismo_0_251975222.html) (Accessed October 2019); José Luis Gutiérrez Molina, “Informe sobre el trabajo esclavo en España durante la dictadura franquista”, *Libre pensamiento*, no. 80, Autumn 2014, 44-49.

<sup>12</sup> For example, this aspect of the Huarte's past is completely passed under silence in the voluminous publication dedicated to the family's role in the Encounters, coordinated by Rafael Llano, *Los Encuentros de Pamplona en el Museo Universidad de Navarra* (Pamplona: Museo Universidad de Navarra, 2017). Given that the Universidad de Navarra is an institution managed by the Opus Dei, the absence of any mention of the Huartes' early relations with Francoism suggests that tacit connections between Francoism, religious institutions and Spanish entrepreneurship might persist in the present.

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous author (probably José Luis Alexanco and Luis De Pablo), untitled introduction, *Encuentros 1972 Pamplona: 26 VI-3VII*, unpaginated.

various arts and matters close to them, as well as the search for new, more effective ways of addressing [sic] others. Pamplona, a relatively small city (140,000 inhabitants), lends itself perfectly to the experience, since a large number of activities, components of these encounters, will be held in the street or in very crowded places. We consider it obvious to point out that nothing similar had been done before in Spain.<sup>14</sup>

De Pablo and Alexanco made it clear that the participation of the public in the emergence of “new artistic realities” was essential and that this conjuncture in Pamplona would produce an unprecedented situation. In their opinion, the city offered an auspicious environment for the reception of artistic experiments due to the “civic tradition” of the San Fermines, its annual celebration during which the inhabitants became the main protagonist of a festive experience. The relation between the San Fermines to be held in July right after the PE, and the successful introduction of avant-garde proposals to the local population was emphasised in the catalogue:

[...] we would like one of the features of the Encounters to be, on the one hand, that the so-called public can—we would even say, must—intervene in artistic matters in a much closer way than usual, occupying it differently: on the other hand, [...] the creator is going to face a much less passive public than usual.<sup>15</sup>

The correlation of avant-garde art, public space and popular participation was, in De Pablo and Alexanco’s view, what would contribute to the emergence of “new artistic realities”. At the same time, the PE were not intended to promote a single aesthetic or cultural position, nor to focus on a single theme or curatorial principle. De Pablo and Alexanco’s primary sources of inspiration were festivals and summer courses in the field of contemporary music: the Musiktage in Donaueschingen, the Tagen für Neue Musik in Bremen and the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Germany;

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<sup>14</sup> José Luis Alexanco and Luis de Pablo to the Catalan poet Joan Brossa, invitation letter dated 3 April 1972. Ref. BROSSA\_CORRES\_ENT\_JB\_E\_00073, Archive of the Centro de Estudios y Documentación, MACBA, Barcelona.

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous author, untitled introduction, in *Encuentros 1972 Pamplona: 26 VI-3VII*, exh. cat. (Madrid: ALEA, 1972), unpaginated. “[...] una de las notas de los Encuentros quisiéramos fuese, de un lado, el que el llamado publico pueda—casi diríamos, deba—intervenir en el hecho artístico de una forma mucho mas próxima de lo que se tenia por costumbre, habitándolo de manera diferente: de otro, lógica consecuencia de lo anterior, el creador va a encontrarse frente a un publico mucho menos pasivo que de ordinario.”

they also mentioned the Sigma Festival in Bordeaux and the Venice Biennial (for its combination of different arts).<sup>16</sup> Their understanding of interdisciplinarity thus originated primarily from the world of music and, in the case of the visual arts, from a sector in which art, science and technology were in constant dialogue. This vision placed them in a position of “facilitators” and intermediaries rather than curators or active promoters of an aesthetic model. De Pablo and Alexanco wanted the PE to offer a snapshot of their time and as such, they wanted it “to be objective with [their] time”. Less interested in identifying and defining artistic quality, they insisted on “a level of seriousness, responsibility and knowing that what you see or hear is the product of a living parcel of the here and now”.<sup>17</sup> [Fig. 4.3]

## **2. The CAYC as an intermediary**

### **2.1 Jorge Glusberg, the CAYC and the Pamplona Encounters**

The ephemeral nature of the artworks exhibited in “Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos” was specified in the catalogue of the PE, and so was the suitability of Prada-Poole’s architecture to exhibit short-lived artworks, centered on ideas and processes:

The pneumatic domes, the very essence of an ephemeral architecture, have been used so to show an art that is wanted and likewise is known as ephemeral: it has been named—quoting Jorge Glusberg—“art of ideas”. Projects, documents, films, lights, recordings, noises, actions, events, etc...<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> F., “Los “Encuentros 72 de Pamplona”, del 26 de junio al 3 de julio”, *Diario de Navarra*, 29 April 1972, 32.

<sup>17</sup> “No nos solidarizamos con todo lo presentado; nos ha bastado un nivel de seriedad, responsabilidad y el saber que lo que se vea o se oiga es producto de una parcela viva del aquí y ahora.” Anonymous author, untitled introduction, unpaginated.

<sup>18</sup> Untitled, *Encuentros 1972 Pamplona: 26 VI-3VII*, exh. cat. (Madrid: ALEA, 1972), unpaginated. The text in this section was published in Spanish, French and English.

The reference to Jorge Glusberg and his “art of ideas” was not a coincidence: the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) from Buenos Aires, of which Glusberg was one of the founders, had collaborated in fact with the PE.<sup>19</sup>

De Pablo and Alexanco’s first contacts with Jorge Glusberg dated back to their joint travel to Argentina in 1971, with the aim of presenting their installation *Interrupted loneliness (Soledad Interrumpida)*. Initially conceived for an exhibition at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires by invitation of the Argentinian musicologist and composer Jacobo Romano, the piece consisted of anthropomorphic plastic figures set in motion through a system of tubes into which air was mechanically blown. **[Fig. 4.4]** The movement of the figures was accompanied by randomly distributed lights and projections and a soundtrack of electronic music composed by Luis De Pablo. Merging De Pablo and Alexanco’s research on forms in movement, new technologies and participation, the piece showed their common interest in “sharing authorship and possible interpretations with the viewer”, as well as “the acceptance of chance” in the work’s development.<sup>20</sup> As the Instituto Di Tella was closed by the military regime of Juan Carlos Onganía, the installation and its immersive environment were eventually relocated and put on display at the Centro Cultural San Martín.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding their encounter with Glusberg, Alexanco recalled that

[I]n 71 I was in Buenos Aires invited by the Instituto di Tella and I contacted the CAYC. While there we received (Luis de Pablo and myself) the assignment from ALEA and we started to talk with Jorge Glusberg about the possibilities of collaboration, which were concreted by telephone and letter. He elaborated the project that he would bring according to our conversations. [...] He had already put

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<sup>19</sup> *Encuentros 1972 Pamplona: 26 VI-3VII*, unpaginated. Besides the CAYC, Spanish public institutions, as well the Cinémathèque Française and Caledonian Airlines collaborated with the organisation. The CAYC however had a different status, as the other collaborators offered logistic support but were not present as participants.

<sup>20</sup> “[...] nos interesaba la idea de compartir la autoría y las posibles interpretaciones con el espectador, la aceptación del azar.” José Luis Alexanco, email to the author, dated 6 November 2019. José Luis Alexanco’s generous contributions have been invaluable for the writing of this chapter but also for learning about other episodes concerning his own contacts and travels to Eastern Europe (in particular Poland) and Yugoslavia.

<sup>21</sup> *Alexanco. Secuencia de materiales en gran formato-Pinturas y trabajos digitales*, exh. cat. (Málaga: Pedro Peña Art Gallery, 2003), 29.

together his idea of a group of artists working on Art Systems. The invitations to the artists were issued by him, we didn't have their addresses.<sup>22</sup>

Glusberg's project consisted in bringing to Pamplona two exhibitions he had recently organised in Buenos Aires and other cities in Latin America: "Arte de sistemas" ("Art systems") and "Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano" ("Towards a Latin American profile of art"). In addition to this curatorship, he also personally attended the event in Pamplona and gave a conference on the notion of "art systems", to which we will return below. The exhibitions "Arte de sistemas" and "Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano" were not mentioned in the catalogue of the PE, however, and contrary to most of the activities held during the eight days, they were not assigned a specific section. In fact, "Arte de Sistemas" and "Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano" were simply integrated to another exhibition, titled "Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos", without distinguishing their participants from the others nor specifying their relation to the CAYC.

### **2.2.1 An invisible exhibition in an astonishing location**

"Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos" was scheduled to be on view in the most unusual venue of the PE: the "cúpula neumática" (pneumatic dome), an inflatable architecture composed by a series of intercommunicated domes conceived by the young architect José Miguel de Prada Poole. [Fig. 4.5] We should fix ourselves on this space because its uniqueness has certainly influenced the reception of the works exhibited there.

While the city of Pamplona had collaborated with the organisers by offering locations as diverse as its sixteenth century citadel, a "frontón" (the name of the halls dedicated to the practice of Basque pelota, a game typical of the region), a museum (the Museo de Navarra), a hotel, two banks ("cajas de ahorros", i.e. "saving banks": it

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<sup>22</sup> "[...] en el 71 yo estaba en Buenos Aires invitado por el Instituto di Tella y entré en contacto con el CAYC. Estando allí recibimos (Luis de Pablo y yo) el encargo de ALEA y ya comenzamos a hablar con Jorge Glusberg de las posibilidades de colaboración, que fueron concretándose telefónica y epistolariamente. Él elaboró el proyecto que traería de acuerdo con nuestras conversaciones. Efectivamente sus contactos con Checoslovaquia eran para nosotros una buena oportunidad, así como la presencia de artistas americanos incluidos los del norte, ej. Baldessari. Tenía ya montada su idea de un conjunto de artistas que trabajaban sobre el Arte de Sistemas. Las invitaciones a los artistas las cursó él, nosotros no teníamos sus direcciones." José Luis Alexanco, email to the author, 20 October 2019.

was actually not uncommon at the time to find spaces dedicated to culture in these structures), three cinemas, a theatre, a church, a walkway (promenade) and a sports center (Anaitasuna), Prada Poole's pneumatic dome was the only architecture built for the occasion and was intended to host several exhibitions, sound and music broadcasts, as well as a series of conferences and debates. Initially, the ephemeral structure was planned to occupy the city's main square—the "plaza del Castillo—but it was eventually relocated to the "Ciudadela", a vacant lot situated in a more peripheral area. This change and the subsequent "margination" of the dome, decided by Pamplona's municipality, were highly criticised as a symptom of Luis De Pablo and José-Luis Alexanco's lack of real commitment to public participation.<sup>23</sup>

José Miguel de Prada Poole was the first Spanish architect interested in the research, application and development of pneumatic structures.<sup>24</sup> After a series of modifications on his initial project due to technical constraints and the change of location, the "cúpula" finally materialised in eleven PVC-domes of different colours—white, orange and red—supported by powerful fans. Visitors penetrated and circulated within through airlock entries.<sup>25</sup> The PVC membranes were very fragile, and the composition of the Ciudadela's terrain, made of earth and stones, retarded the structure's construction; as a consequence, the ephemeral space opened on June 28<sup>th</sup>, three days after the beginning of the PE, and lasted two days and a half till a leak in one of the membranes contributed to the deflation of the whole structure. It was suggested that the dome was deflated on purpose or even sabotaged, due to the political nature of unscheduled meetings taking place inside. Both versions have cohabited until today, showing the difficulty in setting a single account on what

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<sup>23</sup> Various participants and spectators, including the artists Equipo Crónica, Muntadas, Lluís Lluçà, Julio Plaza, Francesc Torres, Nacho Criado, Javier Aguirre and the art critic Tomas Llorens, signed a manifesto stating their "desolidarisation" from the event. After its circulation among the participants, the manifesto was published in the magazine *Triunfo*. "Escrito de los participantes", *Triunfo* no. 510, 8 July 1972. Reproduced in *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, 331.

<sup>24</sup> See José Miguel de Prada Poole and Fabián López Ulloa, "José Miguel de Prada y las Estructuras Neumáticas en España, 1960-1980", in Pepa Casinello, Santiago Huerta, José Miguel de Prada Poole and Ricardo Sánchez Lampreave, eds., *Geometría y Proporción en las Estructuras* (Madrid: Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, 2010), 375-387.

<sup>25</sup> José Miguel de Prada Poole, "La verdadera historia de las cúpulas hinchables", in Rafael Llano, coord., María Carbó, Marta García Alonso, Silvia Sábada and Miguel Zozaya, eds., *Los Encuentros de Pamplona en el Museo Universidad de Navarra*, 157-159.

happened in Pamplona between the 26 June and the 3 July 1972.<sup>26</sup> During its short existence, nevertheless, the architectural experience of entering the space of the pneumatic dome and its presence in the city made a strong impression on those who attended the PE.

The public's feeling of amazement was captured by several photographers, whose images well illustrate the strong contrast between the orderly routine of the provincial town and the unusual situation introduced by the avant-garde festival. The photographer Pío Guerendiáin, native from Pamplona, was the only professional officially "hired" by De Pablo and Alexanco to report on the event.<sup>27</sup> Various of his photographs documented the expression of astonishment, curiosity or perplexity of the visitors contemplating the artworks or attending a performance. [Fig. 4.6] The ethnographic dimension of these visual testimonials has certainly contributed to nurture a specific approach on the PE, insisting on their disruptive character as the first encounter between the Spanish people—in this case, not professionals from the art scene or inhabitants of cultural capitals like Madrid and Barcelona, but "average citizens" of a small town—and contemporary art and experimental practices.

As an astonishing location that strongly impressed the visitors, the pneumatic dome conditioned the reception of the objects and activities that were proposed inside, by redirecting the visitors' attention from the works on display towards the sensitive experience of the whole environment. For many of them in fact, the impact of being immersed in the architecture's coloured environment was such, that what was exhibited inside became secondary or irrelevant. The architect Prada-Poole himself admitted that

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<sup>26</sup> *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, 223.

<sup>27</sup> Pío Guerendiáin was active as a photographer since 1963 and his work has been closely linked to Pamplona and region of Navarra. He photographed the San Fermín and other events of the local culture. Particularly interesting is his work as a photographer for several exhibitions in the Sala de Cultura de la Caja de Ahorros de Navarra directed by Xabier Morrás, organised in the 1960s, including Chillida and Francis Bacon: on display were photographic copies of original artworks made by himself (in the case of Bacon, the photographs were in sepia, since color prints would have been too expensive). "Aquello les trascendía y les emocionaba, aunque dijese: "Y esto, qué es?"" interview with Pío Guerendiáin, in Rafael Llano, coord., María Carbó, Marta García Alonso, Silvia Sábada and Miguel Zozaya, eds., *Los Encuentros de Pamplona en el Museo Universidad de Navarra*, 249-259.



[...] the interior space was so bright that people did not really see the pictures. [...] People only looked up. Everybody was looking with their mouths open and that was it. Some people, despite having been there, do not remember that there was any exhibition there. I don't really think there were more than 200 A4-size photographs and of course, in that environment, people didn't even look at them.<sup>28</sup>

The pneumatic architecture's visual appeal, as well as its short opening to the public—two days and a half—may thus offer a first explanation for the lack of public visibility of the exhibited works of the Central European artists. On the other hand, given the high number of activities and performances carried out during the eight days of the PE, we should admit that bidimensional artworks that were essentially documents—as was the case for the exhibitions brought to Pamplona by Jorge Glusberg—could hardly compete in terms of impact and attractiveness with more spectacular and participatory proposals.

On the other hand, no remaining archive or collection from this exhibition can be consulted; as Alexanco has pointed out, most of the pieces displayed in the pneumatic dome got lost or were damaged after its deflation:

All the works of “Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos” were exposed in Prada Poole's inflatable domes, and remained there until a sabotage drowned them, and all the work disappeared. I cannot remember what the work consisted of, but I remember that most of them were copies, plates or blueprints of originals and that the content corresponded to the statement, “Proposals”...<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “[...] el espacio interior tenía tanta luz, que lo cierto es que la gente no veía las fotografías. [...] La gente miraba únicamente hacia arriba. Todo el mundo miraba con la boca abierta y en eso paró todo. Hay quien, a pesar de haber estado, no recuerda que allí hubiera exposición alguna. En realidad no creo que fuesen más de 200 fotografías tamaño Din A4 y claro, en ese ambiente, la gente ni las miraba.” Prada Poole refers here to an exhibition of photographs in the dome; however, such exhibition is not documented in the catalogue nor in successive reconstruction. de Prada Poole, “La verdadera historia de las cúpulas hinchables”, 159-160.

<sup>29</sup> “Todas las obras de Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos se expusieron en las Cúpulas Inflables de Prada Poole, permanecieron allí hasta que un sabotaje las hundió, y desapareció toda la obra. No soy capaz de acordarme en que consistía la obra, si recuerdo que eran la mayor parte copias, ferros o blueprints de originales y que el contenido correspondía con el enunciado, Propuestas...” José Luis Alexanco, email to the author, 17 October 2019.

This loss was not considered too negatively, however, since “it was conceptually deliberate that the works were ephemeral”.<sup>30</sup> If there is unfortunately no photographic record of the pieces brought by Glusberg and exhibited in the pneumatic dome, one photograph taken by Pio Guerendiáin can give a precious indication on the way bidimensional pieces were displayed.<sup>31</sup> [Fig. 4.6] This system was also well described by José Luis Alexanco in a recent interview:

[The pneumatic dome] was running for four days, and important things were offered in that space, although it was not easy to use as an exhibition space. Because, of course, we did not have all the money in the world, and preparing that space for exhibitions, without a large investment, was not easy, because there were no walls. It occurred to me to plant some tubes in the ground, two or two and a half metres high, join them with cables and hang the works from those cables with a pair of pliers, as if they were clothes to be dried. That’s how we exhibited everything brought by the Centro de Arte y Comunicación de Buenos Aires, directed by Jorge Glusberg. And there was also the audiovisual pollution of Muntadas, and a procession of people. Of course, when the dome was deflated, those tubes were bad because they cracked the plastic. I think it was on Thursday when the dome appeared on the floor and was completely perforated.<sup>32</sup>

If this relatively simple system, as Alexanco has signaled, was primarily due to the absence of internal walls in the pneumatic dome, according to de Prada Poole, it also had a function of safety—rudimentary, it must be said—, since the vertical tubes would

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<sup>30</sup> “No consideraron negativamente la pérdida, era conceptualmente deliberado que las obras fueran efímeras.” Alexanco, email, 17 October 2019.

<sup>31</sup> The pieces visible in Guerendiáin’s photograph were not from “Propuestas...”. They belonged to an exhibition of photographs which was not documented in the catalogue or the program. However, Prada Poole refers to it.

<sup>32</sup> “Estuvo funcionando cuatro días, y en aquel espacio se ofrecieron cosas importantes, aunque no era fácil utilizarlo como lugar de exposición. Porque, claro, no disponíamos de todo el dinero del mundo y acondicionar aquel espacio para exposiciones, sin una grande inversión, no era cosa fácil, porque no había ni paredes. Lo que se me ocurrió fue plantar unos tubos en el suelo, de dos o dos metros y medio de altos, unirlos con cables y colgar las obras de esos cables con unas pinzas, como si fuera ropa tendida a secar. Así expusimos todo lo que trajo el Centro de Arte y Comunicación de Buenos Aires, que dirigía Jorge Glusberg. Y ahí estaba también la polución audiovisual de Muntadas, y un desfile de gente. Claro que, cuando la cúpula se desinfló, aquellos tubos fueron nefastos porque rajaron el plástico. Creo que fue el jueves cuando la cúpula amaneció en el suelo y completamente pinchada.” “Nosotros informábamos a los Huarte de cómo avanzaba el programa, pero ellos se fiaban completamente de lo que hacíamos y seguían todo con gran entusiasmo”, interview with José Luis Alexanco, in Rafael Llano, coord., María Carbó, Marta García Alonso, Silvia Sábada and Miguel Zozaya, eds., *Los Encuentros de Pamplona en el Museo Universidad de Navarra*, 129.

allow the public to leave the domes in case of deflation and the works to be retrieved—a possibility the architect himself had taken into account.<sup>33</sup>

The PE were thus the stage for the concomitant presentation of two groundbreaking exhibitions from the CAYC from Buenos Aires. This was a unique occurrence in the story of these exhibitions, since each of them relied on and sought to expose and diffuse a distinct ideological program.

In this particular context, “Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos” operated as an umbrella exhibition. In addition to “Arte de sistemas” and “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”, it included artists invited by Alexanco and De Pablo, and a few others who had spontaneously decided to participate and were integrated in the exhibition. While the latest, most of them from Spain and present in person at the event, privileged installations and site-specific pieces, the part presented by Glusberg was made up of documents in identical format on which works by a large number of artists were reproduced.<sup>34</sup>

Were the Czechoslovak artists whose works had been brought by Glusberg aware of their inclusion in an exhibition in Spain? Probably not. As Alexanco confirmed, De Pablo and himself did not interfere with Glusberg’s project, who “had already made up his idea of a group of artists who worked on the Art of Systems”.<sup>35</sup> Glusberg did not share the artists’ addresses with De Pablo and Alexanco either, making therefore impossible to send them information or invite them to the event. The fact that all the artists participating in the PE were paid honorariums sheds another light on this gesture.<sup>36</sup> The action of bringing “ready-made” exhibitions abroad without mentioning it to the artists involved cannot be considered as a simple omission,

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<sup>33</sup> de Prada Poole, “La verdadera historia de las cúpulas hinchables”, 157-159.

<sup>34</sup> Among them were also installations from Julio Plaza, Nacho Criado, Leandro Katz, Jordi Benito, Francesc Torres and the Grupo Gran de Gràcia i Antoni Muntadas, at that time residing in New York and who travelled expressly to set up his installation *Pollución Audiovisual* in the pneumatic dome. See *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: fin de fiesta del arte experimental*.

<sup>35</sup> Alexanco, email, 20 October 2019.

<sup>36</sup> It was clearly established from the beginning, and specified in the invitation letters, that the participating artists would receive a 1000 dollars fee. In change, the ones who showed up without having been invited had their project financed.

especially if we know the importance of the notion of communication for CAYC's own agenda and for many artists involved in its network at that time.

Whether the omission was deliberate or not—and I suggest that it reflected Glusberg's main interest in diffusing his own ideas and products rather than giving space to artists involved in them—, we can affirm that the presence of the CAYC in Pamplona contributed to spread and visibilise a vision of art shaped above all as a theoretical product, without allowing the artists who were involved in it to benefit from the relations or spaces of visibility generated by the exhibition. It seems in fact that international artists were invited to participate in these exhibitions first of all to broaden the framework and scope of Glusberg's curatorial and theoretical project. Their presence gave the CAYC an international projection and fulfilled its central scope of communication, without setting critical comparisons between the different social and cultural scenes from which they emanated. On this respect, we should recall the ambiguity of Glusberg's figure. He was an entrepreneur, the owner of Modulor S.A. a company of luminous objects, whose related with the dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla were signaled. These relations, however, were mostly evident in the second half of the 1970s, especially when Glusberg won the prize of the 1977 Sao Paulo Biennial.<sup>37</sup>

This situation invites us to explore further what we can refer to as a “triangular relationship”, made possible in Pamplona through the convergence of various elements: 1. theories emanating from the CAYC; 2. their reception in the Spanish context of the PE; and 3. their resonance and points of friction with artistic production from Central Europe. Studying this relationship can be particularly fruitful to highlight how much the understanding of specific ideas and their related artistic dynamics was strongly connected with the social and political imaginaries that crossed their spaces of reception. It is precisely its constant difficulty of having all its components truly synchronized that makes this triangular relationship interesting, in

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<sup>37</sup> See Xil Buffone, “Los expedientes Glusberg”, *Ramona. Revista de artes visuales*, 38, 2004, 56-85; Katarzyna Cytlak, “Hacia el arte latinoamericano globalizado. La auto-inención del CAYC—Centro de Arte y Comunicación—desde la perspectiva transmoderna y transrregional”, in Paula Barreiro López and Juliane Debeusscher, eds., *Revista de Estudios Globales y Arte Contemporáneo* vol. 5, no. 1, 2017-18, 53-85.

that it reveals the expectations, the outcomes and the deficiencies of this particular encounter—which became, in fact, a “mis-”encounter or a “missed” encounter.

## 2.2 Two programmatic exhibitions: *Arte de Sistemas*

“Arte de sistemas” and “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” were programmatic exhibitions in the sense that the conceptual framework they relied on, formulated by Jorge Glusberg, was as important—if not more so—as the selection of artists they presented, and had repercussions beyond the exhibitions themselves. As the case of the PE shows, the two exhibitions were closely articulated and a comparative study of the discourses they channelled reveals the shift from an internationalist and universalist view (“Arte de sistemas”) to a regionalist focus on the Latin American context and its specificity (“Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”).

“Arte de sistemas” was first held at the Museum of Modern Art in Buenos Aires in July 1971 and brought together one hundred and one artists from different origins. If the expression “art systems” had been already used by Glusberg in August 1970 in the context of a collective exhibition titled “De la figuración al arte de sistemas”, “Arte de sistemas” sought to introduce the notion in an international context and to promote it thanks to a theoretical statement elaborated by to co-founder of the CAYC himself.<sup>38</sup> As he explained in the catalogue, the notion of “system” allowed to both identify and reflect upon creative processes and practices characterised by a coherent interrelation of their constitutive elements—both material and immaterial. “Arte de sistemas” did not pretend “to find single and total comprehensive methods but, rather, structural wholes which may be grouped together and put in order according to certain relationships which occur among them and their properties”.<sup>39</sup> As such, it encompassed a set of productions as diverse as “art as idea, political art, ecological art, the art of proposals or cybernetic art”.<sup>40</sup> Rather than an aesthetic model, the

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<sup>38</sup> “De la figuración al arte de sistemas” exhibited works from the Argentinian artists Luis Fernando Bedit, Edgardo Antonio Vigo and Nicolás García Urriburu at the CAYC headquarters in Buenos Aires and in the Emilio Caraffa Museum in Córdoba.

<sup>39</sup> Jorge Glusberg, “Art Systems”, in *Arte de sistemas*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Moderno/CAYC, 1971), unpaginated.

<sup>40</sup> Glusberg, “Art Systems”, unpaginated.

category “art systems” consisted for Glusberg in “a framework of thought” that would “unite[...] coherently actions, ideas and proposals offered by the selected artists”.<sup>41</sup>

The methodology of production adopted for the exhibition encouraged international participation: in line with the idea of system, the contributions were realised or posteriorly converted into a standardised format easily transportable and reproducible. Artists were asked indeed to send works on tracing paper (60x90 cm) in order to reproduce them through heliography.<sup>42</sup> This method was central for the international success of Glusberg’s exhibitions and their circulation. Considering his ability to forge relations and impose his vision on the international stage, it does not seem incongruous that the decision was, as María José Herrera suggests, strategically conceived as a way to “capitalis[e] on the anti-institutional and alternative attitude that at that time the CAYC shared with other similar art centers already existing in the capitals of Europe and the United States”.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the case of the PE corroborates Herrera’s observation: the category of art systems was more than just a curatorial concept, it was a true institutional strategy of promotion deployed from the CAYC to disseminate its vision on an international scale.<sup>44</sup>

Glusberg’s theory of art systems oscillated between, on the one hand, the affirmation of the centrality of mechanisms and structures that brought artists together and established relationships between them and their works, and on the other, the need to take into account the fluctuating, “open” character of systems based on “adaptable behaviours”, that could be transposed into different contexts.<sup>45</sup> This dynamic, in appearance contradictory—to what extent could systems and structures remain

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<sup>41</sup> Glusberg, “Art Systems”, unpaginated.

<sup>42</sup> María José Herrera, “Hacia un perfil del *arte de sistemas*”, in María José Herrera and Mariana Marchesi, eds., *Arte de sistemas: el CAYC y el proyecto de un nuevo arte regional 1969-1977*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Fundación OSDE, 2013), 22-24.

<sup>43</sup> “El éxito de esta operatoria replicada en decenas de exposiciones se basó, en parte, en la posibilidad de capitalizar la actitud antiinstitucional y alternativa que en ese momento el CAYC compartía con otros centros de arte semejantes ya existentes en las capitales europeas y de Estados Unidos.” Herrera, “Hacia un perfil del *arte de sistemas*”, 23-24.

<sup>44</sup> Herrera and Marchesi, *Arte de sistemas: el CAYC y el proyecto de un nuevo arte regional 1969-1977*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Glusberg, “Art Systems”, unpaginated.

adaptable and wide open without losing the properties that made them systemic?—was made possible as far as the structure (or, in Glusberg’s words, the “schemes and values”), rather than the contents, remained in the center. Such idea is revealing of Glusberg’s relative lack of interest for concrete artistic matter, as he was focused instead on producing a patchwork theory with elements from linguistics, semiotics and sociology. His arguments built a catchall thinking that resulted very attractive for artists and cultural agents whose practices encompassed process-based methods and techniques. On this respect, without minimizing the influence of Glusberg’s ideas through their widespread circulation in Europe (East and West) and America (South and North), we have to assume that for many artists, the primary interest in an organization like the CAYC laid more in the opportunity of being involved in international projects and establishing relations with other artists, than in their fitting with the theories of its founder.

The force of the idea of art systems was, in fact, its generic character, that could be transposed to different environments and contexts. This universal vocation was not, however, offered in a disinterested form; its origin and its author remained fundamental anchors that avoided unorthodox reappropriations.

The omnipresence of CAYC’s graphic identity in the visualisation device of the works attests to the primacy of the mediating organisation over the exhibited object, in such a way that the attention was deviated from artistic proposals. In this way, the CAYC’s “brand” and its powerful communication took precedence over creative individuals, encouraging a partial or biased reception of their works. It is not surprising, therefore, that press reports on the PE referred to an exhibition of “Latin American” art, eluding the presence of international artists:

...there is a manifestation of conceptual art, art that we can summarize in the title of one of the works: “Idea and thinking as a work of art”. There are photographed works, hung with wire clips. In them, is represented the current Latin-American art.<sup>46</sup>

The type of works by Czech and Slovak artists exhibited in “Arte de sistemas” ranged from photographs of actions and performances (Brikcius, Hanel, Klimes, Filko, Štembera, Valoch), works on paper—some of them montages including images and texts, others privileging language and text (Filko, Kroutvor and Filko)—, and studies for unrealised pieces or works in progress (Štembera).

We can rely on three main sources to identify the pieces that were exhibited in Pamplona: the catalogue *Arte de sistemas* issued on the occasion of the exhibition’s first edition in Buenos Aires; the gacetilla of the CAYC titled “Arte de sistemas en el Encuentro internacional de Pamplona, España”, dated 12 June 1972, and the catalogue of the PE.<sup>47</sup> While the first, made by a series of individual sheets (one by artist, front and back) regrouped in a cardboard sleeve, documents in first place the exhibition in Buenos Aires, the “gacetilla”—this is how the emblematic yellow sheets published by the organisation and put into extensive circulation were called—provides a list of artists and works brought together for the PE. However, if we compare both lists with the poster of the exhibition “Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos” in the catalogue of the PE, we observe some discrepancies. **[Fig. 4.1]** For example, Dusan Klimes and J.H. Kocman, whose names appeared in *Arte de sistemas* and the PE’s catalogue, are absent from the gacetilla. Karel Miler’s name appears in the gacetilla, but not in *Arte de sistemas*. On the other hand, as we will see, the list of works each artist presented in *Arte de sistemas* (explicitely mentioned in the catalogue) not always coincided with the list reported in the gacetilla, which might present some variations. Incomplete or contradictory sources thus difficult the task of

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<sup>46</sup> “...hay una manifestación de arte conceptual, arte que podemos resumir en el título de una de las obras: “La idea y el pensamiento como obra de arte”. Hay obras fotografiadas y colgadas con pinzas de unos alambres. En ellas está representado el arte actual latino--americano.” Maria José Arribas, “Pamplona: Encuentros–72. La cúpula neumática desalojada por medio de música electrónica”, *El Correo Español. El Pueblo Vasco*, 1 July 1972, 23. Cited in Iván López Munuera, *Los encuentros de Pamplona (1972) como laboratorio de la democracia*, PhD Dissertation (Madrid : Universidad Complutense, 2016), 200.

<sup>47</sup> *Arte de sistemas*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: Museo de arte moderno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires/ CAYC, July 1971); “Arte de sistemas en el Encuentro internacional de Pamplona, España”, GT-134, 2 pages dated 12 June (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1972).



reconstruction of the participation of Central European artists in the Pamplona Encounters.

By comparing these documents and catalogues, we can nevertheless observe in the choice of works Czech and Slovak artists sent to Glusberg an attempt to respond to the topic of art systems. This is particularly evident in the case of Eugene Brikcius, if we compare his anterior works, mostly happenings in which scenography and theatricality occupied a central place, with his conceptual-like performance *Sundial/ (Sluneční hodiny)*, which documentation was sent to Glusberg. [Fig. 4.7] Realized the 3 July 1970 in Roztoky u Prahy, a small town situated north of Prague, the performance was described in these terms by Pavlína Morganová, Terezie Nekvindová and Sláva Sobotovičová:

Before sunrise, a group of participants in the “exercise”—as Brikcius sometimes called his actions—arrived at an abandoned quarry in the town of Roztoky just outside of Prague. There, they drove a three-meter stake into the ground and waited for the first rays of sunlight. Every hour on the hour, they stretched a white band along the length of the stake’s shadow, repeating this act all day until sundown.<sup>48</sup>

The endeavour to systematically measure and survey a natural element resonated with the idea of art of systems; however, as already said, it was far from characterising Brikcius’ entire production. The artist’s biography in the catalogue *Arte de sistemas* recalled that he was the author of “small actions in public places, in 1966”.<sup>49</sup> Brikcius’ early happenings in Prague, like *Still-Life (Zátiší)* (1967) (two images of which appeared in the catalogue *Arte de sistemas*), or *Thanksgiving (Děkuvzdání)* (1967), were carefully orchestrated actions of celebratory character. They also had a dimension of “mystification”, a central concept in Brikcius’ work, he understood as a manifestation of deeper truth. These public happenings or “exercises” involved an important number of participants who were asked in advance to play a specific role, often with specific accessories (glasses of beer for the first, a slice of fresh bread for

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<sup>48</sup> Pavlína Morganová, Terezie Nekvindová, Sláva Sobotovičová, *České akční umění: Filmy a videa 1956-1989/Czech performance art: Film and video 1956-1989* (Prague: Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, Research Centre (VVP AVU), 2015). English translation available here: <http://vvp.avu.cz/en/video-archive/2459/?table=artvideoarchiv>.

<sup>49</sup> “Eugen Brikcius”, in *Arte de sistemas*, unpaginated.

the other).<sup>50</sup> These two happenings in Prague were monitored by the police and resulted in the arrest of the participants and Brikcius himself, who was put on trial for “alteration of public order and basic feelings (“sentimientos básicos”) of the people”. His biography in *Arte de sistemas* explained, without giving names, that renowned “Western artists” had testified in his defense, after which the Ministry of Culture had finally stated that “the happening [was] officially considered as a special form of art and not violence”.<sup>51</sup>

While *Still-Life* and *Thanksgiving* engaged participants in a previously prepared scenario—leaving a measure of unpredictability and improvisation that contributed to the estrangement of everyday life—, *Sundial* should be inscribed within a tradition of non-invasive actions in landscape, like Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch carried out in their early years. It consisted in simple gestures the sought to inscribe, or convert a natural phenomenon—the course of the sun—and its specific temporality, into a circumscribed yet ephemeral visual element, measurable and thus representable for a limited time. The action’s specific temporality, one-day length interspersed with “idle times”, gave rise to other initiatives like *Cocooning*, an action by Rudolf Němec in which the participants wrapped themselves and also objects—a car—in plastic, like insects in a pupa.<sup>52</sup> *Sundial* was Brikcius’ last happening. He stopped in fact doing “art” in the public sense of the term, although he remained involved in the activities and gatherings of the “Křižovnická škola čistého humoru bez vtipu” (Crusader School of Pure Humour without Jokes), a group of visual artists and theoreticians who met regularly and performed different sorts of activities, trips, actions including insignificant or theatrical gestures, games and child-like jokes. On this respect, it is significant that one of Brikcius’ few works was presented in Pamplona, while he had

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<sup>50</sup> Vladimír Burda, “Les Happenings”, *Opus International* no. 9, December 1968, 51-56. See also Morganová’s description of both happenings. Pavlína Morganová, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art behind the Iron Curtain* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2014), 86-87.

<sup>51</sup> “El Ministerio de Cultura dictaminó: el happening es considerado oficialmente como una forma especial de arte y no de violencia.” “Eugen Brikcius”, in *Arte de sistemas*, unpaginated. Vladimír Burda indicates that while in London, Brikcius gave a press conference which altered the national and international press regarding the situation of “happenings” in Czechoslovakia, perhaps contributing to the final verdict. Burda, “Les Happenings”, 56. We should also recall the Brikcius had been Jindřich Chaloupecký’s assistant at the Gallery Vacláv Spála before he left for the UK, and that Chaloupecký testified at his trial.

<sup>52</sup> Both *Sundial* and *Cocooning* were filmed by Rudolf Němec. See <https://vimeo.com/274501901>

already stopped to develop, at least as a single author, his artistic activities. Since *Sundial* was also published in Klaus Groh's famous book *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* (1972) we can also suggest that the artist considered perhaps this specific piece as the most "internationalisable" of his realisations.<sup>53</sup>

Another documented work in "Arte de sistemas" was Jiří H. Kocman's "Weather activities", including *Project for a tornado on Europe* (study 15) and *Project for temperature on Europe* (study 9). [Fig. 4.8] In both cases, the artist had intervened on a map of Europe with black ink. In the manner of a weather map, he had depicted the trajectory of a tornado affecting part of the continent, or identified similar temperature zones, in this case 37 degrees Celsius, temperature of the human body. The two works came from a broader series of studies and variations that reflected the artist's interest in the study of natural phenomena and his adoption of scientific representational codes and methodologies in his artistic inquiries. In this case, the whole European continent appeared as a natural territory and topography, without internal borders and devoid of any geopolitical indication. Natural phenomena exceeded of course any geopolitical differentiation, re-establishing a kind of territorial unity in the face of bad weather and atmospheric conditions. Kocman was trained in biology and medicine and had just received his diploma in veterinary medicine, as a stamp-like message in *Arte de sistemas* catalogue precised: "we have the pleasure of announcing that mr. j.h. kocman will be graduated as a doctor of veterinary medicine on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1971." The constant intersection of his professional and artistic activities made him a relevant example of a "practicing of art with a science-based mindset".<sup>54</sup>

The work that perhaps better reflected what Glusberg meant by "arte de sistemas" was that of the Slovak artist Stano Filko, who sought to encompass life under different categories and spectrums. The artist created a system of representation and

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<sup>53</sup> Klaus Groh, *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa: CSSR, Jugoslawien, Polen, Rumänien, UDSSR, Ungarn* (Köln: Du Mont, 1972), unpaginated.

<sup>54</sup> Ted Purves, *Art and Biology in Practice: An Essay with Notations*, installation of artists' books and framed texts, 1998. Reported in David Stairs, "ART+BIO", *Leonardo* vol. 31, no. 4, 1998, 266.

experience—an “architecture of information”, in Pierre Restany’s terms<sup>55</sup>—unique in its articulation of a complex universe in which material, metaphysical and linguistic aspects intertwined. Through a multimedia approach involving painting, collage, assemblage, environments, electronic devices and happenings, the artist created a true artistic system, independent and autonomous and yet constantly nourished by elements from the real and the present.

Filko had experienced two clinical deaths that had strongly impacted him. Perhaps as a consequence of these experiences, his artistic practice was fueled by an interest in transcendental philosophy, cosmology and oriental thinking and his personal mythology was a central source of inspiration for his work. Among the works that probably travelled from Buenos Aires to Pamplona were pieces from his series *Asociácie/Associations* (1967-1970), offset prints on paper that could be easily multiplied and distributed (*Associations V* (1968), [Fig. 4.9] II and XXV (1968-69), XV (1968, 1969)).<sup>56</sup> Combining images and words, these works restituted an imaginary permeated with cosmology, metaphysics and cybernetic references. They also included images of the space race. While some have seen in this recourse to abstraction and the cosmos a reaction to Leninist materialist ideology, we could also suggest that these pieces had more to do with an emphasis on autonomy and the potential of free associations for creative thinking than with a direct rejection of languages and expressions imposed by politics.<sup>57</sup>

One of Filko’s contribution to “Arte de sistemas” was created on purpose. It was a drawing composed by a grid of forty-two cells that offered as a “chronology of creation”, a recapitulatory chart of the activities and interests of the Bratislava-based artist. [Fig. 4.10] The cells composed a “crypto-self-portrait” filled with texts and drawings that referred to biographical elements—like Filko’s country and city,

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<sup>55</sup> Pierre Restany, “Stano Filko. Architect information”, in *Stano Filko II: 1965/1969* (Bratislava: A-PRESS, 1970), unpaginated.

<sup>56</sup> Filko’s self-portrait in “Arte de sistemas” was not mentioned in the gacetilla and we should assume that it was not exhibited in Pamplona. The catalogue *Arte de sistemas* reports on the following works presented in Buenos Aires: *Associations III* (1968), *V* (1968-69), *XV*, *XIX*, *XXII*, *XVII* (1968-69), *XXXIIIa/ and b/* (1969), *XXXVI* and *XXXVII* (1969-70)), as well as a *Chronologie of Associations* (1969-70), and *Cosmos* (1968-69).

<sup>57</sup> “Report on the construction of a Spaceship Modules” (New York: The New Museum/Prague: Tranzit.cz, 2014), 9. Available on: [http://hu.tranzit.org/file/Report\\_on\\_the\\_Construction.pdf#page=9](http://hu.tranzit.org/file/Report_on_the_Construction.pdf#page=9) (Accessed January 2020)

Czechoslovakia and Bratislava—as well as previous works and recurring motives.<sup>58</sup> This drawing synthesised Filko’s trajectory and his passage from a practice related to his close environment (designated as “sociological” by Pierre Restany) to an increasingly abstract language turned towards a metaphysical world “beyond”, which could nonetheless only function in balance with a more earthly and physical dimension.<sup>59</sup> The words that appeared in Filko’s drawing/diagram for the CAYC referred to some of his works in different languages: French (the most frequent), English and German. Pyramidal and triangular structures were also present, as symbols “into which he used to project his identity”.<sup>60</sup> Following his habit of reworking his previous works, the artist intervened his drawing in 1980, adding a system of colors (usually dated from the end of the 1970s) that reflected different orientations in his work: white for “absolute spirituality”, blue for “cosmology” and red for “biology”, while black was for the artist’s ego.<sup>61</sup> [Fig. 4.11] He also added the capital-letter writing “EGO” placed under the map, a recurring element in his work, which referred to the artist as part of what he designated as a complex “psychophilosophical system”.

Among the alluded works in Filko’s self-portrait was his series *Oltár súčasnosti/Altar to contemporaneity* (1965-69), consisting in assembled elements (wood, mirror, wire, golden pigment) that manifested his search for a new form of spirituality, in which art would represent the new religion. Also present, the pneumatic multimedia environment *Kozmos/Cosmos* (1968) made of an inflatable tent, “rocket” metal constructions, mirrors and an audio-visual program on the conquest of space. [Fig. 4.12] While the photographic documentation of this work was also exhibited in

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<sup>58</sup> Lucia Gregorová Stach and Aurel Hrabušický, eds., *Stano Filko: poezia o priestore-kozme/Stano Filko: poetry on space-cosmos*, exh. cat. (Bratislava: Vydala Slovenská národná galéria, 2016), 93.

<sup>59</sup> Restany designated Filko as a “specialist of sociological environment”, referring to his Cathedral of Humanism awarded by the jury. Pierre Restany, “Bratislava: une leçon de relativité”, *Domus* no. 472, March 1969, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Gregorová Stach and Hrabušický, eds., *Stano Filko: poezia o priestore-kozme/Stano Filko: poetry on space-cosmos*, 89.

<sup>61</sup> The work was titled *Stano Filko: Arte de Sistemas – EGO. 1971/C. 1980*. It consisted in an intervention on a page from the catalogue *Art de Sistemas* with felt-tip pen. Gregorová Stach and Hrabušický, eds., *Stano Filko: poezia o priestore-kozme/Stano Filko: poetry on space-cosmos*, 79.

Pamplona, one can imagine what a fascinating dialogue could have taken place between his *Cosmos* and Prada Poole's pneumatic dome.<sup>62</sup>

Filko's chronology of creation also included the series of happenings *Happsoc* (from I to IV), the first version of which was realised in Bratislava with the theoretician Zita Kostrová and the artist Alex Mlynárčik. For *Happsoc I* (which name was a neologism created out of the words "happenings", "happy", "society" and "socialism"), the artists sent out an invitation to 400 persons with a list of things (the number of which in the city was specified) and announced that a series of "realities" would take place, that would contribute to turn Bratislava into a work of art during one particular week delimited by two public holidays (May 2<sup>nd</sup> to May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1965).<sup>63</sup> *Happsoc* celebrated art's intervention into everyday life and its capacity to "stimulating the receptiveness and multifaceted enjoyment of reality, released from the stream of everyday existence".<sup>64</sup> With simple words and numbers, it invited to appreciate the inner artistic dimension of things and project them onto reality, that was in this period already "intervened" by a series of socialist celebrations—May 1<sup>st</sup> was Workers Day and May 9<sup>th</sup> marked the day of Slovakia's liberation by the Soviet Army in 1945. Participation in this case was rather mental than physical, it resided in the simple fact of imagining the city as a work of art. Finally, we also recognise in Filko's chronology some elements from *Katedrála humanizmu/Cathedral of Humanism* (1968) a rectangular environment with a mirror floor on which projected images alluded to the socio-political condition of Czechoslovakia in 1968. [Fig. 4.13] The piece was exhibited at the young artists Biennial Danuvius 1968, in Bratislava.

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<sup>62</sup> It seems that this encounter between inflatable structures actually happened in the context of the sixth Paris Biennale in 1969, in which both artists participated. On Prada Poole in Paris, see Paula Barreiro López, "Discorde cordiale: La Biennale de Paris, l'avant-garde et le régime franquiste", in Elitza Dulguerova, ed., *Au prisme de la Biennale de Paris* (working title) (Paris: INHA, upcoming 2021); on Filko, with a photographic reproduction of *Cosmos*, see Pierre Restany, "Pauvre Jeunesse! Paris et la sixième biennale des jeunes," *Domus*, no. 482, January 1970, 47-50.

<sup>63</sup> On *Happsoc* see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso Books, 2012), 140-147.

<sup>64</sup> The Manifest *Happsoc* was released on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1965 and distributed as an invitation. It was first published in *Stano Filko-1965/69* (Bratislava: A-Press, 1970); also in Laura Hoptman and Tomas Pospiszyl, ed., *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: MoMA, 2002), 87.

Scheduled from 5 September to 6 October 1968, the Danuvius Biennial aimed to bring together artists from the East and the West. Its course, however, was dramatically disrupted by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops against the Prague Spring.<sup>65</sup> Among the participating artists, Alex Mlynářčík and Erik Dietmann decided to publish a manifesto stating their opposition to the exhibition, given the repressive situation. Participants to the biennial and close actors were strongly divided between, on the one hand, exposing their “cultural mourning” to protest against the repression suffered by Czechoslovak society; on the other hand, maintaining the initiative to show that the vitality of culture could not be subjected to military and political dictates.<sup>66</sup> Stano Filko first signed the declaration by Mlynářčík and Dietman, and finally withdrew his name, hurting Mlynářčík’s feelings, as the latter expressed in a letter to Pierre Restany:

What is a painful disappointment for us and especially for me is that Filko is one of those who, despite having signed at first—at the end, without a word, they turned their jacket over [...]. Today he exposes his “optimistic manifestations” and he is convinced that “pure art” is something higher than all the real things, something that must not be mixed with the sins of the world.<sup>67</sup>

Only thirteen participants from Italy, Sweden, England, Japan, West Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Spain and France maintained their support to Mlynářčík and Dietmann.<sup>68</sup> The Danuvius Biennial was eventually held without them, but it is another example of the dilemma cultural actors experienced in situations of repression

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<sup>65</sup> See Félix Drouet, “Danuvius 68, “La première biennale des jeunes artistes Est-Ouest””, in Antje Kramer-Mallordy, ed., *1968: La Critique d’art, la politique et le pouvoir. Séminaire de recherche Art contemporain du programme PRISME* (Rennes: Université Rennes 2/Archives de la Critique d’Art, 2018), 123-131; Andrea Bátorová, *The Art of Contestation: Performative Practices in the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia* (Bratislava: Comenius University, 2019), 127-140.

<sup>66</sup> Restany, “Bratislava: une leçon de relativité”, 49.

<sup>67</sup> “Ce qui est pour nous et surtout pour moi une déception douloureuse est, que Filko est un de ceux, qui, malgré qu’ils ont d’abord signé—à la fin, sans un mot, ils ont changé le manteau [...]. Il expose aujourd’hui ses “manifestations optimistes” et il est persuadé que “l’art pur” est quelque chose sur tout ce qui est réel, quelque chose ce qui ne doit pas se mêler dans les péchés de la terre.” Letter from Alex Mlynářčík to Pierre Restany dated 29 October 1968. Archives de la Critique d’Art, Rennes, Fonds Restany [PREST-XSEST05 / 20-21]. Reproduced in Drouet, “Danuvius 68, “La première biennale des jeunes artistes Est-Ouest””, 128-129.

<sup>68</sup> The only signatory from Spain was the artist Francisco Peinado.

and freedom limitation that truly affected their creative practice and their existence. Making a choice between protesting through non-participation or, on the opposite, pursuing their activities to show the persistence of art and its capacity for resistance was far from easy.

The case of the Danuvius Biennial and the reactions it gave rise to resonates with that of the Pamplona Encounters, which, as already mentioned, caused incomprehension on part of the Spanish scene for the same reasons: how to act “as if” the situation was normal when the Spanish society as a whole was in fact governed by a regime that did not allow the free expression of ideas? In both cases, similar logics seemed to guide not only those who criticized the event taking place, but also those who advocated its maintenance, precisely as a means of breathing new life into it and contributing to the progressive introduction of experimental ideas and languages in this scene.

### **2.3 Two programmatic exhibitions: “Hacia un perfil del art latinoamericano”**

A few months after “Arte de sistemas I” in Buenos Aires, the Grupo de los Trece (initially constituted by Jacques Bedel, Luis Bénédict, Gregorio Dujovny, Carlos Ginzburg, Jorge Glusberg, Victor Grippo, Jorge Gonzáles Mir, Vicente Marotta, Luis Pazos, Alberto Pellegrino, Alfredo Portillos, Juan Carlos Romero and Julio Teich) was founded, as a result of an inspiring encounter with the Polish dramaturgist Jerzy Grotowski.<sup>69</sup> Grotowski, who had co-founded the Theatre of the 13 Rows in Opole in 1959 and the Laboratory-theatre (Teatr Laboratorium) in Wrocław in 1962, had a crucial influence on the group for the incorporation of new methodologies of work and the formulation of a necessity to articulate artistic and theoretical production from their particular place.

“Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” was the Grupo de los Trece’s first public presentation—although most of its members had taken part in previous activities organised in the framework of the CAYC—and was subtitled “Exhibition of the group of the thirteen and special guests”. From its very beginning, it was conceived as an itinerant exhibition and Pamplona was the first non-American location to host the

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<sup>69</sup> These are the members of the group constituted in 1971; at the end of 1972, Alfredo Pellegrino left the group and Horacio Zabala was included.



exhibition.<sup>70</sup> Afterwards, “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” circulated and was on display in Spain again, Poland, Yugoslavia and back to America, in Mexico.<sup>71</sup>

“Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” opened a new chapter of Glusberg’s reflection on art systems, focusing this time on the relationship between art and ideology from a regional perspective. This time, it contemplated the specific ideological coordinates shared by Latin American artists and suggested that they could be shared by artists from other regions. In fact, while they were characterised by local circumstances, these coordinates were, according to him, also susceptible to be understood and endorsed by creators from other latitudes—a crucial point for our analysis, which also helps to understand why an artist like Jan Świdziński (see Chapter two) was interested in Glusberg’s ideas.

The general concept underpinning “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” was first revealed in one of CAYC’s emblematic gacetillas. Glusberg started by listing a series of qualifiers: “Conceptual art, art as an idea, opaque art, as opposed to ideological art (the domain of transparent signs)”.<sup>72</sup> The notion of opacity and its relation with ideology calls our attention here—Glusberg would develop his understanding of the term in successive catalogues. Sharing Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology as a “system of collective representations about the conditions of existence in general that allows men to become aware of their conditions of social and material existence” and referring to the thinking of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci and Nikos Poulantzas, Glusberg recognized ideology as a constructed device and as a

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<sup>70</sup> “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” was first displayed in May 1972 in Colombia, at the IIIrd Biennial de Medellín (or Biennial de Coltejer), then at the Salón de la Independencia in Quito, Ecuador (10 May), at the CAYC in Buenos Aires, Argentina (22 June), in the Pamplona Encounters, Spain (26 June) and finally in Lima, Peru (1st July). These exhibitions were listed in the gacetilla, “CAYC: Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”, Buenos Aires: Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC), dated 8 June 1972. The exhibition also travelled to Cordoba in Argentina, and was displayed at the Museo Emilio A. Caraffa, from 13 to 25 October 1972.

<sup>71</sup> It circulated to Galería Amadís in Madrid, Galeria Współczesna in Warsaw, Galleria Grada in Zagreb then to Mexico. Jaime Vindel, *La vida por asalto: arte, política e historia en Argentina entre 1965 y 2001* (Madrid : Brumaria, 2014), 221.

<sup>72</sup> “El arte conceptual, el arte como idea, arte opaco, opuesto a lo ideológico (dominio de los signos transparentes)”. Jorge Glusberg, “CAYC: Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”, gacetilla (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 12 June 1972). Consulted in the Archive of the Centro de Estudios y Documentación, MACBA, Barcelona. The first sheet of the gacetilla (which has only two) is dated 12 June 1972, while the second sheet is dated 8 June 1972. Since this second sheet bears the dates of the Buenos Aires exhibition (from 22 June to 28 July), it seems that it was produced for this particular occasion, whereas the first gacetilla was probably intended to accompany the exhibition in the different places.

sort of “cement” aiming at unifying the systems of representation and belief of human beings and thus conditioning their life.<sup>73</sup> [Fig. 4.14] With such references in mind, “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” sought to address the specific conditions and reality of Latin American societies in relation to ideology. This reality, according to Glusberg, corresponded with Latin American peoples’ permanent state of revolutionary struggle to free themselves from a condition of oppression and colonisation. In this specific scenario, art operated as a vector for raising awareness and develop a regional answer to this condition.

Glusberg was clear: Latin American art “did not exist” as a homogeneous category, however, there was a “related problematic” stemming from its specific “revolutionary situation”.<sup>74</sup> “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” thus represented an attempt to make this problematic visible through artistic means. If, on the one hand, art formulated an urgent answer to the “feelings and desires for independence and liberation felt by Argentine artists”, it was also in constant resonance with needs formulated across the continent and beyond.<sup>75</sup> This translatability is of particular importance here, as it constituted the basis and justification for the presence of non-Latinamerican artists in the exhibition, including Jiří Valoch, the only participant from socialist Central Europe.

“Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” relied on the same methodology of production as “Arte de sistemas” but this time, Glusberg converted it in an explicit political statement. Artists were asked to send their contributions in a standard format that followed the norms established by the Instituto Argentino de Racionalización de Materiales (IRAM). The IRAM had been created in 1935 to certify the quality standards for products, establishing a series of rules that guaranteed an equal distribution of resources and materials. In accordance with the idea of dematerialised and process-based art in vogue at that time, this requisite put an emphasis on the

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<sup>73</sup> “[...] un sistema de representaciones colectivas acerca de las condiciones de existencia en general que permita a los hombres tomar conciencia de sus condiciones de existencia social y material.” Glusberg, “CAYC: Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”.

<sup>74</sup> “No existe un arte de los países latinoamericanos, pero sí una problemática propia, consecuente con su situación revolucionaria.” Glusberg, “CAYC: Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”.

<sup>75</sup> “[...] los sentimientos y deseos de independencia y liberación que sienten los artistas argentinos. Glusberg, “CAYC: Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”.

conceptual and the project-oriented quality of the works, rather than their plastic properties. The decision to impose this rationalised format was not only motivated by the low production cost and the easy reproducibility of heliographic copies, but also because it was a strong message in itself, making the “economic impossibilities” of Latin American artists evident. Using such system was, in Glusberg’s logic, a way to point at the still “unjust social relations that prevail in Latin American peoples” and make obvious that “[s]olutions and concerns of other super-developed groups couldn’t be applied to [their] social means”.<sup>76</sup>

The CAYC published a catalogue of “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” especially for the Pamplona Encounters. Between Glusberg’s programmatic text—the same as in the gacetilla—and the pages dedicated to the artists, one page showed an aerial view of Pamplona’s city centre with the main square. Below, a text in Spanish and English described the “cúpula neumática” in its first location, before it was moved to the Ciudadela: “Pneumatic dome of 150m. length, and 100m. width 16. Of height in the centre, work of Architect J.M. Prada Poole, located at the main square of Pamplona, where this exhibition takes place”.<sup>77</sup>

The English translation of the exhibition’s title in this catalogue is illuminating: in fact, while the version in Spanish language—“Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”—evokes a kind of snapshot or definition of Latin American art, in the manner of an anthology of the regional production, the English version “Towards a Latin American profile of art” (and not “toward a profile of Latin American art”, as it appeared in other situations) makes it clear that the main objective was in fact to approach art *from* the perspective (or profile) of Latin American society, and not to describe Latin American art. Rather than defining the qualities of a geographically/geopolitically circumscribed production, the exhibition’s viewer was hence expected

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<sup>76</sup> “Los conflictos generados por las injustas relaciones sociales que priman en los pueblos latinoamericanos no pueden dejar de aparecer en esta faceta de la vida cultural. Las soluciones o inquietudes de otros grupos superdesarrollados no se pueden aplicar a nuestros medios sociales.” Glusberg, “CAYC: Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”.

<sup>77</sup> “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano. Encuentro internacional de arte en Pamplona España”, exh. cat (Buenos Aires: Centro de Arte y Comunicación, 1972). The catalogue’s printing date in the catalogue indicates that it was issued just before the Encounters started (on 20 June 1972). It remains unclear if it reached Pamplona.

to shift his or her vision and adopt the point of view of what Glusberg refers to as the “sub-privileged”—i.e. the Latin American, who would hopefully become “tomorrow’s potentially privileged”.<sup>78</sup> This statement helps to understand why artists from other countries were also invited: precisely because their own approaches were expected to show a special sensitivity or proximity to that of Latin American producers and, in a way, highlight their relevance.<sup>79</sup>

#### **2.4 Jiří Valoch’s contribution to “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”**

Jiří Valoch had been aware of the existence of the CAYC since the late 1960s, as evidenced by an article published in March 1970 in *Výtvarna Prace*, the magazine published by the Central Czechoslovak Association of Fine Arts.<sup>80</sup> Referring to the creation of the CAYC, Valoch stressed the interdisciplinary nature of the organisation and evoked the exhibition “Arte y Cibernética”, organised in 1969 at the Galeria Bonino, in Buenos Aires.<sup>81</sup> Valoch and Glusberg’s first contact through to the Stuttgart Technical University had been in fact motivated by their common interest for the relationship between art and technology, as well as artistic experiments with computers.

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<sup>78</sup> “[...] los potencialmente privilegiados de mañana”. This comment by Glusberg on Latin Americans becoming “privileged” revealed here the contradictions of his thinking, allegedly based on Marxism and the theory of dependence but longing for an advantageous position for his own place of origin. Mariana Marchesi, “El arte de sistemas como estrategia institucional”, in Herrera and Marchesi, eds., *Arte de sistemas: el CAYC y el proyecto de un nuevo arte regional 1969-1977*, 66-69.

<sup>79</sup> In addition to the members of the Grupo de los Trece, other twenty-one artists participated as “special guests” in “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano.” Most of them were from Argentina (Marie Orensanz, Oscar Maxera, Clorindo Testa (born in Italy), Osvaldo Romberg, Enrique Torroja, Horacio Zabala) and the United States (Juan Downey (from Chile), Guerrilla Art Action Group, Agnes Denes, Ken Friedman, Dick Higgins, Richard Kostelanetz), but the exhibition included also representatives from Chile (Guillermo Deisler, Juan Downey), France (Marcel Alocco, Jochen Gerz (from Germany)), Germany (Klaus Groh, born in Poland, Horst Tress), Israel (Uzi Kotler, born in Argentina), Italy (Auro Lecci), Spain (Juan Navarro Baldeweg), and Czechoslovakia (Jiří Valoch). In this case we take into account the country in which the artist was residing at that time, rather than his/her place of birth. Juan Downey was Chilean, Jochen Gerz was German, Clorindo Testa was Italian-born, Klaus Groh was Polish-born, Uzi Kotler was born in Argentina.

<sup>80</sup> The relations between Jiří Valoch and the CAYC have been addressed by Helena Musilová, who has focused on the exhibition “Arte de sistemas”. Helena Musilová, *Jiří Valoch. Curator, Theoretician, Collector. Years 1965-1980* (Prague: National Gallery Prague, 2018), 98-102.

<sup>81</sup> Musilová, *Jiří Valoch. Curator, Theoretician, Collector. Years 1965-1980*, 98. She quotes Jiří Valoch, “Argentinsky experiment”, *Výtvarna prace* 5, 2 March 1970, 18.

Valoch participated in “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” with three works, of which one was reproduced in the catalogue.<sup>82</sup> The three pieces were based on a series of words or short sentences, placed in simple compositions that contributed to give them a specific meaning. *Political concept* (the one in the catalogue) consisted of three squares horizontally aligned. [Fig. 4.15] In the square on the left side was the word “yesterday”, the square on the right side contained the word “tomorrow” and the square in the middle, in which we would expect to read the word “today”, was entirely and uniformly filled with black. It was easy to deduce that Valoch associated the present with darkness. With this specific work, did he answer Glusberg’s statement about the problematic faced by Latin American peoples, referring to their particular present?<sup>83</sup> If, on the one hand, the idea of a dark, uncertain present reflected the longing for liberation and independence evoked by Glusberg in the exhibition’s statement, it could also, on the other, be transposed to Valoch’s context, Czechoslovakia under normalisation, with the power in place tightening its grip on citizens. On the other hand, the Spanish visitors to Pamplona could also identify with this scheme and relate the obscure present to their own reality under dictatorship. The title of the piece was a direct invitation to read his work as a political statement; despite this, the ambivalent or open use of language produced polysemic compositions departing from generic terms and references—what could be more general, in fact, than the temporal notions of yesterday and tomorrow, and its in-between? It was above all the work’s presence in specific contexts that fixed its meaning, according to the spectators’ understanding of “yesterday”, “today” and “tomorrow”.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> The University of Iowa Archives collection had made the works of the exhibition “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” available through its online project of divulgation “Latin American Realities/International Solutions.” <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/CAYC/index.html>

<sup>83</sup> We should recall that only Brasil was under dictatorship at that time (since 31 March 1964); right-wing dictatorships were instated later in Chile (under Augusto Pinochet from 11 September 1973 to 11 March 1990), Argentina (the “proceso de reorganizacion nacional” (process of national reorganization), as was the civic-militar program set by Jorge Rafael Videla, lasted from March 1976 to 10 December 1983) and Uruguay (from 27 June 1973 to 1 March 1985).

<sup>84</sup> Piotr Piotrowski has referred to a three-page book by Valoch titled *Symmetrical Concept* (1972), which used the same idea, this time with the three words being visible. Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadows of Yalta. Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 330.



Valoch's "exercise-poem", titled *Do it yourself (associations)* was both an explicit message of solidarity—in this case, paraphrasing the title of Alain Resnais' film from 1959 *Hiroshima mon Amour*—with the struggle of the Vietnamese people—and an open invitation to embrace the cause and express solidarity with them, while signaling at the same time that such cause could be replaced by another and subject to variations. The format recalled that of the book *Do it yourself—Dialogue* (1972) also produced at that time, in which Valoch had only introduced the initial structure of the dialogue: 'A: . . . ?' and 'B. . . !'.<sup>86</sup>

Despite their apparently simple aspect, the three works with which Valoch contributed to "Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano" reflected the extent of his personal references and concerns, making his work a relevant example of transnational communication. The Czech artist responded, in his own way, to the problematic raised by Glusberg, reprojecting it towards other temporalities and geographies. His trilogy covered the existential (*Political concept*), historical (*Four association*) and geopolitical (*Do it yourself (associations)*) experience of living in a divided and conflictive, yet already strongly interconnected world.

## **2.5 Beke/Glusberg. First, second and third world: an impossible exchange?**

Jorge Glusberg's statement about "Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano" reproduced in various gacetillas and catalogues made no reference to the situation of artistic production in Eastern Europe. Only in 1974, with the related, yet distinct series of exhibitions "Arte de sistemas in Latinoamerica/Art systems in Latinamerica", we find an explicit reference to the "second world" and its condition, distinct from the first and the third world.<sup>87</sup> Pointing at the state of "underdevelopment" that characterised Latin America, Asia and Africa due to the

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<sup>86</sup> Citing this work among others, Piotr Piotrowski has affirmed that Valoch was "one of the most radical and internally consistent examples of the work identified by Beke as paradigmatic East European conceptualism." Piotrowski, *In the Shadows of Yalta. Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe*, 330.

<sup>87</sup> From April 1974 to 1976, the exhibition "Arte de sistemas in Latinoamerica/Art systems in Latinamerica" circulated across Europe (ICC Anvers; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels; ICA London; Espace Pierre Cardin Paris; Mirò Foundation, Barcelona (this one under the title "America Llatina '76"); its contents were different, starting with the fact that it included only artists from Latin America (Argentina, Brasil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, Paraguay, Guatemala) with material pieces, and various artists realised works in situ. Glusberg himself covered most of these costs. Marchesi, "El arte de sistemas como estrategia institucinal", 75-76.

political, economic and cultural domination imposed on them by the first world, Glusberg observed that the “alternative” offered by “the countries of the Second World (Communist Block)” was “different”, since “the cost of their development has already been paid for when the revolutionary processes took place”.<sup>88</sup> According to this comment, Glusberg therefore did not believe the Second World was under a colonial yoke, but considered it instead a developed region with an important experience of revolutionary processes—his expression, however, was vague enough and could evoke the 1917 revolution as well as the post-WWII imposition of Communism as a social and political doctrine in Eastern Europe. These factors made it a valuable interlocutor for Latin American artists. After all, seen from a Latin American perspective and in the face of the raise of military dictatorships in the region, Eastern Europe remained a place where the Marxist-Leninist doctrine was being applied for the betterment of the community, and a place of hospitality and solidarity for south-Americans in exile.<sup>89</sup>

On the other side, what did Central European artists and critics think about this attempt of establishing a dialogue? The answer of the Hungarian curator and critic László Beke to Glusberg’s invitation to participate in the exhibition *Hungría 74* in Buenos Aires may help us get a sense of the way these projects were perceived on the East side of the Iron Curtain. [Fig. 4.18] The Hungarian seemed in fact more circumspect about the actual possibilities of a mutual understanding:

Dear Jorge Glusberg:

We are supposed to live in the era of mass media. But if I think of the little likelihood of the Argentine public to understand Hungarian art, I get a little uncertain.

Art is supposed to be international. But it is a question, whether we can place ourselves into each other’s way of thinking, even if we know the vocabulary and grammatical rules of a common language.

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<sup>88</sup> Jorge Glusberg, “Introduction to Art Systems in Latin America”, *Art systems in Latinamerica*, exh. cat. (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1974), unpaginated.

<sup>89</sup> One of the better known cases of South-American artists who escaped their country’s dictatorship was the Chilean Guillermo Deisler, who emigrated to France, then East Germany and Bulgaria, where he lived until 1986.



My further doubts: Are the artists of the two continents really able to do something for each other? And is art able to do something for the future of humankind at all? [...]<sup>90</sup>

As we can see, Beke sincerely doubted that the Argentinean public had the codes to understand artistic proposals coming from Hungary, being foreign to the problematics of life under actually existing socialism. Nevertheless, the Hungarian critic pursued his letter to Glusberg by comparing the works of two artists—Argentinian and Hungarian—who both referred to captivity, behavior control, and the restriction of freedom. On the one hand, the Argentinian Luis Bedit's experimental beehive *Biotrón*, exhibited at the 35th Venice Biennial in 1970, invited the audience to observe the insects living in an environment designed by himself, including artificial nectar-producing flowers.<sup>91</sup> While the bees had the opportunity to leave to forage outside, it was said that they remained confined in the space prepared by Bedit. On the Hungarian side, István Haraszty's performance *Like a Bird* (or *Birdcage*) from 1971 showed a parrot in an intervened cage that controlled and reacted to all its movements: the door could even be opened at some point, but it was automatically closed when the bird tried to go out.<sup>92</sup> Both works evoked by Beke involved the study of animals behavior in specifically created living environments, and referred to the issue of the adaptability of natural life being conditioned and intervened by humans. Without being explicit, probably to prevent censorship, Beke's commentary subtly invited to read between the lines and identify through these works a reference to

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<sup>90</sup> László Beke, letter to Jorge Glusberg, in *Hungría 74*, exh. cat. (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1974), unpaginated. The exhibition was held in November and December 1974 and was organised by Glusberg, who was also responsible for the selection of artists. Beke's answer to Glusberg was dated 16/04/1974.

<sup>91</sup> On Bedit, see Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra, "The Future of Control: Luis Fernando Bedit's Labyrinths Series", online article, *Post at MoMA*, posted on 4 September 2019. [https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/1375-the-future-of-control-luis-fernando-bedit-s-labyrinths-series](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/1375-the-future-of-control-luis-fernando-bedit-s-labyrinths-series) (Accessed 31 December 2019). The author proposes that the rise of conceptualisms in Latin America, often considered as a reaction to political regimes in the region, cannot be fully understood without taking into account the relationship between technoscience and art. This perspective, which seeks to distance itself from or at least pluralises the vision of an art produced as a response to a dictatorial or authoritarian context, seems productive and likely to resonate with other readings of Central European art in the 1970s. See for example Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015).

<sup>92</sup> István Haraszty's performance was realised at György Galantai's Balatónbloglar Chapel. See Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, "In the pursuit of freedom: Art and Animals under Socialism", *Acta Historiae Artium*, Tomus 56, 2015, 208-209.

specific social conditions in both Argentina and Hungary. This led him in fact to conclude on a slightly more positive note than “similar analogies between Argentine and Hungarian works could be drawn”, hence “communication is not totally impossible after all”.<sup>93</sup> Importantly as well for Beke, the public—in this case, the Argentinian public—shouldn’t rely on the critic or curator’s help to understand it and had, on the contrary, to use “their own devices” to understand the exhibited works. This position expressed a vision quite distinct from that of Glusberg, for whom curatorial and theoretical discourse took precedence over the works and provided, as it were, a ready-made framework for understanding them.

Although this exchange between László Beke and Jorge Glusberg took place two years after the PE, it illuminates some aspects of the relation between Central European art and its spaces of reception—in this particular case, Spain *via* Latin America. First of all, it emphasises the dual nature of art’s internationalism: often claimed as a kind of prescriptive condition for mutual understanding and collaboration, as Beke well observed, its internationalist scope remained nevertheless limited in the face of idiosyncratic social, political and cultural experiences that were hardly transposable to other contexts. Beke’s comment regarding the difficulty for the public in Argentina to access works from socialist eastern Europe could be perfectly applied to the public who attended the PE and who saw Glusberg’s exhibitions in the pneumatic dome.

### **3. Discussions and tensions in the Spanish context**

#### **3.1. Glusberg’s semiologic approach and the Spanish’s socio-political concerns**

On June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1972, Jorge Glusberg gave a conference at the Caja de Ahorros de Navarra in Pamplona, during which he explained his understanding of the category of art systems.<sup>94</sup> Echoing his text in the catalogue *Arte de sistemas*, Glusberg reiterated the experimental character of his attempt, stating that the objective of his intervention

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<sup>93</sup> Beke, letter to Jorge Glusberg, unpaginated.

<sup>94</sup> The full transcript of Glusberg’s conference can be found in Jorge Glusberg, “Hacia una aproximación estructural del arte de sistemas”, in Fernando Huici and Javier Ruiz, *La comedia del arte: (en torno a los Encuentros de Pamplona)* (Madrid: Editoria Nacional, 1974), 270-282. Extracts from the conference were also published in *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972. Fin de fiesta experimental*. 212-213.

was to present “through some empirical data belonging to the exhibition “Art Systems” [...], a possible methodological path that explains the revolutionary potential of these positions.<sup>95</sup>”

Going back to the origins of his idea, Glusberg exposed the references who had inspired him, like the North American critic and art theorist Jack Burnham, who put forward in 1967-68 the idea of “systems aesthetics” in contrast to artistic “objects” devoid of interaction. He also mentioned the Argentinian semiologist Armando Sercovich, whose seminar at the CAYC earlier the same year had influenced his thoughts, as well as the French historian Pierre Francastel and the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, thus confirming the structuralist matrix of his thinking.<sup>96</sup>

Glusberg provided an example through the work of Luis Bénédict. In his analysis, he focused almost exclusively on the semiologic aspect of the artist’s production, leaving aside any reference to a present situation. Departing from Lévi Strauss’ definition of the binomial nature/culture, and identifying a series of derived pairs (“unmarked/ marked, signifier/ meaning, syntagm/ paradigm, denotation/ connotation, metonymy/ metaphor”, to mention some), Glusberg incorporated the contributions of Bénédict and three other Argentinian artists (Alberto Pellegrino, Jorge González Mir (members of the Grupo de los Trece) and Nicolás García Urriburu) into a system of organisation that emphasized the linguistic properties of their work, without mentioning the social and political context in which they had been produced and its implications in shaping the work.

Glusberg’s insistence on art’s semiologic dimension maintained the discourse on a theoretical level, disconnected from a more material approach, leaving contextual elements in the shadows. The debate that followed the conference reflected the discrepancy between this theoretical perspective and the public’s expectation. In fact, the audience expected to hear from the representative of the CAYC a political and

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<sup>95</sup> “[...] no desarrollaré aquí una teoría completa sino que quiero presentar, a través de algunos datos empíricos pertenecientes a la muestra “Art de sistemas” que organice, un posible camino metodológico que explique el potencial revolucionario de estas posiciones.” Glusberg, “Hacia una aproximación estructural del arte de sistemas”, 270.

<sup>96</sup> Armando Sercovich’s seminar at the CAYC (30 March 1971) was titled “Seminario sobre significado y comunicación social” (seminar about meaning and social communication). The French historian Pierre Francastel, author of *Peinture et société* (1952) was considered the founder of the sociology of art. He was influenced by the ethnologist and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose role was central in the articulation of structuralism.

socially engaged statement. Two examples at least corroborate this view. The discussion, opened to everyone, started as follows:

Spectator 1: *There is a well-known phrase by Godard that he says belongs to Lenin, and that is “ethics is the aesthetics of the future.” Godard says that's where the left and the right are reconciled.*

Glusberg: I never said that art should be political but that art is semiological, which is different.<sup>97</sup>

Glusberg maintained the structuralist approach outlined in his lecture. In contrast, the concerns expressed by the participants in the discussion—some of them anonymous, others identified in the transcript, like Luis de Pablo, Eduardo García Camarero, Francisco Almazán and Javier Aguirre—were rather directed towards the political and social role of art and its implications. De Pablo raised the issue of the position and ideology of music in relation to the situation between underdeveloped and developed countries. Glusberg, wondering about the existence of an “ideology of music”, specified that for him, “Spain is for Europe something like what we are in relation to the United States”, placing thus, quite significantly, the country in the camp of underdeveloped countries with a relationship of imperialist domination and imposition of foreign models. The writer and journalist Francisco Almazán, who had written on flamenco and its political instrumentalisation by the Francoist regime, stressed the avant-garde’s necessity to remain connected with popular or folkloristic culture.<sup>98</sup> He affirmed that artists who pretended to make actual art couldn’t do so without being in contact with the social basis of a nation, inviting to reflect on the “forms of culture taken into account by the avant-garde artist to create a type of art

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<sup>97</sup> “Espectador 1: *Existe una frase muy conocida de Godard que segun él pertenece a Lenin, y es “la ética es la estética del futuro.” Godard dice que ahí se reconcilian la izquierda y la derecha.* Glusberg: Yo nunca dije que el arte deba ser político sino que el arte es semiológico, lo cual es distinto.” “Coloquio efectuado al final de la conferencia de Glusberg”, in Huici and Ruiz, *La comedia del arte: (en torno a los Encuentros de Pamplona)*, 283.

<sup>98</sup> Francisco Almazán was among the authors who had coined the term “nacionalflamenquismo” (national-flamencoism) to designate Franco regime’s strategy of propagandistic appropriation of flamenco music and culture for international relations and domestic politics.

that can serve in some way the progress of social life”.<sup>99</sup> Almazán tackled one of the themes that was giving rise to much debate at the PE: the separation between the artistic avant-garde and people’s aspirations and interests. It is no coincidence that Almazán himself was a contributor to the magazine *Triunfo*, in which various articles and manifestos against the PE had been published, in particular to criticism their elitism and distance from the masses.

What were the implications of being exhibited by the CAYC in Pamplona? Or, to put it differently, how was the CAYC perceived in the Spanish context of that time and, also, in the narrower context of the polarized debates on the PE?

A letter sent to the CAYC by a Spanish citizen can help us to situate the organisation from Buenos Aires and its reputation in the Spanish context. On July 7<sup>th</sup>, Jaime Maymó, resident of Moncada Reixach, near Barcelona, contacted the organisation at its address in Buenos Aires. [Fig. 4.19] In his letter, Maymó asked a copy of the catalogue of “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano” and expressed his interest for “south American artists”:

Having heard of the participation of several South American artists in the “encounters” held in Pamplona [...], and having published a catalogue on this occasion entitled Towards a profile of Latin American art, I would be grateful if you would send me, if available, a copy of the same.<sup>100</sup>

Maymó considered art “as a means of expression of the aesthetic, sensitive and/or political values of man” and revealed that he was unable to attend the PE because he was working in a factory. He was nevertheless informed about the controversy surrounding the PE:

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<sup>99</sup> “Cuáles son las formas de la cultura que tiene en cuenta el artista de vanguardia para crear un tipo de arte que pueda servir en algo al progreso de la vida social?” “Coloquio efectuado al final de la conferencia de Glusberg”, 285.

<sup>100</sup>“Habiendo tenido conocimiento de la participación de varios artistas sudamericanos en los “encuentros” habidos en Pamplona [...], y habiéndose publicado con este motivo un catálogo titulado Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano, os agradecería me mandarais, si esta a vuestro alcance, un ejemplar del mismo.” Jaime Maymó to Jorge Glusberg, letter dated 7 July 1972. Archive of the Centro de Estudios y Documentación (CEDOC), Macba, Barcelona. Ref. Material Gráfico\_P\_M\_0514.

According to the information I have [...], one of the main objectives of the participants, which was communication between them and the possible transcendence to the rest of the popular classes, was obstructed as much as possible by the organizers of the meetings, a maneuver that some media have already denounced to public opinion (such as the magazine *Triunfo*).<sup>101</sup>

The letter ended without ambiguity, with the expression of its author's position regarding the function of art: "Art should be at the service of the people and not of a few".<sup>102</sup> This communication, quickly answered by Glusberg—who replied he had no catalogue at that moment and sent a series of gacetillas as a replacement—is a perfect starting point for introducing the issue of the political positioning produced around the PE and connect them with the issue of the reception/non-reception, relation/non-relation between Central European art and part of the so-called progressive Spanish scene, at stake in this chapter.<sup>103</sup>

In the Spanish context, the postulates endorsed by the CAYC had a particular echo for the artistic and intellectual scene. In fact, Spanish artists and critics who knew about the CAYC considered it a critical and politically engaged organisation. The critic Simón Marchán Fiz associated the line of the CAYC with "ideological conceptualism", comparing it with practices from Spain.<sup>104</sup> In the panorama of the PE, the institution from Buenos Aires was thus dissociated from the position of Luis De Pablo and Alexanco. While the latter were reproached for being too complacent with the Francoist regime and seeking to conceal the abnormality of the Spanish social and political situation under the guise of "experimental" cultural activities, on the contrary, the CAYC generated interest for the apparent radicality of its stances and

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<sup>101</sup> "[...] como medio que es de expresión de los valores estéticos, sensibles y/o políticos del hombre." "segun noticias que tengo [...], uno de los principales objetivos de los participantes que era el de la comunicación entre ellos y la posible transcendencia al resto de las capas populares, fue impedido al máximo por los organizadores" de los encuentros, maniobra que algún medio de información ya ha denunciado ante la opinión publica (como por ejemplo la revista triunfo)." Maymó to Glusberg, 7 July 1972.

<sup>102</sup> "El arte debe estar al servicio del pueblo y no de unos pocos". Maymó to Glusberg, 7 July 1972.

<sup>103</sup> Jorge Glusberg to Jaime Maymó, letter dated 25 July 1972. Archive of the Centro de Estudios y Documentación (CEDOC), Macba, Barcelona. Ref. Material Gráfico\_P\_M\_0514.

<sup>104</sup> Simón Marchán Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, first ed. 1972 (Madrid: Akal, 1997), 269.

discourses, which actually matched with those of the Spanish “old left”, the one who had decided to boycott the PE.

As Jaime Maymó’s letter suggests, the PE were in fact at the heart of a controversy over the intentions of the organizers and the event, as well as their meaning and positioning in the context of Franco’s dictatorship. In order to understand it, we need to look back at Luis de Pablo and José Luis Alexanco’s project and how it resonated with a complex political and social situation.

How could the “vision of the present” proposed by De Pablo and Alexanco elude the situation in the country where the PE were taking place? This was the first point that provoked the anger of part of the local artistic and intellectual scene—resonating with the positions of Mlynářčik and Dietmann about the Danuvius Biennial. For the filmmaker Pere Portabella, the most scandalous was that “[t]he Encounters were presented as a party/fair, as if nothing was happening here”. Accusing the PE to be a ““social” project based on the interests of groups closely linked to the system and therefore to the regime”, Portabella decided not to go.<sup>105</sup> Some considered in fact very problematic that a family like the Huartes, whose industries flourished under the regime, assumed the costs of the operation. Even before the identity of the benefactors was revealed, the idea of an unknown private sponsor had generated a lot of suspicion and speculation. An article on the PE’s presentation in Barcelona thus reported:

Who finances the “Encuentros de Pamplona” (26 June to 3 July). This unknown “who” intrigued some of those who attended the informative presentation of these encounters in Barcelona at an event organized by the College of Architects and the German Institute. Luis de Pablo and J.L. Alexanco said that they could not publicly give the name of the sponsor.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> “Los Encuentros se plantearon como una fiesta/feria, como si aquí no pasara nada. Fue un proyecto “social” en función de los intereses de unos grupos muy ligados al sistema y por lo tanto al régimen, así que decidí no acudir.” Pere Portabella, Interview by José Díaz Cuyás and Carmen Pardo Salgado (excerpt), June 2004, in Díaz Cuyas and Pardo, “Pamplona era una fiesta: tragicomedia del arte español”, 59.

<sup>106</sup> “[...] quien financia los “Encuentros de Pamplona” (26 de junio a 3 de julio). Este desconocido “quien” intrigaba algunos de los que asistieron a la presentación informativa de estos encuentros en Barcelona en acto organizado por el Colegio de Arquitectos y el Instituto Alemán. Luis de Pablo y J.L. Alexanco dijeron que públicamente no podían dar el nombre del financiador.” Oriol Domingo, “Encuentros de Pamplona presentados en Barcelona”, *Diario de Barcelona*, 17 May 1972, 21.

The mystery around the identity of the benefactor fueled rumours, the most widespread of them being that the PE were financed by the Opus Dei. This rumour generated an immediate rejection by the most politicized artists, especially in Catalonia. De Pablo and Alexanco strove to persuade their interlocutors that this was not the case, as a letter to Joan Brossa well illustrates:

Dear friend: We were in Barcelona and we couldn't contact you. We had long conversations with Portabella, María Luisa Borrás, Miró, a brief one with Tàpies etc... in which, we believe, everything was clear: neither Opus nor manoeuvre of any kind. Whoever still doubts it will do it on his own and for his own reason. But we prefer not to insist on the subject. We look forward to hearing from you. We continue to count on your poetry and, if possible, your physical presence; you would be our guest, of course.<sup>107</sup>

Despite these efforts, many artists from Barcelona and Catalonia—including Brossa—declined the invitation to participate in the PE, pressured by Pere Portabella and Antoni Tàpies. Although the motivation of the detractors was firstly and allegedly political, more prosaic reasons seem to have also played a role in this operation of boycott, especially from the Catalan artists, who wanted to organise a very similar event in Cadaqués, but didn't succeed. Francesc Torres, one of the few Catalan artists present at the PE as part of the group Gran de Gràcia, has recently highlighted the contradictions inherent in this polarised national scene, torn between ideology and regional personal interests and identities. For him, the reaction against the PE

[...] consisted of a harsh disqualification from Catalonia with a devastating political and ideological analysis by a highly visible group of intellectuals from the shining local left. The argumentation in terms of dialectical materialism was impeccable, no surprise with Pere Portabella in between. According to the attack of Barcelona's

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<sup>107</sup> “Querido amigo: Estuvimos en Barcelona y no pudimos contactar contigo. Tuvimos largas conversaciones con Portabella, María Luisa Borrás, Miró, una breve con Tàpies etc...en la que, creemos, todo quedo claro: ni Opus ni maniobra de ninguna clase. Quien aún lo ponga en duda lo hará por su cuenta y razón. Pero preferimos no insistir sobre el tema. Esperamos tus noticias. Seguimos contando con tu poesía y, si posible fuera, con tu presencia física; serias nuestro invitado, claro.” Luis de Pablo and José Luis Alexanco to Joan Brossa, letter dates 19 May 1972. Ref. BROSSA\_CORRES\_ENT\_JB\_E\_00035, Archive of the Centro de Estudios y Documentación, MACBA, Barcelona.



caviar Bolshevism, the Encounters were nothing more than an attempt to wash the regime's face with the help of the Castellana's industrial and economic oligarchy.<sup>108</sup>

This controversy, which was very present on the local scene, did not affect however the event's international perception and reception. It remained in fact confined within the country's borders. Probably attracted by the promise of something radically new and by the unusual character of such an event in Spain, the majority of foreign artists who received the invitation accepted to participate; only a few, like the poet and musician Henri Chopin, explicitly expressed their refusal to participate because of Franco's dictatorship. Others, on the contrary, considered their presence in Pamplona as a form of resistance and a contribution to a greater openness of the artistic scene. John Cage, for example, would have declared that since he practiced his art in Nixon's America, he could do it as well in Franco's Spain. As we know, Central European artists didn't have to make a choice regarding their participation, since they were not informed on it. However, negation was, in a way, the prerogative of politicised Western artists who could afford to decline an invitation. For the representatives of the socialist bloc, what was most important was precisely the opportunity to communicate, exchange and appear.

### **3.2. Generational gap and ideological masquerade**

The discussions around the PE also reflected a generational gap on the left: on one side, the traditional anti-Francoist left, close to the Spanish Communist Party (PCE); on the other, what José Díaz Cuyás designated as the "other left", who had no name and no face yet; it was already present, however, as a younger generation, including many students, who had not experienced the Spanish civil war and had a different perspective on the role of culture in their society. Their approach reflected a new form

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<sup>108</sup> "La reacción consistió en una dura descalificación desde Cataluña con un demolidor análisis político e ideológico por parte de un grupo muy visible de intelectuales de la izquierda bruñida local. La argumentación en términos de materialismo dialéctico era impecable, nada de extrañar con Pere Portabella de por medio. A tenor del ataque del bolchevismo caviar barcelonés, los Encuentros no eran otra cosa que un intento de lavarle la cara al régimen con la ayuda de la oligarquía industrial y económica de la Castellana." Francesc Torres, "La invasión de los tomates asesinos", *Carta*, revista del Museo Reina Sofía no. 1, spring-summer 2010, 76-77. The "Paseo de la Castellana" was a central avenue in Madrid, site of many businesses, banks and embassies, associated with economic and political power.

of engagement from this side of the political spectrum, related with counterculture and the students movements of 1968 in France.

The left-wing artists and intellectuals who criticised the event contrasted then with a younger generation who wanted to live “as if this was not a dictatorship”.<sup>109</sup> On the one hand, the idea of living “as if” the dictatorship did not exist may seem illusory, futile and even offensive if one considers the real conditions in which it was expressed. How was it possible to live as if the dictatorship did not exist, since its very nature—whether it was a communist or fascist dictatorship—consisted precisely in eliminating from social life, and consequently from personal life, any “free” space of thought, movement or action? However, this expression and the attitude it describes also reflect the shift from a generation of “resistance” to a generation who kept living and participating in the cultural scene with the hope of changing it from the inside. On this respect, Fernando Millán has observed that the idea of an integration within Europe was experienced by the younger as something unquestionable, and it structured all these years, as a prefiguration of the democratic transition that would start with the dictator’s death, in 1975.<sup>110</sup>

José Diaz Cuyas has also noted that the PE were the perfect arena for a game of “ideological masquerade”, since it operated an inversion of the current political values. He identified

[t]wo very obvious examples of this game of ideological masks: this celebration of “the capitalist and bourgeois oligarchy” featured the CAYC with a collective exhibition that was highly representative of the most ideologically radicalised conceptualism (along with Catalan conceptualism, shortly afterwards), and there the

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<sup>109</sup> “Hay una cosa muy importante, para un núcleo grande de esa generación con el que yo me identifico, y es que éramos gente que había decidido empezar a vivir como si esto no fuera una dictadura. Aquello no tenía nada que ver con nosotros y queríamos vivir en un país normal.” “Fuimos a la organización y les dijimos: “somos poetas y queremos participar en los encuentros”, Fernando Huici, interview in Rafael Llano, coord., María Carbó, Marta García Alonso, Silvia Sábada and Miguel Zozaya, eds., *Los Encuentros de Pamplona en el Museo Universidad de Navarra*, 345.

<sup>110</sup> Fernando Millán, “Utopía, transgresión, neoavanguardia y radicalismo. La poesía experimental en el Estado Español”, in *Escrito está. Poesía experimental en España*, exh. cat. (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium ; Valladolid: Museo Patio Herreriano, 2009), 18.

first Spanish edition of part of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) was distributed free of charge.<sup>111</sup>

In fact, while the artistic avant-gardes were usually considered as left-wing, in the case of the Pamplona Encounters, experimental artistic initiatives were considered by their opponents as “petit-bourgeois”, perfect examples of the alienation of culture in the service of the power.

According to this logic, those who had the reputation of being politically radical, as the CAYC and its representatives, should have lost their credibility for participating in the PE. This, however, did not happen, because the CAYC and Glusberg remained as outsiders, or bystanders of this polemics; they did not take part in the debates and discussions, nor took position on them. Thanks to this ambiguity, Glusberg had then both benefits: showing his two exhibitions in the context of an international encounter and diffusing his discourses filled with political terms in which the traditional left could identify itself.

By extension, the works from the Czechoslovak artists included in the CAYC's exhibition in Pamplona were subject to the same readings, regardless of their particular origins. They thus became representatives of radical aesthetics coming from Latin America, which, in the eyes of anti-Francoist artists and intellectuals, were opposed to the elitist artistic experiments that played the game of the regime. Works influenced by their socialist background were thus projected on the public art scene as the illustration of a “political” statement their authors wouldn't have necessarily shared.

It is probably not a coincidence if the presence of the CAYC was interpreted by part of the public as a rare example of leftist engagement in the context of the PE. This is particularly clear in Jaime Maymó's letter to Jorge Glusberg, who used expressions and concepts directly connected with the “old left” as if he was convinced that Glusberg shared this lexicon with him: “political values”, social classes and the idea that “art should serve the people and not just a few”. In change, the language of

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<sup>111</sup> “Dos ejemplos muy obvios de este juego de máscaras ideológicas: en aquella fiesta de “la oligarquía capitalista y burguesa” figuraba el CAYC con una exposición colectiva y ampliamente representativa del conceptualismo más radicalizado ideológicamente (junto con el catalán, poco después), y allí se distribuyó gratuitamente la primera edición española de una parte de la Sociedad del espectáculo de Guy Debord”. Diaz Cuyas and Pardo, “Pamplona era una fiesta: tragicomedia del arte español”, 24.

the “new artistic behaviours” was different, more poetical and sibylline, privileging non-verbal communication. For instance, Valoch’s graphic works for “Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano”, whose political dimension was clear, carefully avoided peremptory assertions and relied on suggestive on associations.

### **3.3 Final observations**

Several reflections arise from this brief exploration of the works of Czechoslovak artists presented in Pamplona through the exhibitions “exported” by the CAYC. First of all, if one is struck by the great affinity between the idea of art systems and the systemic approach of Stano Filko, the poetical-linguistic explorations of Jiří Valoch, or the expressions of land-art by Eugen Brikcius (but we could also mention the art of possibilities articulated by Josef Kroutvor, conceptual explorations of Petr Štembera or Olaf Hanel’s interventions in the land, that have not been analysed here), it becomes also clear that they arise in a totally different context, not only in terms of socio-political situation, but also in terms of cultural and intellectual references. The idea of the autonomy of art, of the desire for aesthetic, intellectual and psychological exploration detached from any formal and political concerns imposed by the regime underpinned these practices, without imposing a unified format on them. Thus, while they could enter into dialogue with other proposals presented in Pamplona, and find a place among these avant-garde expressions, it is important to stress that their lack of contextualisation prevented the public from appreciating their depth and, also, their specific value.

On the other hand, the discourse and intentions behind these works were precisely at odds with the idea of an instrumentalisation of art at the service of an ideology, be it resistance to a dominant ideological system. In this sense, it could be said that the works of Czechoslovak artists were, in their intention and emphasis on practice outside the sphere of direct political action, closer to the position and poetics expressed by the new artistic generation than to that of the traditional left, who saw in the discourses of the CAYC a reflection of its own dialectical aspirations.

If, on the one hand, some considered the PE problematic because they created an artificial situation in which people just behaved “as if” the conditions of repression

did not exist, justifying in a certain way the power in place, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that they opened up a field of possibilities or, in Marchán Fiz's terms, "a window through which the fresh airs of experimental arts and the "new artistic behaviours" came in".<sup>112</sup> This renewal of the cultural atmosphere not only happened because non-conventional or usually repressed actions were made possible, but also because they occurred in an environment which, even under the authorities' gaze, allowed social interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds and geographical origins at a great scale.

Unfortunately, the Central European artists whose works were presented in the exhibition "Propuestas realizaciones y montajes plásticos" did not benefit from this window, at least directly. The context in which their work appeared was that of Glusberg's theoretical elaborations aiming at positioning the CAYC in an international scenario. Since in Pamplona, this discourse was interpreted by part of the Spanish audience as a rare example of political critique, all the artistic contributions associated with it became associated with Latin American political art when in fact, they insisted on art's autonomy and possibilities.

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<sup>112</sup> "[I]os Encuentros transformaron Pamplona, entonces una ciudad de provincias, en un punto de encuentro, una ventana a través de la cual penetraban los aires frescos de las artes experimentales y los "nuevos comportamientos artísticos"." Marchán Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto*, XXII.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Central European presence at the “centralised and internationalised” Paris Biennale (1973-1977)**

For the political and cultural circumstances in which they took place, the Pamplona Encounters tend to be contemplated as a singular and unrepeatable event in the landscape of post-Francoist Spain. In this new chapter, we will address an international event which, for its condition of biennial, incorporates sequencing, repetition and variation as an integral part of its history and identity. From the outset, this condition implies a different approach that relate (in terms of continuity or rupture) and compare different editions of the biennial. In this case, we will examine the way this particular manifestation implemented during six years a program placed under the sign of avant-garde and internationalisation.

The editions of the Paris Biennale of Young Artists (in its original name Biennale de Paris-Manifestation Internationale des Jeunes Artistes) held between 1973 and 1977 adopted a new model under the supervision of its general delegate Georges Boudaille, leading to a modification of its internal structure and the adoption of a new method of selection of participants.<sup>1</sup> Not only these transformations had a significant impact on the event’s organisation, they also influenced the conditions of participation and visibility of the artists, in a context still strongly marked by the social and political upheavals that had crossed Europe around 1968, and by an increasing interest for artistic realities from non-occidental contexts.

Recent publications and exhibitions have highlighted the importance of the Paris Biennale as a space for exchange and collaboration between East and West, in

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter reproduces in part some early reflections formulated in the context of the seminar “Crossing the dividing line? Eastern European artists at the Paris Biennale” held in the framework of the project “1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris” (Paris, INHA, 21 November 2017). The research program “1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris” directed by Elitza Dulguerova has been crucial for the articulation of new approaches on the Biennale, including the ones concerning Eastern European participation. The upcoming publication related with the project will provide valuable materials and analyses regarding this event. See Elitza Dulguerova, ed., *Au prisme de la Biennale de Paris* (working title) (Paris: INHA, planned 2022) and <https://bdp.hypotheses.org> (Accessed May 2020).

particular during the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> While various studies have provided in-depth analyses on topics such as the critical reception of the Paris Biennale in the Polish Press during the 1950s and 1960s or the Section des Envois at the seventh Biennale (1971), the broader phenomenon of Central European participation and reception, as well as its “framing” within the Biennale deserves further investigation.<sup>3</sup> This chapter therefore seeks to fill this gap, at least regarding the decade of the 1970s, by approaching the phenomenon from two angles. On the one hand, it pays attention to the conditions of participation of artists and works from socialist Eastern Europe (with particular focus on Central European participants) between 1973 and 1977. On the other, it examines the terms under which such participation was referred to in discourses and statements produced at that time by the Biennale itself—mostly in the catalogues, but also during internal meetings—, as well as by journalists and art critics.

As we will see, the personal situation of artists, their countries of origin and their relationship with socialist cultural institutions and authorities had an influence on the

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<sup>2</sup> Already in 2010, the exhibition “Promises of the Past” (Paris, Centre Pompidou, 2010) highlighted without entering into much details the importance of the Paris Biennale for Eastern European artists as a platform of exchange: *Promesses du passé: une histoire discontinuée de l’art dans l’ex-Europe de l’Est*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010), 198-199. In the exhibition “Sitting Together-Parallel Chronologies of Coincidences in Eastern Europe” curated by Zsuzsa László and Petra Feriancová at tranzit.sk, Bratislava, 2016, the Biennale was included in a chronology of international events that had an impact on the circulation of art from socialist Eastern Europe. Zsuzsa László and Petra Feriancová, eds., *Sitting Together*, exh. cat. (Bratislava/Budapest: tranzit.sk/tranzit.hu, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> In the context of the seminar “1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris”, an intervention by Agatha Pietrasik and Piotr Słodkowski focused on the critical reception of the Paris Biennale in the Polish Press during the 1950s and 1960s (INHA, Paris, 12 June 2018). Establishing a dialogue between socialist Central Europe and Southern Europe, this session of the seminar titled “Looking at the Biennale de Paris from both sides of the Iron Curtain: Case Studies from totalitarian Spain and the Polish People’s Republic” also included an intervention by Paula Barreiro López, who replaced the Spanish participation at the Biennale in the context of Francoist cultural policies and the rise of antifrancoist and counter-cultural movements. This session’s combined approach highlighted the potential brought in by bringing these two European regions into comparison and dialogue. The “Section des Envois” held in the framework of the seventh Biennale (1971) and its perception among Eastern European artists were analysed in Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2018), 63-95; the participation of Petr Štembera and Jan Mlcoch to the tenth Biennale was addressed in Juliane Debeusscher, “Traveling images and words: Czech action art through the lens of exhibitions and art criticism in Western Europe”, “Photo-Performance, Performance Photography in Real Existing Socialisms”, Katalin Cseh, ed., *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* vol. 27, 1, 2019, 29-46. Regarding the presence of art from Eastern Europe in editions from 1965 to 1973, see also Juliane Debeusscher, “From Cultural Diplomacy to Artistic and Curatorial Experimentation: The Paris Youth Biennale between 1965 and 1973”, online publication, “Trips” section, *Institute of the Present* (Bucarest), October 2020. <https://institutulprezentului.ro/en/2020/09/10/from-cultural-diplomacy-to-artistic-and-curatorial-experimentation-the-paris-youth-biennale-between-1965-and-1973/> (Accessed November 2020). We should also mention the reconstitution of the *Portable Trench* of the Hungarian artist Tamás Szentjóbby, first presented at the eight Paris Biennale in 1973, in the framework of a curatorial project realised by Héléne Meisel for the Biennale de Belleville, in 2012.

way their application was submitted and their participation carried out. The consultation of the Biennale's archival funds, as well as exchanges with artists and curators involved in the event have been crucial to explore these issues further.<sup>4</sup>

By confronting these two facets of the Paris Biennale between 1973 and 1977 (institutional/critical discourses and personal trajectories and artefacts), this chapter seeks to highlight the event's material and symbolic importance as a space of visibility and exchange between artists and cultural agents from both sides of the Iron Curtain, without overlooking the tensions and contradictions generated precisely because of its experimental format. On the other hand, the impact of the Biennale cannot be measured exclusively by focusing on the brief period in which the artworks were on view in Paris, but also by paying attention to the set of circumstances and relations that made participation possible for artists from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the opportunities and collaborations it gave rise to.

## **1. A Biennale in transformation**

### **1.1 From contestation to transition (1968-1971)**

Since its creation in 1959 and until 1971, the Paris Biennale adopted the traditional system of national representations, implemented since 1895 by the historical Venice Biennale and also adopted by the Sao Paulo Biennale, created in 1951. Unlike its historical predecessors, however, the Parisian manifestation focused exclusively on young artists from twenty to thirty-five years old, positioning itself as the only international exhibition of this scale in Europe to be dedicated to emerging art. Created as a non-profit association subsidised by the French state, the Biennale of the Youth was particularly open to disciplinary cross-fertilisation and experimentation. Besides contemporary art, it paid also attention to music, experimental poetry and cinema from its first years of existence; architecture and urbanism were included in 1967 and in the 1970s, video and performance started to occupy a central place with the creation of specific programs. In the 1960s, the Biennale's section for team works

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter relies on archival research in the Fonds Biennale de Paris, currently conserved in two institutions: the Bibliothèque Kandinsky (Centre Pompidou/Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris) and the Archives de la Critique d'Art (ACA, Rennes). While most of the artists' files from the period this research is concerned with are kept in the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, the documents related with the Biennale's internal organisation (correspondences with international correspondents and institutions, minutes from internal meetings, etc.) are in the ACA.



(“travaux d’équipe”) confirmed the organisation’s multidisciplinary orientation and its interest for collective aspects of artistic creation.<sup>5</sup>

The Biennale relied on the central figure of the “general delegate”, at the head of a team of various specialists devoted to the various sections of the event. A significant fact to be signaled is the recurrent correlation between these figures and an active participation in the Association Internationale des Critiques d’Art: in fact, the Biennale’s founder and general delegate Raymond Cogniat (also co-founder of the AICA in 1949), and his successors Jacques Lassaigne and Georges Boudaille assumed more or less concomitantly the direction of the French section in the AICA.<sup>6</sup> This aspect is worth mentioning, since it highlights the correlation between an active involvement in the international community of art critics and the assumption of institutional responsibilities, particularly in the context of international exhibitions and biennials.

In the general picture of the Biennale, the eight, ninth and tenth editions from 1973 to 1977 form a programmatic ensemble. They took place in the monumental complex of the Palais de Tokyo that comprised the Musée National d’Art Moderne and the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The eight Biennale surged as a consequence of the impact of the protest movements of 1968 in the French cultural and institutional field. French cultural life in 1968 was marked by events that reflected the general atmosphere of protest. From AICA to the pages of magazines such as *Opus International*, from the Sorbonne assemblies to the museums, numerous attempts to question and transform the established order emerged and sometimes collided. As the

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<sup>5</sup> On the Biennale in its first phase, see *Biennale de Paris: une anthologie: 1959-1967* (Paris: n.p., 1977); Justine Jean, “La première Biennale de Paris: genèse, enjeux, bilan et réalité”, Master thesis (Paris: École du Louvre, 2017); Elitza Dulguerova, “La Biennale internationale des jeunes artistes : défis et difficultés”, blog article, published on 13 February 2018, <https://bdp.hypotheses.org/258> (Accessed April 2020); one of the earliest academic researches centered on the Paris Biennale was conducted by Krystel Lavaur, Krystel Lavaur, “La Biennale de Paris, 1959-1985. Éléments monographiques”, MA thesis, (Rennes: Université de Rennes 2-Haute Bretagne, 1992); Krystel Lavaur, “Revue de presse. Biennale de Paris 1959-1965. Analyses et commentaires”, DEA thesis, (Rennes: Université de Rennes 2-Haute Bretagne, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Cogniat was the co-founder and general delegate of the Paris Biennale from 1959 to 1965 and he had founded the AICA in 1949 and been the first president of its French section between 1949 and 1966; his successor Jacques Lassaigne was the Biennale’s general delegate from 1967 to 1969, vice-president of AICA France from 1960 to 1966 and president of AICA International from 1966 to 1969. Finally, Georges Boudaille, president of AICA France from 1969 to 1975, was general delegate of the Paris Biennale between 1971 and 1977.

president of the French section of AICA, Michel Ragon tried to introduce debates on the position of art critics in this stormy context; he ended up resigning from his position of curator of the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale (as Gérard Gassiot-Talabot would also do for the Sao Paulo Biennale, a few months later). While the reactionary nature of cultural institutions was under discussion, the role artists and art critics had to play to transform this condition was also addressed.<sup>7</sup>

After a smooth sixth Paris Biennale in 1969, in the autumn of 1970 the commission in charge for the selection of French artists for the following edition, composed by a group of young art critics, refused to maintain the role of “cultural cops” imposed by the system of selection of artists, and demanded to include all the artists who would express the wish to participate.<sup>8</sup> This radical attempt, however, only concerned the selection process of French artists, while international participations remained under the responsibility of each country’s administration. Even so, the proposal was not implemented due to its impracticability for both economic and “moral” reasons; in fact, as Georges Boudaille later observed, it would have implied “giving up the responsibility of the art critic”.<sup>9</sup> The questions raised during this pivotal period nevertheless marked the Biennale for the next decade and led its general delegate to look for a more democratic and horizontal model.

The seventh Paris Biennale in 1971 was exceptionally held in the Parc Floral of the Bois de Vincennes due to the remodeling of the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. More than the previous, post-1968 edition, it marked a true transitional

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<sup>7</sup> Antje Kramer-Mallordy, “Le Mai des critiques d’art: une question de perspective”, *Critique d’art*, 51 | 2018, 176-194; Marion Glédel, “La VIe Biennale de Paris, recherche d’un nouvel élan face aux critiques et aux contestations”, in Antje Kramer-Mallordy, ed., *1968: La Critique d’art, la politique et le pouvoir. Séminaire de recherche Art contemporain du programme PRISME* (Rennes: Université Rennes 2/Archives de la Critique d’Art, 2018), 133-142.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Boudaille, “Ce qu’il faut savoir”, in *8<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: n.p., 1973), unpaginated.

<sup>9</sup> Boudaille, “Ce qu’il faut savoir”, unpaginated.

moment, with Georges Boudaille making his debut as a general delegate.<sup>10</sup> The system of national selection was maintained, but for the first time, the national commissioners were invited to contribute to three thematic lines: concept, hyperrealism and interventions. These thematics, however, proved to be too narrow and led to the creation of a fourth “catch-all” section in which a large part of participants eventually ended up.<sup>11</sup>

Besides these four options, the Biennale included a separate area curated by the young art historian and critic Jean-Marc Poinot. The “Section des Envois” (“Sending section”) aimed at reporting on mail art and distance communication practices, embraced by an increasing number of artists.<sup>12</sup> Participants from Central Europe were Gyula Konkoly, Endre Tót and Czech Petr Štembera, while Alex Mlynářčík and Tomas Zankó appeared in a short “historical” section bringing together artists Poinot considered as pioneers in this field, including Ray Johnson, Robert Filliou, Andre Cadere, Paul-Armand Gette and Douglas Huebler. Initially conceived as a modest initiative intended to show an emerging trend on the margins of the art system, the “Section des Envois” played a crucial role in the dissemination of mail art.<sup>13</sup>

The Biennale’s sendings section happened to be in fact one of the first platforms through which mail art acquired public visibility in the European context. A large number of artists used the event as an opportunity for establishing contacts with their

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<sup>10</sup> Georges Boudaille’s trajectory within the Paris Biennale was already well established in 1973. In 1965 and 1967, he was part of the curatorial team under the direction of Raymond Cogniat and was in charge of organising the Biennale’s symposia and the “New perspectives” section. Member of the international jury in 1969, he occupied the function of general delegate from 1971 until 1985. A journalist and an art critic, Boudaille also collaborated with different publications (*Cimaise*, *Studio International*) and directed the arts section of the *Lettres Françaises* from 1958 to 1972. See Boudaille’s biography and bibliography on the website of the Archives de la Critique d’Art, <https://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/auteur/boudaille-georges> (Accessed April 2020).

<sup>11</sup> *7<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat., (Paris: n.p.,1971). Also Jean Cahen-Salvador, “Une très vivante exposition”, in *8<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat., (Paris: n.p.,1973), unpaginated.

<sup>12</sup> “Entretien avec Jean-Marc Poinot”, realised by Elitza Dulguerova, INHA, 2016-2017, 00:46:20-01:05:23. <https://skylab.inha.fr/videoPoinot/> (Accessed April 2020); Jean-Marc Poinot, “La communication à distance et l’objet esthétique”, in *7<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: n.p., 1971), 63-69.

<sup>13</sup> A few years later, the publisher, mail artist and active networker Ulises Carrión would insist on the importance of Poinot’s initiative: “To my knowledge, the only person who has ever written of Mail Art with understanding is Jean-Marc Poinot. His introduction to the catalogue *Mail Art-Communication à distance-Concept* is brilliant and even visionary. On the basis of his analyses of the works in the Sections Envois of the Paris Biennale 1971, Poinot accurately predicts the ulterior developments of Mail Art”. Ulises Carrión, “Mail art and the Big Monster”, in Ulises Carrión, *Second Thoughts* (Amsterdam: VOID Distributors, 1980), 46.

pairs. Klara Kemp-Welch, in her extensive study dedicated to this episode, has observed that the event represented “a watershed moment” for Eastern European artists. On the one hand, the focus on mail and distance communication enabled them to send artworks without requesting permission from the cultural authorities of their country; on the other, the Biennale’s institutional context contributed to legitimise the value of experimental works on paper and encouraged artists to follow this path.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the seventh Biennale’s other sections, the selection process for the “Section des Envois” adopted the principles of mail art exhibitions: all the contributions were included, hopefully to “provoke an experimental and confrontational activity.<sup>15</sup>” It could be thus seen as an anticipation, on a minor scale, of the elimination of the role of national commissioners and the exclusion of official policies that would be implemented in 1973, as we shall now see.

## **1.2 Undoing national representations: the system of international correspondents**

In a programmatic essay published in the catalogue of the eight Biennale in 1973, illustratively entitled “Ce qu’il faut savoir” (“What you need to know”), Georges Boudaille introduced the manifestation’s new formula, inaugurating a new tradition of introductory essays aimed at explaining and justifying the Biennale’s choices. He explained that one of the main decisions taken for this edition consisted in abandoning the national paradigm in the process of selection and evaluation of participants: “All national factors and criteria were unanimously rejected, to keep in consideration only the merits of each artist and the specific value of his work”.<sup>16</sup> As to the nature of these merits and values, Boudaille specified that they were “the intrinsic value of the works proposed, the innovative contribution to international current affairs, the quality of

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<sup>14</sup> Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981*, 63-95. Also Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956-1989*, (London: IB Tauris, 2014), 148. Regarding the itinerancy and reception of the Section des Envois in Yugoslavia, see Ivana Bago, “Postal Packages by Želimir Košćević”, on *Parallel Chronologies: An Archive of East European Exhibitions*, post, <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/postal-packages/> (Accessed April 2020).

<sup>15</sup> “[...] nous avons préféré laisser cette manifestation ouverte et provoquer une activité expérimentale et de confrontation”. Poinso, “La communication à distance et l’objet esthétique”, 63.

<sup>16</sup> “Tous les facteurs et critères nationaux furent repoussés unanimement, pour ne garder en considération que les mérites de chaque artiste et la valeur spécifique de son travail”. Boudaille, “Ce qu’il faut savoir”, unpaginated.

execution”.<sup>17</sup> Artists were therefore to be evaluated according to the novelty and quality of their artistic proposal, as well as their work’s suitability in an international context. If the notion of quality may seem surprising in a post-1968 context when, precisely, authoritative judgements of value had been violently rejected by an important part of artists and agents involved in the Biennale, it was invoked unreservedly here in order to counter two other models the Biennale was trying to escape from. On the one hand, the imposition of conformist views by national commissioners who, Boudaille deplored, had the disadvantage of “worth[ing] exactly what the national commissioner of each country was worth”.<sup>18</sup> On the other, the failure of the seventh Biennale’s thematic sections, accused of being a source of “monotony, monopolism and even clumsiness”.<sup>19</sup>

To accompany and support these changes, however, the Paris Biennale needed a stronger governing body. The eighth edition and the two following ones were thus reorganised around a Commission Internationale (International Commission, from now on IC): a centralized organ composed of ten to twelve art critics, curators and artists, including Boudaille himself. They were art critics, curators and artists. Some of them, like Gerald Forty and Jean-Christophe Ammann, had been previously involved in national commissions, others were independent. While most of the IC’s members came from Western European countries, each of the three editions examined here counted with one member from the United States, one from Japan and one from socialist Eastern Europe. Members from this region, were, in 1973, the Romanian art critic Radu Varia—previously involved as a national commissioner, Varia was invited to stay by Boudaille, who considered that he “understood the spirit of the Biennale”—, in 1975, the director of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź Ryszard Stanisławski and, in

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<sup>17</sup> “[...] la valeur intrinsèque des œuvres proposées, l’apport novateur sur le plan de l’actualité internationale, la qualité d’exécution”. Anonymous, “Biennale de Paris”, *Opus International* no. 43, May-June 1973, 72. This article published ahead of the eighth Biennale cited the official press release.

<sup>18</sup> “Quant aux participations étrangères [...], il faut bien dire qu’elles valaient exactement ce que valait le commissaire national de chaque pays”. Boudaille, “Ce qu’il faut savoir”, unpaginated.

<sup>19</sup> Cahen-Salvador, “Une très vivante exposition”, unpaginated.

1977, the art critic and curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade Ješa Denegri.<sup>20</sup>

Of particular interest to our study, the other major novelty of the eighth Biennale was the introduction of a new system of selection, relying on a network of international correspondents. These privileged intermediaries between the local scenes and the Biennale were invited to submit artists' files for their evaluation by the IC—hence the term “centralised” Biennial, since the Commission was actually in charge of taking artistic decisions. The correspondents' task of “clearing the ground” was particularly unrewarding because they were neither paid, nor invited to defend their choice before the IC.<sup>21</sup> The only compensation was the publication of their name in the catalogue, along with the other correspondents. For the IC, on the other side, the amount of additional work was considerable, with hundred files to examine and discuss at meetings held throughout the year that preceded each edition of the Biennale. Approximately six hundred artists' files reached the IC in 1973; they were more than seven hundred and fifty in 1975, and more than five hundred in 1977.<sup>22</sup>

The correspondent's uncertain status was being discussed by the IC, whose members' opinions differed regarding the number—one or more for each country—, the remuneration—impossible to assume for the Biennale, it was in some cases taken care of by the administrations of the participating countries, but in most cases not—and the status—officially recognized or not—of these volunteer collaborators.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of these discussions, held in 1974 and 1975, Ryszard Stanisławski , who had a different view on this issue from his colleagues, provoked a discussion “on the substance” and requested to have it recorded in the minutes of the meeting.<sup>24</sup> He

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<sup>20</sup> Besides Boudaille and the already mentioned members from Eastern Europe, other members were, in 1973 Daniel Abadie, Jean-Christophe Ammann, Wolfgang Becker, Gerald Forty, Jennifer Licht, Toshiaki Minemura, Raoul-Jean Moulin, Ansgar Nierhoff, Antonio Saura and Gijs van Tuyl; in 1975, Abadie, Ammann, Becker, Forty, Walter Hopps, Minemura, Ole Henrik Moe, Moulin, Ad Petersen and Tommaso Trini; in 1977, Michael Compton, Nina Felshin, Johannes Gachnang, Catherine Millet, Minemura, Moe, Petersen, Trini and Armin Zweite.

<sup>21</sup> Boudaille, “Ce qu'il faut savoir”, unpaginated.

<sup>22</sup> These figures are reported in the various catalogues from 1973, 1975 and 1977 as well as in the *Journal de la 10eme Biennale* (Paris: Biennale de Paris, 1977).

<sup>23</sup> Report of the meeting of the International Commission, 4 to 6 April 1974, 1-3. Fonds Biennale de Paris 1959-1985, INHA-Collection Archives de la critique d'art (from now on, FBP INHA/ACA).

<sup>24</sup> Report of the meeting of the International Commission, 8 to 14 January 1975, 2. FBP INHA/ACA.

considered the correspondents had to be chosen more strictly and suggested that their proposals should be accepted outright.<sup>25</sup> Stanisławski indeed was not in favour of the operating system of the Biennale, and proposed to reconsider it for the next edition. The anonymous author of the report observed that the Polish curator was more inclined to adopt a format like the Documenta, with a central curatorial figure, but that this vision was contrary to the spirit of the new organisation of the Paris Biennale. His colleagues estimated in fact that by sharing the weight of the decisions, the IC would evade its responsibilities and become “a ghost committee”.<sup>26</sup> This debate reflects one of the paradoxes of the Biennale’s centralised model: on the one hand, the IC promoted a more democratic system through the rejection of national selection, while on the other, it self-attributed the right of inclusion or exclusion, without any possible discussion. Its collective format minimised individual take over, but was still elitist and relatively closed, especially in terms of mediation with the public.

We know in fact thanks to the reports from the IC’s meetings that Stanisławski was particularly concerned about the audience and wanted to democratise the access to contemporary art and the Paris Biennale, especially among workers.<sup>27</sup> This concern was in line with his task as a director of the Museum Sztuki in Łódź, a pioneering European institution regarding the collection of modern art but also in terms of actions with the public. In the 1970s, Stanisławski organised a series of events designated by the motto “Sunday at the Museum”. They were addressed to the local community and aimed at integrating the Museum in the context of Łódź, its history and cultural traditions through a series of activities—concerts, exhibitions, workshops,

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<sup>25</sup> A few years later, Jindřich Chalupický who, as seen in Chapter three, was a correspondent for the Biennale, expressed similar views: “Probably, the status of the Biennale should be reconsidered. If I may give you some suggestions: 1) limit the number of “correspondents” to people you can trust. 2) give them the right to choose an artist eliminated by the jury. (Is it really competent to judge definitively the things not seen?)”. (“Probablement, il faudrait reconsidérer le statut de la Biennale. Si je puis vous donner quelques suggestions: 1) limiter le nombre des “correspondants” aux personnages auxquelles vous pouvez donner toute votre confiance. 2) leur donner le droit de choisir un artiste éliminé par le jury. (Est-elle vraiment compétente de juger définitivement les choses pas vues?)” Jindřich Chalupický to an anonymous receiver (probably Boudaille), letter dated 30 November 1976, FR ACA BIENN COM COR018. FBP INHA/ACA.

<sup>26</sup> Report of the meeting of the International Commission, 8 to 14 January 1975, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Report of the meeting of the International Commission, 4 to 6 April 1974, 3.

fashion shows, books sales.<sup>28</sup> In the context of the Paris Biennale, Stanisławski's proposals were however confronted with the pragmatic pessimism of his colleagues from the IC, who observed that efforts to democratise art were rarely rewarded. Jean Christophe Amman considered this intention an "illusion" and clearly stated that the Biennale's exhibitions were addressed to artists and to a minority. Although he agreed with Stanisławski, Gerald Forty observed that the workers' fatigue did not allow them to go to the museum and that they did not feel concerned with contemporary art. As he insisted that important efforts were being done in Poland to bring contemporary culture closer to the people with some results, Stanisławski was replied by Boudaille himself that the "Maisons de la Culture" ("Houses of Culture") created in France for the same purpose had not given positive results with workers and farmers. Other members suggested to invite trade union delegates (Walter Hops) or to choose artworks more accessible to the public (Ad Petersen). All in all, this internal discussion demonstrates that the majority of members of the IC were above all keen to maintain the Biennale's avant-gardist orientation regardless of its reception by the public.

While the Biennale set up certain structures of mediation (in 1975, it planned a "Visitors' school" based on the participation of students and in 1977, it published a newspaper that synthesised its main ideas and lines of action), its opening up to a broader and more popular audience was, apparently, not a great concern. This position is all the more striking if one considers that the organisation occupied the same buildings as the A.R.C. (for "Animation Recherche Confrontation"), the pioneering institution created in 1967 by Pierre Gaudibert (then, from 1972 on, under the direction of Suzanne Pagé) with the aim to guarantee a more democratic and decentralised access to art and culture.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, the Paris Biennale (or, to better say, its international commission) was strongly reluctant to modify its model anchored

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<sup>28</sup> Stanisławski directed the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź and its unique collection of modern art between 1966 and 1990. He developed a model of open museum, conceived as a place of free access, where works of art and creative attitudes could be confronted and give place to new interpretations. For biographical elements on Stanisławski, see Mathilde Arnoux, "Présences Polonaises, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983. Singularité culturelle et artistique dans un monde bipolaire", in Marie Gispert et Maureen Murphy, eds., *Voir, ne pas voir. Les expositions en question* (actes de colloque, Université Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne-HiCSA and INHA, 4-5 June 2012), 2014, online access: [hicsa.univ-paris1.fr/documents/file/Arnoux.pdf](https://hicsa.univ-paris1.fr/documents/file/Arnoux.pdf) (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Regarding Gaudibert and his involvement in the "action culturelle" see Chapter two.



in the fascination for an art of the avant-garde that broke with the past and the codes in force but had not interest in questioning the social function of art.

Apparently, Stanisławski was the only member of the International Commission who disagreed with the system of the new centralised Biennale and felt concerned with the audience; this fact might explain why his collaboration was not renewed for the next editions of the Biennale.

Beyond the internal discussions on their status, the system of correspondents was implemented to pluralise and make the selection process more transparent and independent from state and official structures. It had its geographical limits, however: while the seventh Biennale in 1971 included artists from forty-five countries, only twenty-five were represented in 1973. This drastic reduction can be partly explained by the fact that the correspondents were chosen among personal contacts or acquaintances of the IC members who came predominantly from Western Europe and North America. To explain these gaps, Georges Boudaille invoked difficulties of communication with correspondents from certain regions or countries; he deplored the silence of “specialists from the African continent” who had been approached, the “slowness” of the Latin Americans, the late answer of the Yugoslav correspondents and the “bureaucratic or other complications” with Asian partners, causing the absence or scarce representation of artists from these regions in the Biennale.<sup>30</sup> His comments are particularly striking for the cultural stereotypes they imply and for the division—probably unconsciously formulated by Boudaille himself—between a first world efficient and connected and a non-Western realm made of unadapted temporalities and inefficient manners.

On the other hand, if deserting the official channels enabled the centralised Biennale to host a broader range of artistic profiles, it also made artists’ participation more uncertain and subject to unpredictable economic, logistic and ideological factors. While national participations were organised until 1971 with the support of diplomatic networks including national delegations or embassies in France, the system of correspondents entirely relied on the time and resources of correspondents

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<sup>30</sup> Boudaille, “Ce qu’il faut savoir”, unpaginated.

and artists. Censorship through the postal services was also a possible contingency.

Despite such obstacles, a significant number of correspondents from socialist Eastern Europe were involved in the three centralised editions between 1973 and 1977. Of fifty correspondents who contributed to the eighth biennial, seven were from socialist Eastern Europe: Wiesław Borowski from Poland, Jindřich Chalupecký from Czechoslovakia, Éva Körner and László Lakner from Hungary (the latter emigrated to West Germany in 1974), Ruxandra Garofeanu-Nadejde from Romania, Annelies Tschofen and Willi Sitte from East Germany. We should also mention the two correspondents from non aligned Yugoslavia, Božo Bek and Jerko (Ješa) Denegri. Some of the correspondents renewed their collaboration for the ninth Biennale, and even the tenth—Chalupecký and Borowski contributed to the three editions. In 1975, thirteen of one hundred and forty-nine correspondents were eastern Europeans (plus four from Yugoslavia) and in 1977, they were nine of eighty-eight correspondents (two from Yugoslav), in all cases a significant representation.<sup>31</sup> The profile of these intermediaries varied; most of them were independent art critics or art historians, other worked for institutions or were members of Artists Unions. While their collaboration with the Biennial was always on a personal basis and not in representation of the state or the organisations they worked for, these functions clearly overlapped in some cases—this is particularly visible for Borowski, whose proposals were often artists close to the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw, he directed.

The presence of artists among the correspondent contributed at pluralising the profile of the expert and valorising the opinion of art makers on the production of their pairs. Eastern European creators who accepted to fulfill this task between 1973 and 1977 were László Lakner, Ana Lupas, Alex Mlynářčik, Andrzej Lachowicz, Endre Tót and Zdzisław Sosnowski. Their proposals illuminate the relations of solidarity between artists who did not hesitate to promote the work of their pairs, even in the more competitive environment of international exhibitions. A correspondent for

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<sup>31</sup> In 1975, the correspondents were László Beke (Hungary) and László Lakner (Hungary/West Germany), Janusz Bogucki, Wiesław Borowski, Andrzej Lachowicz, Olgierd Truszyński, Andrzej Turowski (Poland), Jindřich Chalupecký and Alex Mlynářčik (Czechoslovakia), Willi Sitte (East Germany), Ana Lupas, Ruxandra Garofeanu-Nadejde and Radu Varia (Romania) and Božo Bek, Ješa Denegri, Biljana Tomić and Vladimir Gudac (Yugoslavia). In 1977: Jindřich Chalupecký and Alex Mlynářčik (Czechoslovakia), László Beke and Endre Tót (Hungary), Wiesław Borowski, Andrzej Lachowicz, Andrzej Sawicki and Zdzisław Sosnowski (Poland), Hans Brosch (East Germany) and Nena Dimitrijević and Biljana Tomić (Yugoslavia).

the tenth Biennale in 1977, Endre Tót promoted the candidatures of his compatriot Gábor Tóth and the Geneva-based Écart group co-founded by John Armleder, with whom he had maintained an active correspondence since 1973.<sup>32</sup> Although Tót's proposals were eventually rejected by the IC, they show how much the system of correspondents relied on a network of artistic affinity and comradeship that transcended national divisions. Other artists, such as the Czech Karel Miler, preferred not to collaborate: "Unfortunately, I cannot accept your offer", he wrote to Georges Boudaille. "Many various matters make me unable to work in such an important enterprise. I hope you will understand and excuse me".<sup>33</sup> Miler's elusive and laconic tone suggests not only possible material difficulties—as already said, sending files could have had a significant cost—but also the fear of attracting the attention of the Czechoslovak authorities in the midst of normalisation.

### **1.3 Zdzisław Sosnowski, from correspondent to participant**

The case of Zdzisław Sosnowski illustrates the permeability of the sections of the Biennial.<sup>34</sup> Initially invited as a correspondent for the tenth Biennial, the Polish artist accepted enthusiastically and proposed a project in two parts, based on his experience as an active cultural agent and, since 1975, the co-director of the Galeria Współczesna in Warsaw. The first part of his project focused on the development of "artistic attitudes expressed through photography and film" in the Polish context between 1972 and 1976, as well as in relation with the rest of the world. For information, Sosnowski

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<sup>32</sup> Endre Tót and John M Armleder actively exchanged since 1973 and published their correspondence in a book (1974). Tót's *Rain postcards* (1971-1973) were exhibited at the Galerie Écart in June-July 1974. In 1976, the Hungarian artist spent a few months in Geneva, where he carried out a series of street actions (*TOTALJoys*). Tót insisted on the importance of the 1971 "Section de Envois" for his contacts with the international art scene. "Endre Tót: le Mail Art pour contourner la dictature", interview for the archives of Écart, 28 May 2018, <http://archivesecart.ch/videos-dartistes-partie-6-endre-tot-le-mail-art-vu-de-budapest/> (Accessed April 2020)

<sup>33</sup> Karel Miler to Georges Boudaille, letter dated 25 May 1976, File "Correspondants 1977", FBP INHA/ACA.

<sup>34</sup> Native of Wrocław, Zdzisław Sosnowski, founded in the early 1970s the Galerie Sztuki Aktualnej (Actual of Actual Art, 1972-1974), with Janusz Haka, Jolanta Marcolla and Dobrosław Bagiński, exploring the properties of photographic and film language. His work engaged in a critical analysis of mass culture, through a reconversion of photography and film as tools of suggestion and persuasion in the service of a media and consumer discourse. Between 1975 and 1977 he was director of the Galeria Współczesna in Warsaw, founded in 1965 by Maria and Janusz Bogucki and one of the most important places for art in Poland and its internationalisation. He then directed the Studio Gallery (1978-1981) in Warsaw.

sent one of his articles discussing the relationship between art and photography in Poland.<sup>35</sup> The second part, more in accordance with what correspondents were expected to do, presented the dossiers of four Polish artists: Janusz Haka, Dobrosław Bagiński, Jan Wojciechowski and Tomek Kawiak.<sup>36</sup> Sosnowski's ambitious proposal failed to materialise due to its rejection by the IC, who invited him instead to participate as an artist on the proposal of the Commission member Ješa Denegri. Sosnowski thus exhibited a series of photographs and a double projection of 16mm films that were part of *Goalkeeper*, an extensive project developed since 1974.<sup>37</sup> [Fig. 5.1 and 5.2]

*Goalkeeper* explored the language of popular and mass culture and questioned the way contemporary myths were constructed and nurtured by the media. To do so, Sosnowski stepped into the skin of an adulated footballer/goalkeeper, an excessive character with an opulent lifestyle including cigars, three-piece suits and little-dressed young women played by Sosnowski's partner, the artist Teresa Tyszkiewicz, and Halina Lenartowicz.<sup>38</sup> The first film showed the artist in a football field, dressed in a white suit and wearing a hat, with sunglasses and a cigar, defending a goal cage under the screams of fans who remained off-camera. The montage juxtaposed repetitive scenes of the artist throwing himself to the ground or with the ball in his hands, as a sort of anthology of key moments of the match, which were the result of a conscious staging. The second film, shot indoors, showed the artist on the ground defending desperately his ball from a woman whose legs and heel-clad feet were the only visible

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<sup>35</sup> The document sent by Sosnowski was the typescript of an article that was later shortened and edited for its publication in English and Italian in the journal *Data*, edited by Tommaso Trini. Zdzisław Sosnowski, "Arte e fotografia" and "Poland: Photo Art", *Data*, n°27, July-September 1977, 48-49 and 79-80. The same issue also included an article by Natalia LL on the Permafo gallery and the use of film and photography as new linguistic parameters.

<sup>36</sup> Zdzisław Sosnowski to Georges Boudaille, letter dated 24 May 1976, FBP INHA/ACA. Sosnowski's artist files are kept in the Fond Biennale de Paris MNAM-Bibliothèque Kandinsky in Paris (FBP MNAM-BK), BDP 280 and 875.

<sup>37</sup> *Goalkeeper* was exhibited for the first time at the Galeria Współczesna in September 1975, in the framework of the exhibition "Aspects of the Contemporary Polish Art". The films can be seen on the website of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw : <https://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/sosnowski-Zdzislaw-goalkeeper> (Accessed March 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Teresa Tyszkiewicz was the co-author with Sosnowski of films such as *Permanent Position* (1973) and *The Other Side* (1980). Her own photographic, film and performance work engaged with issues of the body, femininity/feminism and consuming. She was the author of films like *Image and Games* and *Adaptation* (both from 1981), among others.

part. The scene was clearly sexualised with a soundtrack consisting of a series of moans emitted by a woman's voice. The commonplaces associated with success, from the obscene display of wealth to a sexist image of the objectified women were taken to the extreme of an abnormal, compulsive attitude.

Sosnowski's file preserved in the Biennale's archive contains a series of documents that confirm the importance of the critical apparatus already built up around *Goalkeeper* at the time of his participation in the tenth Biennale. [Fig. 5.3] Apparently made expressly for the Biennale as a "visit card", photograph of himself with a young woman was accompanied by a short text:

I am a goalkeeper. I am very happy if I can play football. People tell me, that I am a very good goalkeeper. Maybe, because my friends from the Polish team—Deyna, Szarmach and Lato—cannot score a goal. I do not play in the national team only because, that I have a hat and a cigar. If you want—I can give you the instructions how to play football efficiently as goalkeeper.<sup>39</sup>

Below, the formula "Zdzisław Sosnowski as GOALKEEPER" confirmed his identification with this condition as, in the words of the art critic and artist Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski's, a "total" footballer whose entire life seemed to reflect his attitude on the field, just as the "total" artist, who was also "all an attack".<sup>40</sup> Other writings and statements maintained the idea of a fictional figure standing between art, entertainment and sport, like the interview with Sosnowski partly reproduced in the Biennale's catalogue, realised by Teresa Tyszkiewicz.<sup>41</sup> In another text, Wojciechowski described *Goalkeeper* as an implementation of the idea of film as "persuasion" or an element of persuasion:

[...] it operates through condensation of simple sounds and visual attractions and it entirely rejects the story and symbolic aspect.[...] Rapidly condensed, irritating,

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<sup>39</sup> Untitled and undated document in Zdzisław Sosnowski's file, FBP MNAM-BK, Paris, BDP 280.

<sup>40</sup> Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski, "The Total Football", undated text. Zdzisław Sosnowski's file, FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 875.

<sup>41</sup> Teresa Tyszkiewicz, "Comment jouer efficacement au football—Zdzisław Sosnowski gardien de but", interview with Sosnowski, in *10<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat., (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1977), 268. An English version of the interview can be found in Sosnowski's file.

sensual sound tries to discredit reality—this reality which is taken from everyday sensual experience. Film and reality mutually discredit each other.<sup>42</sup>

The film was, in his opinion, a “real sensual experience” while at the same time “an artistic intensive and condensed one”, which invited the viewer to reflect after its visualization and not while experiencing this flood of seductive images.

Regarding the reception of the work by the Biennale’s audience, it is probable that Sosnowski’s photographs and videos were not associated with his country of origin or the socialist bloc it belonged to. The kind of visual references they put on display were indeed easily transposable to a non socialist context and resonated with other artistic researches aiming at dissecting the media, although different in their methods. We should recall that Sosnowski had organised the exhibition on “Video and Sociological Art” at the Galeria Współczesna in 1975, including for example works from the Spanish artist Joan Rabascall that borrowed elements from the media and consumer society and played with their familiarity and attractiveness (see Chapter two). However, according to David Crowley’s interpretation, *Goalkeeper*’s scenes also articulated “a provocative response to what might be called the visual and material culture of “banal socialism””.<sup>43</sup> All the same, the observers had to be familiar with the Eastern European socialist world to detect in Sosnowski’s obsessions for certain objects—the suit, the cigar, sunglasses—an allusion to a world of consumption usually inaccessible to the vast majority of Poles. The very subject of football, on the other hand, also had a “local” anchorage since it referred to the Polish society’s infatuation with this sport after the national team came third in the 1974 World Football Championship in Germany.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski, untitled and undated text. Zdzisław Sosnowski’s file, FBP MNAM-BK, Paris, BDP 875.

<sup>43</sup> David Crowley, “Art of Consumption”, in *1,2,3... Avant-gardes. Film/Art Between Experiment and Archive*, Łukasz Ronduda, and Florian Zeyfang, eds., (Berlin: Sternberg/Varsovie: Centre for Contemporary Art, 2007), 19.

<sup>44</sup> Grzegorz Dziamski, “Polish Files in the Lomholt Mail Art Archive”, retrieved from <https://www.lomholtmailartarchive.dk/focus/focus-2-grzegorz-dziamski-polish-files-in-the-lomholt-mail-art-archive> (Accessed May 2020).

The omnipresence of mediatised images in a consumer society and their power as instruments of suggestion and immediate pleasure had been already tackled two years earlier, in the context of the ninth Biennale, from a certainly more feminist angle, by Natalia LL in her today famous series *Consumer Art* (1974) and *Art After Consumption* or *Post-Consumer Art* (1975). [Fig. 5.4 and 5.5] The Polish artist actually participated as “Natalia LL-Permafo”. Like a “kind of ironic trademark”, she juxtaposed her name (already a pseudonym since her real name was Natalia Lach-Lachowicz) to Permafo, the name of the space she was running in Wrocław with Zbigniew Dłubak, Antoni Dzieduszycki and Andrzej Lachowicz.<sup>45</sup> In the context of the Biennale, Natalia LL’s name was not the only element to be modified: she also altered her own date of birth (from 1943 to 1937) in order to participate to the event, since she was more than thirty-five years old at that time.<sup>46</sup>

While their visual motives and references acquired specific meanings in the context of a socialist society, the works of Zdzisław Sosnowski and Natalia LL nevertheless resisted any simplistic identification with an Eastern European identity and their playful critique to media and consumption proved to be easily transposable to non-socialist spaces of reception. At the same time, one can detect in their lack of seriousness, the excessive and grotesque dimension of certain gestures a singular sense of humour that differed from the more analytical language of an Anglo-American institutional critique, or from the critical vision of the sociological proposals that circulated in the French context.

*Goalkeeper* and the *Consumer/Post-Consumer* circulated actively on the international scene and Sosnowski and Natalia LL maintained constant relations with foreign countries, in particular through the structures they ran (Permafo and *Współczesna*) and the newsletters or magazines they published. This adaptability of their artistic language to other contexts and its relation to mass imagery was among

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<sup>45</sup> Anna Markowska, “PERMAFO 1970-1981: Zbigniew Dłubak, Antoni Dzieduszycki, Natalia LL, Andrzej Lachowicz”, in Anna Makowska, ed., *Permafo 1970-1981* (Wrocław: Contemporary Museum and Motto Books, 2013), 13-101 (Herę 14).

<sup>46</sup> “The date of birth I borrowed from my brother, Edward Lach (born 1943), whom I envied as a child that he was a boy. My biography, my curriculum vitae, was composed of my individual Works or projects.” Natalia LL, “Biennale w Paryżu”, in Natalia LL, *Texty* (Bielsko-Biała: Galeria Bielska BWA, 2004), 261. Cited in Krzysztof Pijarski, “Doing it right: Natalia LL’s poetics of publicity”, in *Natalia LL Doing Gender*, exh. cat. (Warsaw: Fundacja Lokal Sztuki/Lokal\_30, 2013), 106.

the motives of a virulent condemnation of their work and that of a group of young Polish artists by Wiesław Borowski, art critic and co-founder of the Galeria Foksal.<sup>47</sup> In a famous text titled “Pseudo-avant-garde” he published in 1975, Borowski accused several artists, including Zbigniew Dłubak, Natalia LL, Zbigniew Warpechowski, Josef Robakowski and Zdzisław Sosnowski, of imitating Western art, and denounced their “amoral and anti-intellectual” position.<sup>48</sup> For Borowski, these artists were mere impostors who used the language of the avant-garde without embracing its radical ideals. He considered that their interest in everyday life betrayed the modern and radical aspiration for art’s autonomy—implicitly suggesting that himself and the organization he represented (the Foksal Gallery) were the true holders of such modernity and radicality.<sup>49</sup> This controversy reflected the polarisation of the Polish scene around power struggles. As Anna Markowska pointed out,

The article “Pseudo-Avant-Garde”, discrediting progressive fellow artists, proved to be an anachronistic attempt to resurrect artists’ “Thaw” consensus with the government. It turned out that in the communist state there had been no solidarity of the artists, because some of them preferred to replicate the patterns of authoritarian power placing themselves in a privileged and pro-monopoly position. Although the Foksal Gallery opposed the communist state, it adopted some of its tactics and values.<sup>50</sup>

The quarrel had a strong impact on the relations between Polish artists, while Borowski cultivated his “image of artistic self-marginalization in the name of promoting seemingly universalistic values, while at the same time fighting against

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<sup>47</sup> Borowski co-founded the Galeria Foksal in 1966 with Anka Ptaszkowska and Mariusz Tchorek, until both of them left the gallery, at the end of the decade, while Tadeusz Kantor occupied a more significant role along with Borowski.

<sup>48</sup> Wiesław Borowski, “Pseudoawangarda”, *Kultura* n° 12, 1975.

<sup>49</sup> If we recall Antoni Muntadas’ comment on his perception of the Polish scene in the mid-1975 (see Chapter two), this idea of Galeria Foksal as the true representative of the avant-garde scene in Poland was particularly common abroad.

<sup>50</sup> English Summary, in Anna Markowska, *Dwa przelomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku* (Two Turning Points: Polish Art After 1955 and 1989) (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2012). Cited in Karolina Majewska, “On historicizing Conceptualism and the interpretation of feminism. A conversation with Ewa Partum”, *Obieg*, April 2014, <https://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/english/31894> (Accessed April 2020); see also Anna Markowska, “Avant-Garde” and “Pseudo-Avant-Garde” in the People’s Republic of Poland in the 1960s and 1970s”, *Centropa* vol. 11, no. 2, 2011, 143-152.



possible domestic competitors”.<sup>51</sup> Borowski didn’t hesitate to claim in his article that the Pseudo-Avant-Garde was a dangerous phenomenon for Polish culture, and that its protagonists used art as a “lever for career, promotion, a way to gain a position or participate in international (declining) events and institutions such as the Biennale of Young People in Paris or the AICA Association”.<sup>52</sup> A curious statement, if we consider that Borowski himself was a correspondent of the Paris Biennale at that time—he was even involved in the three centralised editions. As the unique Polish correspondent for the eight Biennale in 1973, his imprint was particularly visible with the participation of two groups—Anonymous Artists and Druga Grupa—who had also exhibited at the Galeria Foksal shortly before the Biennale.

#### **1.4 The limits of the system of correspondents. Diplomacy and critiques**

Several artists considered that the system of correspondents was a new monopoly, through which the choices of the CI and its personal contacts were imposed on the Biennale.

The Polish duo KwieKulik (Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek) repeatedly denounced the lack of transparency of the pre-selection process for the Paris Biennale in the 1970s and the impossibility for some artists (including themselves) to participate because of the barriers established not only by the Polish cultural authorities, but also by the system of correspondents. They even sent a complain to the Ministry of Culture to suggest the lack of qualification of the committee in charge of selecting artists documentation:

We are presenting some of our materials at the Young Biennale in Paris, in the “documentation of artistic activities” section. The qualifying committees [they refer

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<sup>51</sup> Jacqueline Niesser, Thomas Skowronek, Friederike Kind-Kovács and Ulf Brunnbauer “Cultural Opposition as Transnational Practice” in Balázs Apor, Péter Apor and Sándor Horváth, eds., *The Handbook of COURAGE: Cultural Opposition and its Heritage in Eastern Europe* (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2018), 559-562. This description could be applied, at different levels of course, to other figures mentioned in this dissertation, moving between collaboration and competition: Jorge Glusberg, Amerigo Marras or Jan Świdziński, for example, as well as some Spanish detractors of the Pamplona Encounters like Pere Portabella.

<sup>52</sup> “[...] dzwignia do kariery, awansu życiowego, droga do uzyskania pozycji lub uczestnictwa w międzynarodowych (upadających zresztą) imprezach i instytucjach takich jak Biennale Młodych w Paryżu czy Stowarzyszenie AICA.” Wiesław Borowski, cited in Markowska, *Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku*, 421. (My translation)

here to the Polish committees]—there were about five of them—gave us extra work to do, because each wished to make changes in the selection and sequence of the slides. All were composed of officials and activists (!) who, to make matters worse, were dealing with this kind of art for the first time in their lives! As a result, about three-fourth of the slide show presented by O. Truszczynski, the show’s curator, and deemed by the authors to be final, was rejected.<sup>53</sup>

This problematic was also exposed in 1974, in a lecture to an audience mainly composed by students in Elbląg. KwieKulik showed slides and discussed the authorities’ decision and their own opinion on the selection process, with the following aim: “This is to fulfill our postulate of informing the audience not only about the form and content of our works and “activities”, but also about the political circumstances of our artistic work”.<sup>54</sup> The following year, KwieKulik were definitely forbidden to represent Poland abroad and had their passports confiscated due to a provocative action in the context of the exhibition *Seven Young Poles* at Malmö Konsthall.<sup>55</sup>

The duo did not stop its denunciatory campaigns, however. In 1976, KwieKulik sent a “Mail-Out” on the subject of the Paris Biennale. The Mail-Outs, carried out since 1973, consisted of letters addressed to a national and international audience in which the artists expressed their opinion on a particular issue. *Mail Out-Third World on the Vistula* reacted to a comment by Natalia LL in the magazine of the Galeria Współczesna, in which she expressed positive views on the selection process of the ninth Paris Biennale—to which she participated.<sup>56</sup> KwieKulik responded with a

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<sup>53</sup> Łukasz Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s* (Warsaw: Polski Western, 2009), 254.

<sup>54</sup> KwieKulik, Attachment to scholarship application, Part 2, 1974, PPDiU archive, cited in Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s*, 254.

<sup>55</sup> In 1975, the artists participated in the exhibition *Seven Young Poles* at Malmö Konsthall. Without the knowledge of the curator, Janusz Bogucki, they included in the catalogue a composition of two photographs with an ironic look at the art developed in the Polish People’s Republic, evoking in its title the “Visual Arts Barracks” in a scornful tone. The authorities reacted immediately by forbidding them to represent Poland abroad and withdrawing their passports. Ronduda, *Polish Art of the 70s*, 255.

<sup>56</sup> In the publication of the Galeria Współczesna from 16 January 1976, Natalia LL’s signaled that the Biennale, “organised with the perverse [sic] method (avoiding the fixed and particular hierarchies in the country) of inviting artists through correspondents, proved a roaring success”. This phrase was cited in KwieKulik’s *Mail Out-Third World on the Vistula* (1 February 1976), reproduced and translated in Łukasz Ronduda and Georg Schöllhammer, *KwieKulik* (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2013), 219.

eloquent table that disclosed the actual affinities and family ties between the Biennale’s Polish correspondents and the artists they had selected [Fig. 6]:

Selecting correspondent	Degree of kinship	Biennale participant
Wiesław Borowki director of Foksal Gallery	Artist represented by Foksal gallery	Krzysztof Wodiczko
Andrzej Lachowicz	Husband-wife	Natalia LL
Janusz Bogucki	Father-son	Michal Bogucki

In a completely irrefutable manner, the Mail-Out showed the limits of the independence of the selection system that had supplanted the national representations in the context of the Paris Biennale.<sup>57</sup>

Another critique to the correspondents system was formulated by the Romanian artist André Cadere, who had lived in Paris since 1967. In a letter to the British magazine *Studio International*, Cadere denounced the control of the International Commission over the eight Biennial.<sup>58</sup> The letter provoked the reaction of the IC member Gerard Forty, who insisted that “[g]iven that national commissioners and national sections had been abolished, this seemed the only way of making sure we spread our net wide enough, but it was not by any means our only source and information about artists reached us in many other ways”.<sup>59</sup> Forty regretted that such an “embittered and unconstructive” critique could come from “a French artist [...] almost wholly concerned with the in-fighting of French art politics and scarcely at all with what the exhibition actually contained, or what it set out to achieve”. Piqued by these insinuations, Cadere reacted with another letter, he concluded in these terms: “One remark: I am not French, I’ve lived in Paris for only a relatively short length of time. I

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<sup>57</sup> Besides the table of relations, the document also included a stamp conceived by KwieKulik, “in which the part “wie” (“knows”) was circled.” According to Ronduda and Schöllhammer, the stamp could be interpreted as “KwieKulik knows. The artists observe and know what mechanisms rule the art scene in Poland”. Ronduda and Schöllhammer, *KwieKulik*, 219.

<sup>58</sup> Letter by Cadere, *Studio International*, no. 960-961, December 1973, x.

<sup>59</sup> G.M. Forty, “Paris Biennale”, *Studio International* vol 187 no. 963, February 1974, 56.

am Roumanian, comrade Forty.<sup>60</sup> At that time, Cadere was an atypical figure within the French artistic scene. He was mostly known for his *Barres de Bois Rond* (“round bars of wood”) made of cylindrical coloured units, he transported and disposed in a wide range of places, institutional and not. His critical approach to art’s institutionalisation and his insistence on the independence of art as a basic necessity often led him to frictions or conflicts with some of its representatives.<sup>61</sup> His second letter published in *Studio International* clearly expressed, however, his refusal to be assimilated with a “French” artist angry about the Biennale’s system. Cadere recalled his origin as a way to take distance from dissenting positions that were likely to be absorbed by the system, while at the same time, he insisted ironically on the qualifier “comrade” as an indelible mark of his origins and, perhaps, the source of his particular intransigency and his total lack of attraction for the temptations of the system.

While it clearly appears from the previous examples that the system of correspondents could give rise to favouritism and preferential treatments, it should be also specified that the International Commission was also open to independent proposals. This was the case of the only Hungarian participant in 1977, Zsigmond Károlyi, had contacted himself the CI and sent his dossier.<sup>62</sup>

The exchange between Georges Boudaille and the Hungarian cultural officials regarding Károlyi’s participation sheds further light on their expectations with regard to the manifestation. Informing Géza Csorba and Livia Bíró-Patkó, respectively official of the Ministry of Culture in Budapest and head of the artistic section of the Hungarian Institute in Paris, about Károlyi’s selection, Boudaille specified that his

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<sup>60</sup> Cadere, “Comrades in art”, *Studio International* vol 187 no. 966, May 1974, 220.

<sup>61</sup> Regarding Cadere’s position, see Lily Woodruff, *Disordering the Establishment: Participatory Art and Institutional Critique in France, 1958-1981*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, upcoming 2020) and Lily Woodruff, “André Cadere’s Disorderly Conduct”, in Catherine Dossin, ed., *France and the Visual Arts since 1945: Remapping European Postwar and Contemporary Art* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018), 227-236. On his unpredictable interventions in the context of the Paris Biennale, see also Mica Gherghescu’s lecture in the context of the seminar “1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris”. <https://bdp.hypotheses.org/1910> (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Georges Boudaille to Zsigmond Károlyi, letter dated 9 June 1977. FBP MNAM-BK, ref. BDP 228. László Beke advised the artist for his participation but not formally acted as an intermediary. Phone conversation with László Beke, 17 March 2020.

participation could, if they wished, “remain unofficial”.<sup>63</sup> His words suggested the coexistence of a regime of officiality and non-officiality and its tacit acceptance by a Biennale, which, paradoxically, had sought to escape from state-connected issues.<sup>64</sup> Livia Bíró-Patkó’s answer to Boudaille clearly expressed her positive opinion on the Paris Biennale. Regretting the scarce representation of Hungarian artists, she proposed an alternative to the system of international correspondents and offered to organise study visits for members of the IC, in order “to gather personal impressions, which would obviously say more about the works than the competent—but naturally limited to a few files—proposals of the National Delegate”.<sup>65</sup>

The Paris Biennale was Szigmond Károlyi’s first international exhibition. The twenty-five years old artist had recently graduated from the Budapest Academy of Fine Arts and was working as an art history teacher in a professional school. A four-pages document translated into French sent to the Biennale offered a comprehensive view of his work since 1975, along with photographs and slides. This ensemble documented extensively Károlyi’s early practice, in particular his practical and theoretical reflection on the perception of reality, space and time, as well as his serial approach to particular motives or objects.<sup>66</sup>

Károlyi’s interests were reflected in the sophisticated environment he conceived for the Biennale. *Labyrinthe droit (Straight Labyrinth)* (1977) consisted in a room, from the two sides of which were projected two similar images (slides) of an anonymous man, walking besides a high brick wall. Two curtains of gauze hanging across the room and the double projection created an optical effect that was the result

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<sup>63</sup> Georges Boudaille to Géza Csorba and Livia Biro-Patkó, letter dated 15 March 1977. FBP INHA/ACA.

<sup>64</sup> On this respect, see also the case of Spain and the relations between the Biennale and the Francoist regime in Paula Barreiro López, “Discorde cordiale: La Biennale de Paris, l’avant-garde et le régime franquiste”, paper delivered in the context of the seminar “1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris”, Paris, INHA, 12 June 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from Livia Biro-Patkó to Georges Boudaille, 29 June 1977. FBP ACA, Rennes.

<sup>66</sup> Károlyi, Szigmond, “Catalogue-Mes oeuvres en ordre chronologique”, undated and unpublished document, FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 228. The artist’s file encloses a consistent series of documents and photographs that shed light on the complexity of Károlyi’s work and his main artistic interests.

of a specific montage, the artist described in his notes and preliminar drawings sent to the IC [Fig. 5-7 and 5.8].<sup>67</sup>

*Labyrinthe droit* operated as an experimental perceptive device through the spectator's body lost its materiality to become a "life-size projected figure". Combining images and space, associated by the artist with art and reality, the environment altered at the same time the division between reality and illusion.<sup>68</sup> For the British art historian Paul Overy, Károlyi's *Labyrinthe droit* was "one of the most impressive works in the exhibition".<sup>69</sup> Overy compared its method—projected images on surfaces—and interest for ambiguity with the installation of the British artist Tim Head, also exhibited at the Biennale.<sup>70</sup> His article in *The Times* was actually one of the few to highlight the presence of Eastern European art at the Biennale by observing that "[r]ecent Paris Biennales have paid more attention than most international exhibitions to what artists have been doing in East Europe. This year artists from Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary were particularly in evidence [...]".<sup>71</sup> Importantly, Overy's comparison of Károlyi and Head's works refuted the common idea according to which Eastern European art could only be a pale imitation of its Western counterpart.

### 1.5 Jan Mlčoch and Petr Štembera. An invisible performance

This misconception was, in fact, directly addressed by Overy: "One might be tempted to reflect cynically on conceptual and performance art in East Europe. Yet often it *is*

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<sup>67</sup> Zsigmond Károlyi, Undated typewritten document, FBP MNAM-BK, ref. BDP 228.

<sup>68</sup> Károlyi's environment was recreated in 1978 in Budapest, for his first personal exhibition at the Bercsényi Club of the Budapest Technical University and gave rise to a film. Miklós Peternák, "Mirror Line Labyrinth. Zsigmond Károlyi and the motion picture", in *Zsigmond Károlyi, Old New 1975-2015*, exh. cat. (Paks: Paksi Képtár, 2015), 40-43.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Overy, "Hurly-burly in Paris", *The Times*, 27 September 1977, 38. Paul Overy was a specialist of European Modernism in art and architecture. He showed particular interest for Eastern European art and in the 1970s and 1980s he was the author of several articles and reviews on this topic in the British daily and specialised press.

<sup>70</sup> Tim Head's installation *Displacements* (1975) consisted of "a number of "real" props—step-ladder, bucket, chair, etc, beside which are projected slides of the same objects, directly confronting and sometimes confusing image and reality." Overy, "Hurly-burly in Paris, 38.

<sup>71</sup> Overy, "Hurly-burly in Paris, 38.

done well”.<sup>72</sup> This time, his ironical words directly pointed at a condescending view that still prevailed among Western approaches to Eastern European art.

For the first time since its creation in 1959, the tenth edition of the Biennale included a special section dedicated to performance art, coordinated by the Italian art critic Tommaso Trini. Among the nineteen artists whose performances were scheduled between the 15 September and the 2 October 1977 were the Prague-based artists Jan Mlčoch and Petr Štembera, invited to participate on the recommendation of Jindřich Chaloupecký.<sup>73</sup> Both were developing at the time a practice based on artistic action, often involving a dimension of physical resistance that might in some cases require the intervention of a member of the audience. Given the ban on all gatherings by the Czechoslovak authorities, their actions took place in private or unoccupied places, in front of a very small audience.<sup>74</sup>

Curiously, despite the fact that both artists were developing their own practice individually, they were invited by the Biennale as a group and as such, were expected to present a joint performance. Early exchanges with the organisation were marked in fact by several misunderstandings, since the two artists first communicated separately with the organisation until they were recalled that they were expected to send a joint performance project. Petr Štembera insisted on the absurdity of having a shared page in the catalogue:

[...] you could see that our biographies, bibliographies, etc. are the different ones!!  
Yes, we are very familiar, we are collaboration and one another influencing, etc, but:

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<sup>72</sup> Overy, “Hurly-burly in Paris, 38.

<sup>73</sup> The other participants in the performance section were Laurie Anderson, Bruce-Alistair Barber, Jared Bark, Marc Chaimowicz, Alexander Danko, Ralston Farina, Tina Girouard, Julia Heyward, Kousai Hori, Kristina Kubisch, Bruce McLean, Jan Mlčoch, Mike Parr, Adrian Piper, Diana Rabito, Masako Shibata, The Ting, Dragoljub Raša Todosijević and Ulay. “Calendrier des performances”, *Journal de la Biennale*, 1977, 7.

<sup>74</sup> For a comprehensive contextualization and analysis of the work of Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch, see Pavlina Morganová, *Czech Action Art. Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art behind the Iron Curtain* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2014); on Štembera, also Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology Under Socialism*. Budapest: Central European University, 2015.

NEVER WE WERE WORKING TOGETHER AS A GROUPE. Each Mlčoch's piece in his own piece, as well as each of mine.<sup>75</sup>

Since the Czechoslovak authorities denied Štembera the permission to go to Paris, the joint performance was eventually cancelled. The reasons for this interdiction to Štembera and, on the contrary, Mlčoch's authorisation to travel remain unclear and reflect the randomness of official decisions on foreign travel.<sup>76</sup>

Scheduled on September 30 and October 2, 1977, Jan Mlčoch's performance *Wire* went almost unnoticed. If Paul Overy mentioned it—as a joint performance by Mlčoch and Štembera—, he also immediately specified that he had not been able to see it.<sup>77</sup> The explicative scheme Mlčoch previously sent to the organisers described an action distributed in two rooms, like in *30 Minutes*.<sup>78</sup> [Fig. 5.9] In room number one, the artist was sitting on a chair, a wire fastened to his neck while a video camera retransmitted his image live in a second room, open to the public and crossed by the same wire. The action Mlčoch actually carried out at the tenth Biennale, renamed *Paris 1977* was a bit different:

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France, 30 September 1977

At 1:30 pm, in a partitioned exhibition hall at the museum, I went into the shot of a camera which transmitted the image to the part of the hall where the public was sitting. A second camera was fixed on the viewers via a monitor in my part of the hall. I lay down on the floor, put a bag with all my personal belongings under my head. I cut open my left hand with a razor blade, I settled down comfortably and let blood pour out of my hand.

At 2:30 pm I collected my things together and left by a side exit without heeding the camera or the monitor. I didn't encounter anyone. No visual recording was made of this action.

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<sup>75</sup> Petr Štembera to Caroline Bissière, letter dated 2 April 1977, FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 252. The participants to the Biennale were given a double page in the catalogue, which had to follow a standard format, one side for the biography, bibliography and a possible critical text, the other side for images.

<sup>76</sup> For more details on the circumstances of Štembera and Mlčoch's participation to the Biennale, see Debeusscher, "Traveling images and words: Czech action art through the lens of exhibitions and art criticism in Western Europe".

<sup>77</sup> Overy, "Hurly-burly in Paris", 38.

<sup>78</sup> Jan Mlčoch, outline for *Wire* performance, 1977, FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 252.



Since the action was not documented, Mlčoch used a general view of the Palais de Tokyo with its esplanade to document the action, a gesture through which he also insisted on his having been “there” (at the Biennale and in Paris) rather than on the action he realised. [Fig. 5.10] On the other hand, if we believe Mlčoch’s later assessment, the action itself did not fulfill his expectations, since he simply realised during the process “that the blood transmitted to a black and white screen [didn’t] interest anyone—the monitors were black and white back in those days”.<sup>79</sup> While he had decided to mediate the audience’s reception of his action through the technology of live video broadcast, this choice turned out to be a deceptive result for the artist and, probably, for the audience as well.

This sensation of failure or semi-failure was also due to the attempt to transpose the intimate format of the artist’s actions usually reserved to a small and friendly audience into the context of an international exhibition with a considerable offer and an audience expecting more impressive actions. Indeed, nothing could be further from *Wire/Paris 1977* than *Relation in Movement* (1977), the spectacular 16-hours performance realised on the esplanade between the Musée d’Art Moderne et the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris by Ulay (invited to the Biennale) and his partner and invited guest for this occasion, Marina Abramović. The action consisting of Ulay driving a truck in circles while Abramović was counting the rounds with a megaphone until one of the parties was exhausted—the vehicle succumbed first, after 16 hours. The important media coverage received was certainly due to the action’s high visibility within the physical space of the Biennial, but also to its spectacular and, perhaps also, glamorous nature.

In the context of international exhibitions more than elsewhere, conditions of visibility or invisibility clearly depended on artists strategic ability to “adapt” to this context—and, just as importantly, on their willingness to do so. In this light, Mlčoch’s and Štembera’s decision to stop performing at the end of the decade appear as

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<sup>79</sup> Jan Mlčoch, email to the author, 15 November 2017.

acknowledgement of the limitations of their own practice in an international context and their unwillingness to play the game of institutionalisation.<sup>80</sup>

## **2. Scanning the Biennale's discourse**

### **2.1 Industrialized vs third world countries**

Paul Overy's previously cited comment in *The Times* seemed to imply that Eastern European art was still often seen as nothing more than a poor copy or an irrelevant attempt to fit the canon of Western avant-garde art.<sup>81</sup> These stereotypes, at least, were not reflected in the statements emitted by the Biennale between 1973 and 1977—starting with Georges Boudaille's introductory essays in the catalogues. What kind of vision of socialist Eastern or Central Europe and, by extension, of artistic practices from this region appeared and was diffused in the context of the three centralised Biennales, then?

References to the region were relatively few, but telling enough. The most widespread term used by the IC in its meetings or in the catalogues was “Eastern Europe” and, less frequently, “socialist countries”, while Central Europe was absent from the literature around the Biennale. While this may be interpreted as a consequence of the Biennale's rejection of the national paradigm, it also reflected the influence of Cold War geopolitics on the configuration of a European space strongly marked by the East-West dichotomy. However, this polarised vision did not actually correspond to a simple partition between a capitalist Western and a socialist East, but operated instead a socio-economic divide between, on one side, industrialized countries and, on the other, developing or Third World countries. In fact, what characterized the Paris Biennale between 1973 and 1977 was the tension between, on the one hand, the conviction that avant-garde art could emerge only under advanced socio-economic conditions and, on the other, the desire to open the Biennale to other cultural geographies that do not share the same field of reference—identified, in this case, with the Third World.

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<sup>80</sup> Susanne Neuburger and Hedwig Saxenhuber, *Kurze Karrieren / Short Careers* (Wien: Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Overy, “Hurly-burly in Paris”, 38.

In his programmatic text “Ce qu’il faut savoir”, Georges Boudaille affirmed: “A realistic analysis of the artistic situation in the world forces us to recognise that the monopoly of research is a privilege of artists working in countries at an advanced stage of economic development”.<sup>82</sup> This statement automatically excluded a significant number of artists whose living and working conditions did not meet the established criteria. According to this reading, socialist Eastern Europe was immediately assimilated to the group of industrialized countries. The same idea appeared again in 1975, in relation to what Boudaille identified as creativity’s two main poles: “concept” (art as idea) and “primary structure” (art as form). According to him, the “current creative innovations” were developed “between these two opposites” and those who occupied this space were “young artists from the world’s main industrial countries, including most of the socialist states”.<sup>83</sup> More than their ideological background, it was thus the countries’ economic conditions and level of development that directly influenced art’s level of innovation, in other words, its avant-gardist character. If we follow this logic, no distinction could be drawn between artistic practices from capitalist and socialist societies. A little further on, the general delegate referred to the ongoing “phenomenon of internationalization” of art common “to all artists in the industrialized countries”. In contrast, artists from Third World countries whose approach was, according to Boudaille, connected to “traditional or national modes of expression” risked to remain isolated. This was well shown in fact by the “low representation of Latin American, African and Indian artists” in the Biennale.<sup>84</sup>

The conditions of inclusion of artists from the Third World were particularly debated within the IC. While, on the one hand, its members aspired to a greater representation of artists from these countries—in particular, they even suggested at

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<sup>82</sup> “Une analyse réaliste de la situation artistique dans le monde nous oblige à reconnaître que le monopole de la recherche est le privilège des artistes qui travaillent dans les pays parvenus à un state de développement économique avancé”. Boudaille, “Ce qu’il faut savoir”, unpaginated.

<sup>83</sup> Georges Boudaille, “Une Biennale tournée vers l’avenir/A forward-looking Biennale”, *9<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: n.p., 1975), unpaginated. From 1975 on, the essays in the catalogue of the Biennale were published in French and in English (except for the texts by Johannes Gachnang and Victoria Combalia in 1977, respectively published in original German and Spanish in addition to their French version).

<sup>84</sup> Boudaille, “Une Biennale tournée vers l’avenir/A forward-looking Biennale”, unpaginated.

some point to organise thematic events (“African, South American weeks, etc.”)—they also deplored the fact that artistic proposals hardly “fit into the framework” of the exhibition or did “not meet the criteria used to judge other artists”.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, some of the solutions contemplated during the Commission’s internal meetings were far from eliminating binary views: fortunately, proposals like creating “an information section that would report on a phenomenon that exists but is unrelated to the art of the industrialized countries” were eventually rejected precisely because they encouraged segregation.<sup>86</sup>

Two years later, in 1977, Georges Boudaille still insisted on the correlation between the international avant-garde art and a certain level of socio-economic development, he went so far as to define as liberalism: “Nowadays, the sometimes disconcerting changes in art are a common phenomenon in all the countries which have reached the technological era in a liberal economic system. But there are whole areas in the world which escape this procedure or do not wish to accept it, for various reasons”.<sup>87</sup> Reporting part of Boudaille’s comment in a review on the tenth Biennale, the painter and member of the group DDP Raymond Perrot, also a member of the French Communist Party, noted ironically that while “a socialist wind” had blown over the tenth Biennial, it was unfortunately not the same for its organisers. In particular, the artist deplored the exaltation of individuality and the transformation of the “practices of knowledge into subjectivism” that had led to the abandonment of collective work.<sup>88</sup>

Looking at the centralized Biennial and its abolition of national selections, Jean-Marc Poinot remarked in 1973 that if, on the one hand, “contemporary culture” followed a “proper logic”, and therefore did not require any interpretive apparatus, works from

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<sup>85</sup> Report of the meeting of the International Commission, 1 to 5 October 1974, 2, FBP INHA/ACA.

<sup>86</sup> Report of the meeting of the International Commission, 1 to 5 October 1974, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Georges Boudaille, “Préface/Préface”, *10<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat. Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1977, 13-16 (here 14)

<sup>88</sup> Raymond Perrot, “Un vent socialiste”, *Les Cahiers de la peinture* no. 56, October 1977, 6-7.

“certain countries” could be “devalued” if they were presented “out of context”.<sup>89</sup> His statement implied a clear division between, on the one hand, art from developing or Third World countries that called for a contextualised approach and, on the other hand, avant-garde art from industrialized countries that was self-sufficient. According to Poinot, their cohabitation in the same exhibition space could become a source of conflict and, above all, “did not serve” (“ne rend pas service”) the first one, since this mode of presentation was deprived of contextual elements that would permit to understand it. Poinot also observed that the absence of countries that had been so far present at the Biennale proved “that there can be several cultural ensembles in the world and that the notion of “universal” art—especially since it is avant-garde—had a delicious hint of colonialism”.<sup>90</sup> Abandoning this notion of universal art, however, did not imply a flattening of the criteria of judgment or a deep questioning of their validity; it was rather a matter of maintaining the avant-garde as always, while understanding that “other” artistic practices could exist, as far as they belonged to a proper context that justified them—with identitarian, cultural, historical and economic reasons. Following this logic, including artistic productions unsuitable to the modernist canon in an international exhibition of avant-garde art would have represented a colonial attitude, and it was then better to simply eliminate them from the selection: “What the few ousted artists lose in prestige, they gain, it seems to me, in respect”, Poinot believed.

Regarding western and non-western art, a series of remarks from the art critic Jean Clair, also director of the magazine *Chroniques de l'Art Vivant*, were particularly revealing. Referring also to the absence of a certain number of countries in the eight Biennale, the critic considered that what remained was an “aligned art”, or an “art of the aligned countries” produced and appreciated “between people [...] speaking the same language and knowing what it is all about when it is a question, as here, of the

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<sup>89</sup> Jean-Marc Poinot, “Enquête à la Biennale de Paris”, *Chroniques de l'Art Vivant* no. 43, October 1973, 7.

<sup>90</sup> “C’est à mon avis reconnaître qu’il peut exister plusieurs ensembles culturels dans le monde et que la notion d’art “universel”—et ce d’autant plus qu’il s’agit d’avant-garde—avait un délicieux relent de colonialisme”. Poinot, “Enquête à la Biennale de Paris”, 7.

avant-garde”.<sup>91</sup> Clair’s idea of artistic alignment included capitalist countries and socialist countries. His polemical article, ironically entitled “The coming of the barbarians” (“L’entrée des barbares”) was indeed one of the few to refer to geopolitical events contemporaneous to the Biennale, such as the Conference of Non-Aligned countries in Algiers held in August 1973. Recalling the highly asymmetrical character of the system of national representations applied in the Biennale’s previous editions, Clair denounced the even more exclusionary principle of the centralised Biennial, whose motto was, in his words, “we stay among ourselves”. He observed that the Biennale hadn’t hesitated to eliminate “those countries, precisely, that in other years it was so difficult to hide, I mean to “squeeze in”: in particular, the countries of the third world and the USSR”.<sup>92</sup> The eviction of those Jean Clair designated as the “true” barbarians was accompanied by a return to origins or primitivism by artists from post-industrial societies, who had become fond of “robinsonades”. This new attitude of regression went so far as to “mimic” (the term used by Clair in French is “singer”, imitate like a monkey) the “societies without history”—an expression he repeated several times—and adopt ethnologising art forms. Such forms, noted Clair, were particularly visible since Third World representatives were absent from the Biennale: “one can primitivise at ease, without the risk of being confronted with a Senegalese who is delighted to modernize himself at will”.<sup>93</sup>

Beyond its polemical tone and despite the author’s disturbing vision of “peoples without history” permeated of paternalism and colonial patterns, Clair’s article highlighted the contradictions at the very heart of the project of the centralised Biennial: on the one hand, it promoted an idea of avant-garde art inherited from a Euro-American centered system of thought, while on the other, it aspired to show itself as a truly international organisation, keen to host all the cultures and regions. If the issue of the Biennale’s growing attention to individualism, combined with its

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<sup>91</sup> “[...] on reste entre nous. Sans gêne, donc. Entre gens [...] parlant le même langage et sachant de quoi il s’agit quand il est question, comme ici, d’avant-garde.” Jean Clair, “L’entrée des barbares”, *Chroniques de l’Art Vivant* no. 43, October 1973, 3-6 (here 4).

<sup>92</sup> “[...] ces pays, justement, que les autres années on avait tant de mal à cacher, je veux dire à “caser”: en particulier, les pays du tiers-monde et l’URSS.” Clair, “L’entrée des barbares”, 3.

<sup>93</sup> “[...] on peut primitiviser à l’aise, sans risquer de se voir confronté à un Sénégalais ravi, lui, de se moderniser à l’envi”. Clair, “L’entrée des barbares”, 5.

internationalism and new modalities of inclusion of non-Western practices seem to be far from the issue of the participation of Central European artists, it is important insofar as it highlights their own position and that of artists from socialist Europe.

## **2.2 Eastern European art in the Biennale's narrative**

Considering the above-mentioned statements that established a clear distinction in function of the socio-economic conditions in which artistic practices were carried out (avant-garde art from industrialised countries and “traditional”, “handicraft” practices from developing countries), what place did contributions from socialist Eastern Europe occupy in this picture?

We have seen that in the Biennale's main narrative, socialist countries were situated on the same level as capitalist industrialized countries. As a consequence, the avant-garde status of artworks from the region was not questioned. As the comments by Jean-Marc Poinot and Jean Clair implied, the real “others” in the context of the Biennale were artists from Third World countries whose integration was considered problematic because they did not share the same cultural and aesthetic references as their pairs from industrialized countries. Nevertheless, the often-approximate nature of the information about the countries Eastern Europe, as well as the tendency to put all its representatives under a unique simplified label prompts us to establish some distinctions. On this respect, the notion of “close Other”–or “not-quite-other”–seems to be appropriate. For Piotr Piotrowski, the “close Other” in modern culture was situated “on the periphery of European culture, outside the center but still within the same cultural frame of reference”. He distinguished this position–assimilated with that of Eastern Europeans–from that of a “real Other”, “determined not by the strategy of marginalization, but of colonization”.<sup>94</sup> This implied not only a difference of position between the “close Other” and the “real other”–Piotrowski referred to an Asian subject in this particular case–, but also a shared approach between Eastern and Western Europeans towards the “real Other”:

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<sup>94</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History”, in *Umeni/Art* no. 5, 2008, 378-383. Piotrowski himself refers to Bojana Pejić's first use of the term “close other”, in reference to Boris Groys.

The identity of the “real Other” develops in the tension between its own, local tradition and the metropolis that colonizes the area. This difference has consequences for how the respective Others regard one another. The Eastern European shares with the Western European an “orientalizing” approach to the “real Other,” taking into consideration, however, a range of “difference.” The Asian, by contrast, no matter from which part of Asia he or she comes, regards Europe as a fairly small and homogeneous continent. To the Asian, the culture of Germany, France, Hungary and Poland is all European culture, with a different degree of potential for expansion. What is more, the Hungarian and the Pole want to perceive themselves as Europeans and their art as European. They wanted it particularly badly under the communist rule; their longing was a psychological instrument of resistance against the attempts of the Soviet Union to impose its model of culture on Hungary and Poland. Asian cultures show no common desire to refer to a single Asian core. In a sense it is even the reverse: they all have a sense of far-reaching local differences, including differences in the reception of “Euramerican” modernity.<sup>95</sup>

Piotrowski’s triangular analysis involving three geocultural areas—Western Europe, Eastern Europe and Asia—shows the importance of combining different approaches and scales when dealing with regional and transregional studies. While cultural, social and political specificity requires to pay attention to local contexts and their realities, it is also necessary to take into account not only the image that a society or a community has of itself, but also the image it projects on others. In that sense, Piotrowski’s reference to Eastern European orientalist views on other cultures is particularly valuable as it contributes to put the idea of Eastern European unilateral victimisation into perspective, placing its own relations and preconceptions into a wider context.

In an interview by Catherine Millet about the eighth Biennale, Georges Boudaille observed that most artists presented “a rather personal, individualized world”. In contrast with this generalized phenomenon, however, he identified “works with a social or political content” coming “mainly from Eastern Europe, South America and Spain, countries where these problems are particularly crucial”.<sup>96</sup> Without naming

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<sup>95</sup> Piotrowski, “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History”, 380.

<sup>96</sup> “Les œuvres à contenu social ou politique viennent surtout des pays de l’Est, d’Amérique du Sud, d’Espagne, des pays où ces problèmes se posent de façon particulièrement cruciale.” Catherine Millet, “La 8<sup>ème</sup> biennale de Paris, un entretien avec Georges Boudaille”, *artpress* no. 6, September-October 1973, 4-5.



explicitly military dictatorships in South America, Francoism in Spain and Soviet-type socialism in Eastern Europe—Boudaille suggested a close correspondence between artistic practices in these countries or regions and the political violence exercised by their incumbent leaders.

According to Boudaille's text in the Biennale's catalogue, the spatial distribution of the works in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris reflected these ideas, with a display designed by Jean-Christophe Amman that highlighted three main trends: processual art, pictorial works and those showing "social or political commitment".<sup>97</sup> Here again, the latter, coming from "Latin America, Spain and socialist countries"—"curiously", Georges Boudaille observed—were installed in the Museum's access areas.<sup>98</sup> The Biennale's display thus reflected some configurations marked by Cold War geopolitics, with some ensembles characterised by their origins, i.e. regions known for not having the same standards of politics and democracy as Western Europe or North America. We can wonder whether this spatial distribution, which seemed to relegate artists from countries with a system different from that of Western liberal democracies to a less prestigious space of circulation within the museum, resulted from a classification of the participants according to their origins—East and South on one side, West and North on the other—, or answered instead to the material properties—and, perhaps, the lesser commercial value...—of those "political" works, often of conceptual and bidimensional type and as such, suitable for narrower spaces.<sup>99</sup>

The display and attribution of spaces in the context of international exhibitions is a fascinating topic indeed, since it often reflected the organisers' mindset and the

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<sup>97</sup> Boudaille, "Ce qu'il faut savoir", unpaginated.

<sup>98</sup> "Dans les accès du Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, "seront accrochées des œuvres qui révèlent un engagement social ou politique et qui, curieusement, nous viennent d'Amérique latine, d'Espagne et de pays socialistes." Boudaille, "Ce qu'il faut savoir", unpaginated.

<sup>99</sup> Regarding the issue of spatial distribution, Paula Barreiro López has highlighted how the political work of the Spanish Group de Treball, exhibited in a space of circulation of the museum in 1975, was the object of a protest letter from a visitor scandalised to find "a billboard covered with anti-Franco posters". This misunderstanding was due to the fact that the work was not signed by the collective, for fear of reprisals from the regime, which is why it did not publish any images in the catalogue either. Barreiro López, "Discorde cordiale: La Biennale de Paris, l'avant-garde et le régime franquiste".

power relations and pressures visual and spatial arrangement could give rise to.<sup>100</sup> In the case of the three editions of the Paris Biennale we are concerned with, however, the lack of documentation and photographic records on the exhibitions display does not allow us to approach this topic in depth.

A little further on in the above-mentioned interview with Georges Boudaille, Catherine Millet observed that artists in Western Europe and the United States were returning to painting. “On the other hand”, she continued, “the works sent by the Eastern European countries that you have just mentioned [she referred to the works with social and political contents evoked by Boudaille] reach us mostly under the unconventional form of events, happenings, gestures...”<sup>101</sup> Following her, the general delegate distinguished the position of an artist in a capitalist society, where he was assured of finding an audience and being able to sell his work, from his condition in a socialist country, where he knew that “in any case his work will not be sold, that he cannot expect any official purchase, that there can be no purchase from private individuals”. Faced with this reality, the artist had to “make his thoughts known in a different way”, the most efficient way being “to organize a show, a happening”.<sup>102</sup> Boudaille thus suggested that the dematerialised nature of art in socialist countries was a direct consequence of the incapacity of having it inserted into a commercial or institutional circuit—proposing a reversed version of art’s dematerialisation in Western capitalist contexts, whose authors claimed, on the contrary, their critical distance from commercial and institutional reappropriation. In Boudaille’s view, actions in the

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<sup>100</sup> In the case of the Ljubljana International Biennial of Graphic Arts, launched in 1955, Bojana Piškur, and Teja Mehrar have recalled that works from the Third World countries were generally placed in the basement of the Museum, less prestigious than the rooms situated on the first floor. Bojana Piškur, and Teja Mehrar, “Third World: Prints from the Non-Aligned Countries at the International Biennial Exhibitions of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana between 1961 and 1991”, in Tamara Soban, ed., *Southern constellations: The poetics of the non-aligned*, exh. cat. (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 2019), 173.

<sup>101</sup> “En revanche, les œuvres envoyées par les pays de l’Est que vous venez de citer nous parviennent surtout sous des formes non conventionnelles d’événements, de happenings, de gestes...” Millet, “La 8<sup>ème</sup> biennale de Paris, un entretien avec Georges Boudaille”, 5.

<sup>102</sup> “Dans une société capitaliste, l’artiste –si farfelue qu’apparaisse son œuvre – trouvera toujours un public et aura une chance de vendre, d’être diffusé. En pays socialiste, l’artiste d’avant-garde sait que de toute façon son œuvre ne sera pas vendue, qu’il ne peut espérer d’achat officiel, qu’il ne peut y avoir d’achat de particuliers. Alors il cherche à faire connaître autrement sa pensée.” Millet, “La 8<sup>ème</sup> biennale de Paris, un entretien avec Georges Boudaille”, 5.

context of Eastern European societies showed “a sense of unease, that of the artist, especially of the young artist, in a society where he cannot find an audience”.<sup>103</sup>

A few months later, László Beke reported this exchange between Georges Boudaille and Catherine Millet in his review of the eighth Biennale, published in the Hungarian magazine *Művészet (Art)*. Reacting to their insistence on the political character of Eastern European art, and the alleged recurrence of actions and happenings, he observed:

The article in *artpress* was published in June 1973, which perhaps explains why the Biennale did not quite provide the same impression. While the Spanish works were the strength of the exhibition (as shown by Georg Grosz's paintings from Equipo Crónica and Alberto Corazón's sociographic documentation), five of the Eastern Europeans presented environments, two presented paintings and conceptual art—thus the same forms as their Western counterparts—and there was only one artist who presented photographs of (non-political) actions.<sup>104</sup>

In fact, neither the notion of politically and socially engaged art, nor that of action art were entirely applicable to the production of the thirteen artists from Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania selected for the eighth Biennale. On the contrary, the works of Zorka Ságlová, Milan Knížák, Jana Želibská, Druga Grupa, Anonymous Artists (Artyści Anonimowi), Tamás Szentjóby, György Jovánovics, Péter Legénydy, Guyla Pauer, Ana Lupas, Eugen Tăutu, Mircea Spătaru, Șerban Epure, some of them specially conceived for the occasion, reflected the large diversity of practices carried out in socialist Europe. They deployed a wide variety of techniques, materials and expressions: installations or environments made up of objects, sculptures, drawings and paintings, conceptual pieces and documented actions.

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<sup>103</sup> “Les actions trahissent un malaise, celui de l'artiste, du jeune artiste en particulier, dans une société où il ne trouve pas son public.” Millet, “La 8<sup>ème</sup> biennale de Paris, un entretien avec Georges Boudaille”, 5.

<sup>104</sup> “Az art press 1973/6. számában közzétett interjú még júliusban készült, talán ennek tudható be, hogy a biennálé nem egészen ezt a képet nyújtotta. Igaz ugyan, hogy a spanyol anyag a kiállítás erőssége volt (az Equipo Cronica aktualizált Georg Grosz-festményei és Alberto Corazon szociográfiai dokumentációja), azonban a kelet-európaiak közül ötven menteket mutattak be, ketten festészeti problémákat, egy művész koncepciót - tehát ugyanolyan formákat, mint nyugati kollégáik - és mindössze egy művész akadt, aki (nem politikai jellegű) akciófotókkal szerepelt.” László Beke, “Fiatalkor Biennáléja Párizsban” (“Paris Youth Biennial”), *Művészet*, 1974/4, 41-42. My translation.

We will now examine a selection of works and artists' approaches, in order to confirm Beke's appreciation on the heterogeneous character of the selection, and challenge the idea of an antagonistic art, purely opposed to the ideological system in which it emerged.

Contrary to what Boudaille affirmed in the interview, the only "live performance" was realised by Druga Grupa ("Second Group" in Polish). Formed in 1966 in Krakow by Lesław Janicki, Waław Janicki and Jacek Maria Stokkłosa, the group was involved in the theatre company Cricot 2, directed by Tadeusz Kantor. Their action *Garantie sur 20 à 35* carried out in Paris proposed a singular reflection on the age limit imposed by the Biennale and on the idea of accumulation of experiences and goods against all eventualities (a "guarantee"):

[...] we had collected resources sufficient for reaching a ripe old age, reflecting a natural habit of old people who tend to save all kinds of things for an undetermined future. That was our guarantee. We put several tons of food in boxes brought from Poland on display.

Out of sheer contrariness, we appeared at the Youth Biennale as elderly people. This was possible thanks to professional makeup artists who worked for the film industry. The makeup was so convincing that the French minister of culture, who visited our display, showed due reverence to the elderly versions of us. Once again, our work failed to encompass typically artistic products; instead, we utilized found objects and ourselves—our specific sense of humour, irony and wit.<sup>105</sup>

The intervention within the framework of the biennial thus sought to establish a kind of fictitious transgenerational dialogue, convoking the "old" artists from the future to convey a surprising message to young people, insisting on the acquisition of material and immaterial goods in anticipation of the future. [Fig. 5.11] The notion of "guarantee" could, moreover, resonate with the many conditions—artistic, economical, administrative—to be fulfilled on both the Polish and French sides before being able to participate in the Biennial.

The second group from Poland selected for the Biennale was Anonymous Artists. Both students at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts, Roman Siwulak and Andrzej

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<sup>105</sup> Druga Grupa, statement in occasion of their presentation "Call !", Cricoteka, Krakow, 2015. <https://www.cricoteka.pl/pl/druga-grupa-call/> (Accessed April 2020).

Welmiński had adopted this name in the early 1970s to designate their joint works and escape the surveillance of professors at the art high school they frequented.<sup>106</sup> Their encounter with the theatre director Tadeusz Kantor in 1970 proved to be decisive and they joined the Cricot 2 Theatre under his direction. The six installations planned for the Paris Biennale reflected the duo's interest in objects and the narrative dimension produced by materials and their arrangement. They combined architectural elements (a door, stairs) or everyday objects (a cupboard, a doormat) with "poor" materials (tar, dirty water, black soap), which, for the artists, carried a metaphorical or symbolic charge. These elements altered the meaning of the main object and gave the scene an uncanny tone. All the titles of the works (*Behind the wardrobe*, *Behind the Door*, *Under the table*, *Under the door-mat*, *Behind the screen*, *Under the stairs*) suggested the presence of an unidentified, mysterious element emerging from behind or underneath these familiar elements.

In *Behind the wardrobe*, we see a massive wooden cupboard, placed against the wall while a black liquid–tar–was spread on the floor. [Fig. 5.12] An elongated metal element, resembling the end of a cane or rifle, protruded from behind the wardrobe. *Behind the door* was based on the same principle. An old wooden door opened into a dark space in the background to the right of the picture. Behind the door was a vertical parallelepiped on the floor that looked like a box. The description signaled another element, water spilled on the floor around the door. For the artists,

All these installations were connected by the idea of negation of exhibiting as exhibition, exploration of unofficial regions, changing the condition of the viewer from the looker to the peeper, voyeur; the use of poor materials (tar, water, gray soap), however burdened with metaphorical or even symbolic meanings and a reference to Schulz's poetics of dark nooks and corners, mouse holes, rotten empty spaces under the floor and chimney flues.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Lech Stangret, "The painter's condition", *Roman Siwulak. Pomimo obrazu*, cat. exp. (Warsaw, Foksal Gallery, 2009), 4.

<sup>107</sup> Andrzej Welmiński, email to the author, 27 February 2020. See also the artist's biography: <https://www.welminski.pl/en/biography/biography-andrzej-welminski> (Accessed March 2020).

These awkward scenes in which “poor” objects seemed to have a life of their own and produce unexpected secretions or excrescences were inspired in fact by Polish writer, painter and illustrator Bruno Schulz, and also resonated with the visual universe of Kantor’s theatre.

A careful observation of the images of *Behind the wardrobe* and *Behind the door* reveals that they were photomontages or collages. The tar puddle in one of the images was not real but hand-painted on the image, and the wall forming the background of the photograph had also been covered with a thin layer of paint, unifying the background. These images were in fact designed for their publication in the catalogue and functioned as a preparatory project, anticipating the realization of the three-dimensional pieces in the exhibition. These, however, did not see the light of day. The Department of Fine Arts of the Polish Ministry of Culture refused financial support to the Anonymous Artists for the transport and insurance of the works, citing a “lack of funds”.<sup>108</sup> “The matter was sealed, recalled Andrzej Welmiński, in those days there was no other way. At that time, we did not have the funds to cover such costs”. Due to a lack of personal resources to send the works or to travel to Paris, the Anonymous Artists were forced to cancel their participation in the Biennale, leaving the only trace of their participation in the catalogue.<sup>109</sup> As we can see, the presence of artists in the catalogue was far from certifying their real participation or the presence of the reproduced artworks at the Biennale.

If the Hungarian artist Tamás Szentjóby didn’t attend the Biennale, it was not for economic reasons but because he was not authorised to travel out of Hungary. He nevertheless sent a few works and proposed to reactivate a new version of his *Portable Trench for Three Persons*, with the support of the Biennale’s team. **[Fig. 5.13]** The first version of Szentjóby's *Portable Trench* dated back to 1969 and alluded

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<sup>108</sup> The answer from Mieczysław Ptaśnik, Director of the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Culture, was the following: “In response to the gentlemen’s letter regarding participation in the International Biennale of Young Artists in Paris - the Department of Fine Arts kindly informs that they do not see the possibility of ensuring gentlemen participation in this event due to lack of funds”. Andrzej Welmiński, email to the author, 27 February 2020.

<sup>109</sup> The installations were finally produced in 1976, as part of the exhibition “Behind the Cupboard” (“Za szafą”) at the Foksal Gallery. They were exhibited this time under the artists own names and not as a duo, and presented again in 1979 in Rome in the context of the exhibition “Polish avantgarde 1910-1978” (“L’avanguardia polacca 1910-1978”) organised by Ryszard Stanisławski at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni (later at the Teatro del Falcone in Genoa and Ca’ Pesaro in Venice).

to the intervention of Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia. This ready-made sculpture made of sulphur-impregnated cloths tended over a wooden structure looked more like a stretcher than a trench. Despite its political connotation, the work reflected what the artist later described as “Third Method”: rather than dealing with any type of subject “in a correspondingly contradictory way, as the conventional Second Method” does”, the Third Method did it “in a complementarily mutating way: “acting is striking””.<sup>110</sup> Such method resisted any unambiguous and ideological interpretation, operating rather by deformation and reverberation. In other words, while for Szentjóby the First Method consisted in going with the flow (he uses the word “drifting”) and letting oneself be carried along by events—which was synonymous of collaborating with the system in place—, and the “competitive” Second Method sought opposition and confrontation in the tradition of “poster-like political meaning”, the “Third Method” operated through absurdity and negation. As Szentjóby recalled, it was inspired in non-violent actions emanating from the civil society to interfere with military and official actions, as a sort of sabotage. Referring to the repression of the Prague Spring, he explained:

Although seventy-two Czech and Slovak civilians were killed and hundreds were wounded by the armies of the “friendly, socialist countries” during the invasion, the people did not resist with “second method” weapons, but invented many “third type methods” for disrupting the military actions: like changing the signposts to disorient the troops, or switching the street-names and house-numbers in order to block the arrests, etc. When a military decree prohibited the people from listening to the radio, a recipe was invented, and since it did not request talent, skill, knowledge, mastership, virtuosity, etc., anybody could make it in the sense of fluxus, many people realized it: “listen to a newspaper-covered brick on the street!” So, the soldiers confiscated thousands of this non-art-art pieces all around the country.<sup>111</sup>

One of Szentjóby’s works from that time consisted precisely in declining this popular object of common knowledge into a series of sulphur-covered bricks he called

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<sup>110</sup> Interview with Tamás Szentjóby, in Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, eds., *Revolution I love you: 1968 in art, politics and philosophy*, (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2008), 160-164.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Tamás Szentjóby, 163.

*Czechoslovak radio 1968* (1968-69), as a form of “non-art-art for and by all”. The *Portable Trench for Three Persons* followed the same logics of montage and interbreeding. Szentjóby, like many artists of his generation, believed deeply in the possibility opened up by the Prague Spring. More than just a reform of the outdated socialist system, he saw it as a step towards “Direct Democracy, as it was planned by the anarchists, autonomes, and for a while the Leninist soviets”.<sup>112</sup> One can see in the objects produced in the late 1960s, which blurred the lines between the artwork, the functional object and the unidentified artifact, this attempt to preserve an autonomy and the contestation of any attribution of a “utility”, be it ideological or functional.

### **2.3 Jana Želibská’s monumental feminine and feminist project**

I would like to dwell now on the participation of the Slovak artist Jana Želibská and in particular on the project she initially conceived for the Biennale and could not carry on for practical reasons to show how, once again, languages and concerns shared with artists from the international scene were mixed with issues and methods related to the artist’s space of production. While Jana Želibská’s work has often been associated with European pop art and nouveau réalisme, I will seek to highlight here other aspects of her proposal for the Biennale related to site-specificity on the one hand, and to the Slovak context of production on the other, in order to highlight the transnational and transdisciplinary dimension of her activity.

Želibská’s work on view at the eight Biennale was the environment *Le goût de paradis* (*The Taste of Paradise*). In a letter to Georges Boudaille, she described the work as follows:

A tree (it is a tree of Temptation) grows in the middle of the square grass (dimension 2x2m) strewn with flowers; this tree is planted in the sky (this sky is painted on the canvas which is suspended from the ceiling - the same dimensions as the lawn). On this tree, which ends in the sky, grows a single apple. In the corner of the grass there are small boxes of fruit (which can easily be found in shops; this represents the consumer society). The boxes will be filled with apples. Visitors can take them. The sun shines through the clouds - it is a projector suspended above the canvas. The

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<sup>112</sup> Interview with Tamás Szentjóby, 163.



music of paradise - namely the singing of birds - will accompany this work. Around the tree birds are flying away. Everything will be in original natural colours.<sup>113</sup>

Želibská insisted that it should be possible to walk around the work, since visitors were expected to stop by and experience the environment through their senses. Its artisanal and handmade design pointed to the materiality of a theatre set created with simple and perishable materials [Fig. 5.14]. In fact, since the artist hadn't been authorised to participate in the exhibition, the installation was unofficially transported abroad and listed as a theatre backstage in the customs declaration".<sup>114</sup>

The work of Jana Želibská, especially her production of the 1960s, had been associated with pop art and nouveau réalisme, certainly in part because of Pierre Restany's interest in her work. *Le goût de paradis* disclosed however a very personal interpretation of this approach, seeking to offer a total experience to the viewer and activate his or her participation by the means of artificial and real elements. Želibská's reference to consumer society and "temptation"—the piece was initially titled "L'arbre de la tentation" ("The tree of temptation")—suggested a tension between the audience's pleasure while experiencing this small piece of landscape in a visual, auditive and olfactive way, and the temptation to take a piece of fruit and experience "the taste of paradise", provoking at the same time an alteration of this idyllic vision. No reference to religion or the myth of the fall of the human species in her work though: Želibská's hedonistic proposal called for an exploration of the senses, but also of ideas, without restraint or repression. For Pierre Restany, the temptation was above all that of knowledge:

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<sup>113</sup> "Un arbre (c'est un arbre de Tentation) pousse au milieu de la pelouse carrée (dimension 2x2m) jonchée de fleurs ; cet arbre s'implante dans le ciel (ce ciel est peint sur la toile qui est suspendue au plafond- aux mêmes dimensions que la pelouse). Sur cet arbre, qui finit dans le ciel, pousse une seule pomme. Dans le coin de la pelouse il y a de petites caisses de fruits (qu'on peut trouver facilement dans les magasins ; cela représente la société de consommation.) Les caisses seront remplies de pommes. Les visiteurs peuvent s'en servir. Le soleil brille à travers les nuages—il s'agit d'un projecteur suspendu au-dessus de la toile. La musique de paradis—à savoir le chant des oiseaux—accompagnera cette œuvre. Autour de l'arbre s'envoleraient des oiseaux. Tout sera en couleurs naturelles originales". Jana Želibská to Georges Boudaille, undated letter, FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 48.

<sup>114</sup> "L'installation [...] est transportée officieusement à Paris par l'artiste, un an avant l'exposition à laquelle les censeurs lui avaient interdit de participer. Les différentes parties de l'installation figurent dans la déclaration de douane comme des coulisses de théâtre." Zuzana Bartošová, "Pierre Restany et la Slovaquie. L'oeuvre d'Alex Mlynářčík", in Richard Leeman, ed., *Le demi-siècle de Pierre Restany*, (Paris: INHA, 2009), 277.

Jana Želibská, spring's eternal fiancée, reminds us that the tree and the apple - of all temptations - first symbolize that of knowledge. The tree of science is the tree of life. I live, therefore I know. The taste of happiness is the taste of a fruit, the taste of knowledge.<sup>115</sup>

Restany's text, written in one of his trips to Slovakia, in October 1973, accompanied Želibská's exhibition at the gallery Jean-Gilbert Jozon in Paris, in December 1973.<sup>116</sup> [Fig. 5.15] The artist had seized in fact the opportunity of the Biennale to show her work in a gallery, with the complicity of the French art critic.<sup>117</sup>

Restany got to know Želibská better in 1968, while a member of the committee of the controversial exhibition "Danuvius" to which she refused to participate in protest against the intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia (see Chapter four). While Restany had previously referred to her work in his critical writings, the exhibition "Le goût du Paradis" at the Galerie Jean-Gilbert Jozon in 1973 marked their first direct collaboration.<sup>118</sup>

The participation of Želibská to the Paris Biennale was proposed by Jindřich Chalupecký, along with that of the artists Milan Knížák and Zorka Saglová. In a letter to Raoul-Jean Moulin, he noted:

I have informed Knížák, Ságlová and Želibská. No one can come to Paris—except by a miracle. Which complicates the situation especially for Želibská. Her actions cannot be organized without her. The other members of the commission should understand

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<sup>115</sup> "Jana Želibská, éternelle fiancée du printemps nous rappelle que l'arbre et la pomme—de toutes les tentations—symbolisent d'abord celle de la connaissance. L'arbre de science est l'arbre de vie. Je vis, donc je sais. Le goût du Bonheur est le goût d'un fruit, la saveur du savoir." Restany, Pierre, "Le goût du paradis", in *Jana Želibská-Le goût du paradis*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Jean-Gilbert Jozon, 1973), unpaginated. The small variations in the French title reflects the original designations given by Želibská: the work exhibited at the Biennale was titled *Le goût de paradis*, it was renamed *Le goût du paradis* from its exhibition at the Galerie Jean-Gilbert Jozon—the English version remained "The taste of paradise".

<sup>116</sup> Bartošová, "Pierre Restany et la Slovaquie. L'oeuvre d'Alex Mlynárčik", 277.

<sup>117</sup> The exhibition was held from 3 December 1973 to 1 January 1974. The correspondence between Jana Želibská and the organization confirms that the work was collected at the Biennale by the gallery owner Jean-Gilbert Jozon. FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 48.

<sup>118</sup> Pierre Restany, "Bratislava: Une leçon de réalité (Une leçon de relativité)", *Domus*, no. 472, March 1969, 49-51.

the situation. Why not put up a panel with documentary photos of Želibská's actions, so personal and poetic?<sup>119</sup>

Despite her inability to travel, Želibská's project for the Biennale went far beyond the simple panel documenting her past actions suggested by Chalupecký.<sup>120</sup> In fact, she first conceived another piece completely different from *Le goût de paradis*. This proposal, which can be traced in the event's archives, consisted of a kinetic sculpture composed of twelve female figures of monumental size. The twelve plane figures, titled *Concours Miss d'Amour (Love Miss Competition)*, were supposed to move with the participation of the visitors and should have been accompanied by sound effects.<sup>121</sup> Due to the environment's size, between 6 and 8 meters high for each element, the artist insisted to exhibit her sculpture outside. Apparently, this request did not meet with any resistance within the IC and she was even offered to place her sculpture in the central outdoor space between the two museums of modern art, along the colonnade that connected the two buildings.<sup>122</sup> This site specific project was eventually abandoned, precisely because it would have been impossible to adapt the proportions of the kinetic sculpture to those of the colonnade: "As the height of the columns of the Museum of Modern Art is 16m, my female figurines should reach at least 12m in my original design. We would then have some difficulties with "transport"', explained Želibská in a letter to Raoul-Jean Moulin where she admitted she had to abandon the project and proposed to substitute *Concours Miss d'Amour* with *Le goût du paradis*.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> "J'ai informé Knížák, Ságlová et Želibská. Personne ne peut venir à Paris—sauf par miracle. Ce qui complique la situation spécialement pour Želibská. Ses actions ne peuvent pas être organisées sans elle. Il faudrait que les autres membres de la commission comprennent la situation. Pourquoi ne pas exposer un panneau avec les photos documentaires des actions de Želibská, si personnelles et poétiques?" Jindřich Chalupecký to Raoul-Jean Moulin, letter dated 24 December 1972. FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 48.

<sup>120</sup> We learn from a letter sent by Moulin to Chalupecký that while Milan Knizak and Zorka Saglová were unanimously accepted, in the case of Želibská's application, the Commission asked for a "complément de dossier" in order to understand better her proposal. Raoul-Jean Moulin to Jindřich Chalupecký, letter dated 14 December 1972. FR ACA BIENN COM COR018. FBP INHA/ACA.

<sup>121</sup> Jana Želibská to Georges Boudaille, letter dated 9 February 1973. FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 48.

<sup>122</sup> Georges Boudaille to Jana Želibská, letter dated 7 March 1973. FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 48.

<sup>123</sup> "Comme la hauteur des colonnes du Musée d'Art Moderne est de 16m, mes figurines féminines devraient atteindre dans ma conception originale 12m au moins. On aurait alors certaines difficultés avec "le transport"." Želibská to Moulin, undated letter. FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 48.

Although this project was never carried out and remains almost unknown within Želibská's trajectory, it is nevertheless worth mentioning for it raises several interesting questions about the artist's work, its relation with its Slovak context of production and the international showcase offered by the Paris Biennale. The detailed description of *Concours Miss d'Amour* in Želibská's correspondence with the Biennial encourages us to reconstruct the history of this unrealized work, focusing more specifically on two aspects. The first concerns its relation with the outdoor public space in which it was supposed to be inserted; the second is related with the feminine collective dimension involved in its production in Slovakia.

*Concours Miss d'Amour* was to be inserted outside of the architectural and sculptural complex currently known as the Palais de Tokyo, initially designated as "Palace of the Modern Art Museums". The ensemble was built on the occasion of the International Exhibition held in Paris in 1937, with the aim of including two museums, the Musée d'Art Moderne and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. It is characterized by an imposing modernist (art déco) architecture completed with a series of allegorical sculptural pieces.

The production and exhibition of works and activities in the open air was one of the features of Želibská's work in Czechoslovakia from the early 1970s onwards. Her outdoor installations and happenings referred to the relations between humans and their natural environment, the natural cycles and the myths and rituals surrounding them. One of her most famous happenings, *The Betrothal of Spring* (or *Engagement of Spring*) (1971), took place in the countryside and consisted in a series of celebrative acts—picnic, dance and music, decorating trees with ribbons—involving the inhabitants of a close village, in order to accompany the passage from spring to summer. Besides actions in nature, Želibská also participated in initiatives held in private spaces in the city, like the Open Workshops organised by the artist Rudolf Sikora at his home in Bratislava, in 1970. On this occasion, she occupied the courtyard with her installation *Amanita Muscaria—the possibility of saving for the entire year 1971*, made of mushroom-like piggy banks disseminated in the whole space. In contrast, exhibiting in a public space in her country was unthinkable for Želibská, especially after her refusal to participate in "Danuvius 68" that led to her

forced withdrawal from public life. This makes her first proposal for the Paris Biennale particularly unique, since it is, to my knowledge, the only work of monumental scale she has conceived for a public space abroad.

A photomontage created by Želibská shows how the figures composing *Concours Miss d'Amour* would have been placed along the high colonnade that connects the Musée d'Art Moderne and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris [Fig. 5.16]. The female figures, coloured pink, are suspended from a thread like an articulated puppet, whose arms and legs rise up when the thread is pulled. The body, and especially the female body, was a recurrent element in the artist's production. In her early works from the late 1960s associated with new realism and pop art, such as *La possibilité d'une découverte* (1967) or *Kandarya-Mahadeva* (1969), the body emerged from simplified and linear forms, often in parts or anatomical fragments.<sup>124</sup> [Fig. 5.17] *Concours Miss d'Amour* displayed a playful and ironic tonality that contrasted with the solemn architecture and the group of sculptures located on the esplanade between the two museums.<sup>125</sup> The kinetic, vertical and dynamic ensemble would have contrasted in fact with a series of female nudes from 1937, placed around the central rectangular basin. [Fig. 5.18] This sculptural ensemble consisted in twelve figures representing mythological or real characters: several nymphs, but also a *Jeune Vendangeuse* (Young Harvester) and a *Femme Maure* (Mauritanian woman).<sup>126</sup> The sensuality and placid beauty of these half-lying bodies seemed to be primarily intended for a male gaze. On the contrary, if the nudity of Želibská's articulated figures may have a sensual and even sexual connotation, it manifested itself as a game which rules were defined by the artist herself. The large scale of the figures and the invitation to get involved with them and produce movement produced an interactive relation with the audience that was in sharp contrast with the attitude of contemplation

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<sup>124</sup> The presentation of *Kandarya-Mahadeva* in the exhibition "The World Goes Pop" at Tate Modern in London in 2015 contributed to a re-reading of Jana Želibská's work through the prism of pop art, whereas her work had previously been more associated with the new realism. See the interview with the artist: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/ey-exhibition-world-goes-pop/artist-interview/jana-želibská> (Accessed March 2020). We could also recall Niki de Saint-Phalle's *Nanas* as being visually close to Želibská's female bodies.

<sup>125</sup> The sculptures include Alfred Janniot's allegorical bas-reliefs dedicated to the legends of the land and the sea from 1937 and Antoine Bourdelle's figure *La France*, erected in 1948.

<sup>126</sup> Only six of these sculptures by Léon Drivier, Auguste Guénot, Louis Dejean, Pierre Vigoureux and Anna Quinquaud are still in place today.

of a lying female nude. On this respect, we should insist on the IC's immediate support to the artist's ambitious proposal, which would have radically altered the perception of the monumental space with the introduction of these non canonical female bodies, far from the solemnity of monumental public sculpture. The position of the kinetic sculpture in such a central and strategic location demonstrates the Biennale's positive attitude towards experimental proposals and their visibility in public space, beyond the museum's limited framework.

Recalling the origins of the Palais de Tokyo and the ideological confrontation performed a few hundred meters away by the Soviet and German pavilions built for the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1937, it is perhaps not anecdotal that thirty-six years later, the monumental sculpture of an unofficial artist from a socialist country occupied an architectural space built in the same period, charged with symbolic and allegorical representations. Želibská's proposal disrupted a historical and aesthetic genealogy based on symbols and archetypal identities at the service of political ideologies.<sup>127</sup>

Like she did with *Le goût de paradis*, Jana Želibská declined the idea of *Concours Miss d'Amour* through several formats and techniques. The artist, who had learnt painting and graphic arts at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava (1959-1965), mastered the art of engraving and often produced pieces around the subjects of her main installations or actions through this method. This modus operandi favoured their circulation and allowed Želibská to participate in several graphic arts international exhibitions.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> The pavilions of the Third Reich Germany and the Soviet Union face to face in 1937, foreshadowed the conflict of the Second World War. The two powers competed through their architectural representations, respectively designed by Albert Speer and Boris Iofan. In front of the German building crowned with an enormous eagle, on the top of the Soviet pavilion was the famous sculpture of Vera Mukhina representing a worker and a kolkhoz woman, which was to become a model for the aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism. If we deepen these relations of continuity and rupture between the sculptures that have occupied the public space of this Parisian area in the twentieth century, we must also remember that the sculptor Vera Mukhina, author of the sculpture of the worker and the kolkhoz woman, was herself a student of Antoine Bourdelle during a stay in Paris for health reasons in 1912-13.

<sup>128</sup> Many of them were exhibitions of Slovak graphic arts or prints, taking place in Belgrade (1967), Helsinki, Ottawa, New Delhi (1968), Geneva and Krakow (1970), Mexico City (1971). She also participated in the Graphic Arts Biennale in Pescia, Italy (1968).

In a medallion-shaped dry-point bearing the same title as her Paris proposal—*Concours Miss d'Amour*—and dated 1973, Želibská depicted a naked woman from the back, who twisted her body while directing her face towards the spectator. [Fig. 5.19] Her active and voluntary body in movement transmitted the idea of a subject willing to show herself but refusing to submit to the laws of contemplation. The model nevertheless established an exchange, erotic or otherwise, with the observer. This reversal of the positions of observed/observer subjects also referred to voyeurism, an issue present in other works by the artist. The changing image of the female subject in Želibská's work, constantly reflected as an active individual in her relationship to the social and natural world, resonated with feminist claims of that time. The artist herself, however, has never claimed such position:

I have never declared my claim to support for feminism. If I ever was a feminist, I did not know about it. My views on a woman are the same as on a man. From smile-critical till sarcastic. My living is very private, so I change, move and put the finishing touches to all received “information.” So, I play with myself.<sup>129</sup>

Even unintentionally, however, we can consider from today's perspective the celebration of body, eroticism and shared experiences of sensitive pleasures transmitted through her work as a feminist approach, since it definitely opened up spaces of freedom and autonomy in which women occupied a central and active position, in a context in which visual alternatives challenging the patriarchal gaze remained an exception.

The second element of interest in Želibská's unrealised project for the Paris Biennale, also connected with gender issues, is its particular form of authorship. In her letter to Boudaille, the artist specified that *Concours Miss d'Amour* would be carried out “with the participation of the members of Club Inter Bratislava”, including “artists,

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<sup>129</sup> Jana Želibská, 1997, cited in the introduction to her personal exhibition “A piece of land”, curated by Vladimíra Bünigerová and Lucia Gregorová Stach at the Slovak National Gallery in 2013. [https://www.sng.sk/en/exhibitions/283\\_jana-želibská-a-piece-of-land](https://www.sng.sk/en/exhibitions/283_jana-želibská-a-piece-of-land) (Accessed March 2020).

academic painters”.<sup>130</sup> She provided a list of names and ages—all women under thirty-five years of age—and asked to include them in the Biennale’s catalogue.

Želibská did not provide further information on the “Club Inter Bratislava”. It seems that this organisation was more an artistic project initiated by Alex Mlynárčik than a “classic” association of amateur or professional artists, as typically found in socialist societies.<sup>131</sup> However, the description of “academic artists” in Želibská’s letter suggests that the process of making *Concours Miss d’Amour* gave rise to as a bridge between avant-garde and experimental art and a more formal artistic activity. Her collaboration with artists committed to academic painting showed Želibská’s attachment to practices developed beyond the small circle of the local and international avant-gardes. She was interested in incorporating more vernacular or traditional knowledge and know-how to her work through a syncretic creative process that did not seek to establish distinctions or hierarchies between these forms and contributions. This aspect was reflected in other actions and happenings from Želibská, which conveyed references to popular culture under experimental artistic forms that privileged ephemeral gestures or artefacts and participatory processes over the materiality of the work of art.

Her decision to appear as a co-author of the proposal for the Paris Biennale alongside other eleven women artists—hence twelve woman artists, who would have created twelve female figures to be exhibited in a public space in which other twelve female academic sculptures were visible—can be read as an important gesture, consisting in inscribing her participation to an international exhibition under the sign of artistic collaboration, feminine/feminist collectivity and public participation. This aspect of Jana Želibská’s work contradicted the idea of socially and politically

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<sup>130</sup> Želibská to Boudaille, 9 February 1973. FBP MNAM-BK, BDP 48.

<sup>131</sup> The exact origins and functions of the “Club Inter Bratislava” remains rather obscure. Klara Kemp-Welch reports that in April 1972, “Mlynárčik invited Restany to be an honorary member of what he called the “Club Inter Bratislava”, thereby suggesting some sort of affiliation with the official sports club Inter Bratislava.” Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Block*, 34. We also find in a letter by Mlynárčik to Raoul-Jean Moulin a reference to a “Club Inter-art section” he had founded with Robert Cyprich. Mlynárčik sent the adhesion form to Moulin, specifying that “it is a club for the family—the friends.” Alex Mlynárčik to Raoul-Jean Moulin, 19 July 1972. Archives de Raoul-Jean Moulin, MAC/VAL. The same year, an invitation to “Inter-Étrennes”, a tombola (raffle) organised in December 1972 by Alex Mlynárčik at the Galerie Lara Vincy also stated that the event was under the aegis of “Inter Bratislava-Cultural Section.” In the case of Jana Želibská, there is no other mention of this club apart in her letter to Georges Boudaille.



committed art understood as a contestation and rupture with the system in place and the traditions on which it was based. On the contrary, the project for *Concours Miss d'Amour* reflected a conscious artistic practice in which the desire for autonomy, expressed through a search for new plastic languages and relentless experimentation, was accompanied by its embedding, or anchoring, in a specific social fabric informed by artist's local context. All these combined elements eventually marked the artist's aesthetic and technical decisions.

### **3. An art aspiring to autonomy, anchored in its social reality**

#### **3.1 Ješa Denegri, "Some New Artistic Attitudes in Socialist Societies"**

In 1977, a text dealing specifically with contemporary art in the socialist countries finally appeared in the catalogue of the tenth Biennale. Its author, the Yugoslav art critic and curator Ješa Denegri, also member of the Biennale's International Commission, addressed the relation between avant-garde art and the reality of socialist systems. His text, in particular, highlighted the tensions between an ideologisation of art imposed by the "dominant political and social forces" and the aspiration to autonomy expressed by avant-garde artists.<sup>132</sup>

Although Denegri came from the Yugoslav context and insisted on its specificity, his text referred to the entire socialist bloc and evoked in particular Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. As he addressed in first place a public unfamiliar with the situation of the region, Denegri adopted a didactic tone and insisted on the fact that such a "sensitive subject" could not be approached without prior historical and theoretical knowledge. This regarded on the one hand the trajectory of the avant-gardes since the October Revolution of 1917 and, on the other, a sociological approach to art through the prism of Marxist thinking. In view of these gaps, Denegri modestly proposed "a few ideas based on some concrete experiences".<sup>133</sup>

Pointing at the inevitable conflict between revolutionary artistic languages and political and social strategies that required their direct instrumentalisation, the

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<sup>132</sup> Ješa Denegri, "Nouvelles positions artistiques dans les sociétés socialistes/Some New Artistic Attitudes in Socialist Societies", in *10<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1977), 39-44.

<sup>133</sup> Denegri, "Nouvelles positions artistiques dans les sociétés socialistes/Some New Artistic Attitudes in Socialist Societies", 39.

Yougoslav art critic emphasised art's ideological treatment in socialist societies and the polarization of the cultural scene operated by official discourses. These discourses distinguished, on the one hand, "a practice conforming to what is proclaimed by the dominant political and social forces" and, on the other, "various forms of expression" that could be considered either positively—in this case, added Denegri, they were associated with notions such as humanism, optimism, authenticity—or negatively—as decadent, nihilistic or, even worse, imported from the West.<sup>134</sup> In this context, the notion of art's autonomy contrasted with the idea of artistic production as a response to or, in Denegri's words, the "reflection" of a concrete social situation, like in the case of socialist realism.

Denegri insisted on the relation of continuity between the Polish, Czechoslovak and Hungarian avant-gardes of the first half of the twentieth century and the new generation of artists in the region. According to him, the former constituted a "germ and an orientation point" for the latter, who preserved the "consciousness of the fundamental nature of the language and of the comportment of the avant-garde" and used it in a more or less explicit way to confront attempts at ideological channelling.<sup>135</sup> While these new languages were comparable to other practices carried out in the West, their typology was, for Denegri, proper to the region. Far from the idea of an unbalanced relation between centre and peripheries, he proposed a genealogy of Eastern European art that combined roots and influences drawn from local, regional and international sources.

One of the central aspects of the text is its defense of the idea of art's autonomy in opposition to any kind of ideological instrumentalisation. Contemporary artists were described in these terms:

In the same way that they resisted the exigencies of a heteronomy of the artistic language by refusing to adhere to the propagandistic messages of "social realism" and its derivatives, they try to resist the tendency to militant art since it is simply the other side of the coin—that is to say, another aspect of the same process of making art

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<sup>134</sup> Denegri, "Nouvelles positions artistiques dans les sociétés socialistes/Some New Artistic Attitudes in Socialist Societies", 40.

<sup>135</sup> Denegri, "Nouvelles positions artistiques dans les sociétés socialistes/Some New Artistic Attitudes in Socialist Societies", 41.

ideological. Radically refusing all ideological dimension inside of the structure of the artistic language, refusing all apologetic and supportive art, they insist on the concept of the autonomy of their practice.<sup>136</sup>

In the French version of the text, “militant art” appears as “art contestataire”. Denegri’s vision was actually stepping away from a discourse that affirmed art’s mandatory role to support political and social protests. The popularity of such practices in France was connected with the development of the “Jeune Peinture” (“Young painting”) or the “Nouvelle Figuration” and with the support of organisations like the A.R.C. at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, as well as magazines like *Opus International*, which, as already seen, was particularly interested in artistic developments in Eastern Europe. While the exhibition “Le monde en question, ou vingt-six peintres de contestation” (“The world in question, or twenty-six militant painters) organised in June 1967 by Gérard Gassiot-Talabot at the A.R.C. marked an important moment in the development of these practices and their visibility, one decade later, the centrality of contestation seemed to have faded away.<sup>137</sup> In parallel with the closing of the tenth Paris Biennale, Pierre Gaudibert himself, a great advocate of art of contestation in the 1960s and early 1970s, observed in the context of the Venice Biennale del Dissenso—discussed in the next Chapter—its decline and analysed the rise of dissidence as another attitude to face political and social reality of the time.<sup>138</sup>

As Ješa Denegri’s text clearly explains, neither of these attitudes (contestation or dissidence) could be happily endorsed by Eastern European artists and intellectuals, who sought instead to reaffirm art’s autonomy. Their conception of autonomy, however, in no way implied a lack of interest for social issues: “On the contrary”,

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<sup>136</sup> Denegri, “Nouvelles positions artistiques dans les sociétés socialistes/Some New Artistic Attitudes in Socialist Societies”, 41.

<sup>137</sup> “Le monde en question, ou vingt-six peintres de contestation” was held at the A.R.C. in Paris from 6 to 28 June 1967 and brought together artists who displayed an explicit critique of the system in their paintings. The participants were Arroyo, Berni, Bertini, Christoforou, Crémonini, Dias, Erro, Golub, Equipo Crónica, Grupo Realidad, Guerreschi, Kudo, Matta, Millarès, Parré, Petlin, Rancillac, Récalcati, Rubino, Sarkis, Saül, Self, Stenvert (Curt), Tisserand, Vacchi. The accompanying leaflet included texts by Pierre Gaudibert, Gérard Gassiot-Talabot and Max Clarac-Sérou. It was accompanied by a colloquium on the theme of “contestation”. See also Jean Cassou, ed., *Art et contestation. Témoins et témoignages* (Bruxelles: Connaissance, 1968).

<sup>138</sup> Pierre Gaudibert, “Dalla contestazione alla dissidenza”, in *La Nuova Arte Sovietica* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia/Marsilio Editori, 1977), 21-23.

Denegri wrote, “in these works, there is always a series of indirect messages embodying social situations or everyday data”.<sup>139</sup> To illustrate what he meant by “indirect messages”, Denegri referred to young artists from Czechoslovakia and Poland. The Czechoslovaks’ research spanned from the intimacy of their own beings and bodies to a use of nature as “the vastest framework possible of existence”; the Polish used technological means (film or video) to record “sensory and sensual” experiences in which societal motives, although secondary, still surged in the backdrop. Without naming them, Denegri’s description seemed to refer to works exhibited in the last three biennials: Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch’s actions centred on their own bodies, Zorka Saglová and Jana Želibská’s happenings in nature, or the media fictions of Zdzisław Sosnowski and Natalia LL. For him, these examples were representative of the “expressive languages of the artistic avant-garde” in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary and he pointed at their similarities and differences with “artistic formulations in Western Europe”.<sup>140</sup>

In conclusion, Denegri noted that what was at stake in the relationship between the artistic avant-gardes (from every period) and the reality of socialist systems was the function and the finality each part attributed to art. He recalled, quoting Adorno, that the desire for independence and autonomy represented in itself a critical stance in the face of the system and insisted to distinguish the idea of freedom in a socialist context from other contexts, in a way that resonates with Jindřich Chalupecký’s understanding on this notion:

In order to understand the comportment of the new artists in the socialist societies, it must be emphasized that they do not wish to take action under the sign of what bourgeois culture traditionally conceives of as “freedom”. For them, “freedom” signifies the right to the recognition of the social existence of the artist as a subject at once critical and constructive. Many obstacles rise up along this way, which in its essence, is socially positive, and the artist cannot avoid entering into more or less evident conflict with society. A spirit of activism and a feeling of anguish and alienation develops, at the same time, as a result of this state of conflict. As in all the

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<sup>139</sup> Denegri, “Nouvelles positions artistiques dans les sociétés socialistes/Some New Artistic Attitudes in Socialist Societies”, 41.

<sup>140</sup> Denegri, “Nouvelles positions artistiques dans les sociétés socialistes/Some New Artistic Attitudes in Socialist Societies”, 41.

social constellations of the past and of the present, the status of the artistic avant-garde in the socialist countries is marked by various contradictions. Seemingly this form of art, whose very kind is to be critical, cannot escape such a destiny in any socialist structure in the near future.<sup>141</sup>

Denegri's text confirms one again that seen from the perspective of creators and intellectuals from socialist societies, radicality resided in their rejection of politics in a partidist sense, and their claim for freedom, independence and autonomy in a way, however, totally different from the understanding of Western committed or leftist artistic circles. This appeared clearly in Tamás Szentjóby's ambiguous objects mentioned above, but also in Jana Želibská's interventions and projects in collaboration with local communities. Beyond, or even against Georges Boudailles's simplistic characterisation of the Eastern European art scene by its political approach, the image of artists as active participants in the construction of society in spite of their resistance to state socialism is essential to understand their reluctance to the label of political or dissident art, often applied to their work or posture. Many of them believed in fact in socialism's ideals, but rejected the bureaucratic and authoritarian drifts brought in by its actually existing version in Eastern European societies.

### **3.2. 1977, time for balance**

The tenth Paris Biennale in 1977 was marked by a certain disenchantment with the centralised model. In fact, as this Chapter has sought to highlight, the model introduced in 1973 was built upon a series of tensions and contradictions that contributed to produce three rich and heterogeneous editions, but turned out to be hardly viable in the long term. The IC was created with the intention to form a horizontal and democratic organism that operated as a plural and anti-authoritarian safeguard against the power of a single commissioner or state administrations. This role, however, seemed less and less convincing to its members, who looked critically at the politics of compromise and permanent negotiation that had often led to bland and unambitious proposals: "The selected samples are in fact representative", wrote

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<sup>141</sup> Denegri, "Nouvelles positions artistiques dans les sociétés socialistes/Some New Artistic Attitudes in Socialist Societies", 44.

the art critic Giovanni Joppolo about the ninth Biennale. “Of course, one could have chosen some artists rather than others within the same trend, but there would have been no great change in the final result and the overall vision”.<sup>142</sup> The logic of sampling and representativeness—works that could be modulated or easily replaced by others similar to them—had ended up taking precedence over the peculiarities the Biennale was constantly claiming to shed light on.

While Georges Boudaille, in his now customary introductory essay to the catalogue of the tenth Paris Biennale, affirmed that this edition was “more interesting if not better than the previous one”, other members of the IC expressed their doubts regarding the process of selection relying on artists dossiers transmitted by the international correspondents, and the difficulties for administering such a large number of proposals.<sup>143</sup> The British curator Michael Compton even evoked his “sense of alienation” when confronted with this task—a difficulty, he noted, multiplied by the fact that some documented works already consisted of documents.<sup>144</sup> Another member of the IC, the director of the Kunsthalle Bern Johannes Gachnang, regretted the difficulty to select artists on the basis of a dossier and to find an acceptable agreement on the selection criteria.<sup>145</sup> He also considered that the crisis of institutions following 1968 should have alerted the Commission on the fact that “the “international style” represented by abstraction and mostly promoted by Anglo-Saxon countries was no longer the only one in force, but had on the contrary to coexist with “a multitude of smaller “mental spaces” (Mentalitätsräume)” whose qualities were “specific to the autonomy and the whole of a region, and justified new historical situations”.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> “Les échantillons choisis sont en effet représentatifs: bien sûr, on aurait pu opter pour certains artistes plutôt que d’autres au sein d’une même tendance, mais il n’y aurait pas eu de grands changements dans le résultat final et la vision d’ensemble.” Giovanni Joppolo, “Échantillons représentatifs”, *Opus International* no. 57, October 1975, 48.

<sup>143</sup> Boudaille, “Préface/Préface”, 13.

<sup>144</sup> Michael Compton, untitled, in *10<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1977), 26.

<sup>145</sup> Johannes Gachnang, “Anmerkungen zur Biennale de Paris 1977/Remarques sur la Biennale de Paris 1977”, in *10<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1977), 25.

<sup>146</sup> “Il est apparu que les anciennes métropoles artistiques étaient remplacées par une multitude d’“espaces mentaux” (Mentalitätsräume) plus petits, dont les qualités spécifiques sont propres à l’autonomie et à l’ensemble d’une région, et justifient de nouvelles situations historiques.” Gachnang, “Anmerkungen zur Biennale de Paris 1977/Remarques sur la Biennale de Paris 1977”, 25.

Although Gachnang referred primarily to artistic contributions from Switzerland, Canada or the United States, this view could be extended to the countries still considered to be on the margins of western modernity. Coinciding with Jean-Marc Poinot's previously cited observations concerning the obsolescence of the universal model and the presence of a plural set of worlds to be taken into account, Gachnang's words reflected a tension between the perpetuation of a conception of avant-garde art still rooted in the canon of European modernity, and the awareness of a multiplicity of artistic realities beyond this model.

The Biennale's claim for internationalisation was also subject to critical reflections; revisiting the application of this principle in the three editions, Catherine Millet regretted that it had led to a kind of flattening out of local particularities: "From Los Angeles to Belgrade, the same "conceptual art" is produced today—the basic material, Kodacolor, leaves little room for local colour".<sup>147</sup> She evoked the "ironing out of contradictions" resulting from internationalisation, but also from the impossibility to find a satisfactory agreement between the members of the IC. In fact,

[...] a consensus of opinion between personalities as diverse in their way of thinking and their knowledge as a Norwegian, an Italian, a Japanese, etc., would hardly be likely to occur except by means of concessions, the elimination of differences and by reducing variety. The works left were perhaps good but fairly neutral and because of their neutrality encountered agreement more readily than works which were unpredictable but also more personal.<sup>148</sup>

All these comments anticipated the end of the centralized model and the return to national participations with the eleventh Biennial, in 1980. The adventure of the internationalisation of the Paris Biennale concluded with its tenth edition. It would be unfair, however, to see in this experience only the errors of organisers who were not receptive to the issues generated by the beginnings of globalisation and were too

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<sup>147</sup> Catherine Millet, "Quand une manifestation internationale se pose la question de l'internationalisme.../When an international exhibition questions itself about internationalism...", in *10<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1977), 22.

<sup>148</sup> Millet, "Quand une manifestation internationale se pose la question de l'internationalisme.../When an international exhibition questions itself about internationalism...", 22.

focused on promoting a still monolithic and Eurocentric idea of avant-garde art, based on novelty and rupture.

More than an affirmative event, the centralised Biennale that operated between 1973 and 1977 was a reflexive and, more importantly, self-reflexive one. It introduced important interrogations on its own place and function, in a European context affected by the political and social upheavals of the late 1960s and, on the other, by the increase of international and transcontinental exchanges. The numerous stances expressed by members of the IC—whether through publications or in internal meetings—clearly reflected a tension between, on the one hand, the imperative of maintaining a focus on the avant-garde and even anticipate future tendencies, particularly strong due to the age range to which the Biennial was dedicated and, on the other hand, the need to broaden its field and open it up to other cultural spaces and their specificities. In this sense, the Biennale’s growing interest in Third World countries—often mixed with a feeling of guilt for not offering them more space—is a central issue, without which we cannot fully understand the position and reception of artists from Eastern Europe in the manifestation. In fact, the appeal for the “Other” crystallized on a still little-represented Third World and its artistic capital tinged with exoticism (see for example Latin America as an “invited country” in 1977), while proposals from the socialist bloc were received as contributions from a close neighbour, different but all in all quite familiar.<sup>149</sup> As no surprise, the exhibition “Magiciens de la Terre”, held in 1989 but in preparation since 1984, would operate as a sort of closing of the Paris Biennale times, claiming to be a “truly international exhibition” that proved, however, to maintain many Western stereotypes and reading filters. To give an example, while the Biennial had the merit, if not always objective, of employing correspondents who were active in their local contexts, the preparation of Magicians was based on a very distinct approach of curatorial visits by Western organisers to the countries concerned. But this would be another story.

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<sup>149</sup> The exhibition as a paradigmatic case has generated an extensive literature, from the original catalogue and its contributions to rereading from a post-colonial perspective. See Jean-Hubert Martin, “Préface”, in *Magiciens de la Terre*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1989), 8-11; in the same, Homi K. Bhabha, “Hybridité, hétérogénéité et culture contemporaine”, 24-27; Emmanuelle Chérel et Fabienne Dumont, eds., *L’histoire n’est pas donnée. Art contemporain et postcolonialité en France*. (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016); Lucy Steeds, ed., *Making art global. Part 2, ‘Magiciens de la terre’ 1989* (London : Afterall Books, 2013).



## CHAPTER 6

### The narrative of dissent in Venice (1977)

Our last case presents another approach on artistic practices from the socialist bloc. In contrast with the Pamplona Encounters, where the almost invisible and accidental participation of Central European artists was mediated by an external organisation, the CAYC, with its own agenda, or with the case of the centralised Paris Biennale that integrated Eastern Europe in a broader frame of industrialised countries, the Venice Biennale of 1977 was built on the affirmation of the region's cultural and political singularity, through the prism of dissidence.

The “Biennale del Dissenso”, to borrow the name it was promptly given in the press, has been discussed by several scholars and curators who have already raised crucial issues, especially regarding the event's political and diplomatic sides.<sup>1</sup> This chapter aims at pursuing their inquiry by exploring two aspects which, in my view, deserve further analysis. The first concerns the particular place of the visual arts within a debate apparently focused on politics, and the competing narratives that have been created to address it. In fact, while the Biennale del Dissenso has been repeatedly identified as a political event and its cultural and artistic dimension have remained in the background, we should re-examine the conditions of inclusion and participation of visual arts/plastic production in the event, as well as the readings that accompanied this process. While numerous actors joined the Biennale to debate

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<sup>1</sup> Among the studies of art historians who have taken an interest in this episode, several have been essential resources for the writing of this chapter: Maria-Kristiina Soomre, “Art, Politics and Exhibitions: (Re)writing the History of (Re)presentations,” *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 21, no. 3 (January 2012), 106-121. Soomre also curated the first exhibition that tried to reconstitute the history of the Biennale del Dissenso: “Archives in translation. Biennial of Dissent’77” at the KUMU Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia, 2007; Sandra Frimmel and Matteo Bertelé, “Salon Suisse-Criticism and Dissent: 1977 Re-enacted: La nuova arte Sovietica”, report of the conference at Palazzo Trevisan, Venice, 23 November 2013-23 November 2013, 9-10. Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-86506> (Accessed March 2020); Edit Sasvári, “Eastern Europe Under Western Eyes. The “Dissident Biennale”, Venice, 1997”, in Beata Hock ed. “Doing culture under State-Socialism: Actors, Events, and Interconnections”, special issue of *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und Vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, 4, XXIV, 2014, 12-22; Jan May, ““Biennale of Dissent” (1977): Nonconformist Art from the USSR in Venice”, in *Art beyond borders: artistic exchange in communist Europe (1945-1989)*, eds. Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski (Budapest: Central European University, 2016), 357-368; Matteo Bertelé, “Venice 1977: (counter)celebrations of the October Revolution”, *Twentieth Century Communism*, no. 13, October 2017, 67-87; Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018), 383-389. Also Juliane Debeusscher, “Debates en torno al Disenso: el arte del bloque soviético en la Bial de Venecia de 1977,” in Barreiro López, Paula, ed., *Atlántico Frio. Historias transnacionales del arte y la política en los tiempos del Telón de Acero* (Madrid: Brumaria, 2019), 413-443. On a register more akin to memories, mention should be made of the book by Carlo Ripa di Meana and Gabriela Mecucci, *L'ordine di Mosca. Fermate la Biennale del Dissenso* (Rome: Liberal Edizioni, Rome, 2007).

about the role of socialism, human rights and democracy in their respective contexts and in relation to Soviet-type systems, the presence of visual artworks in two exhibitions (“La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale” and “Grafica Cecoslovacca. Undici anni di ricerca 1965-1976”) and the conditions of their appearance has been often overlooked, or drowned in the numerous polemics fueled by diplomatic and political tensions. It seems important then to come back to this visual dimension and its relation with the label of “cultural dissidence” that was used in the context of the Biennale and turned out to be particularly problematic and inadequate, even more in field of visual arts than in any other discipline included at the Biennale. On this respect, Edit Sasvári has already formulated a series of essential questions that should be kept in mind:

[T]o what extent the spirit of the artistic avant-garde was identical with that of political dissidence, [...] is an artist to be regarded a dissident if censorship prevents the display of his or her works? [...], does the West indeed need the dissidents? And contrariwise, having fought for and won their little cultural freedoms, do East European intellectuals have an interest in risking their remaining room to maneuver?<sup>2</sup>

Discussions on “dissident art” and especially on its quality and modernity, as we will see, were very much connected with the question of the legitimacy and, in definitive, the right of non-western art to become visible in the context of a prestigious institution such as the Venice Biennale.<sup>3</sup> It is thus necessary to reflect on the turning points that have led not only to identify unofficial art with political opposition, but also to promote and legitimise this view through the medium of exhibition.

The episode of the Venice Biennale del Dissenso was marked by the conjectural debates generated around Soviet and Eastern dissidence in Western Europe in the second half of the seventies. The second important point addressed in this chapter regards the confluence of

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<sup>2</sup> Sasvári, “Eastern Europe Under Western Eyes. The “Dissident Biennale”, Venice, 1997”, 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> Among the studies carried out on previous Central European participation to the Venice Biennale during the Cold War, see Veronika Wolf, “Czechoslovakia at the Venice Biennale in the 1950s”, in *Art beyond borders: artistic exchange in communist Europe (1945-1989)*, Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski, eds. (Budapest: Central European University, 2016), 345-356 and Kinga Bódi, “I Carried out the Program According to Plan.” Lajos Vayer and the Hungarian Exhibitions at the Venice Biennale (1968–1972),” in *Mezosfera*, no. 6 (February 2019) [http://mezosfera.org/i-carried-out-the-program-according-to-plan-lajos-vayer-and-the-hungarian-exhibitions-at-the-venice-biennale-1968-1972/#\\_ftn21](http://mezosfera.org/i-carried-out-the-program-according-to-plan-lajos-vayer-and-the-hungarian-exhibitions-at-the-venice-biennale-1968-1972/#_ftn21).

actors from Mediterranean Europe (Italy, France, Spain, but also Portugal and Greece) in Venice, more specifically in the context of the two symposia organised by the Biennale, “History/Freedom and Socialism. Historical moments of Dissent” (“Storia/Libertà e socialismo Momenti storici del Dissenso”) and “Avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes in Eastern Europe” (“Avanguardie e neoavanguardie nell’est europeo”). While this presence was in part related to the political sphere—and more particularly, to the growing interest in the articulation of a Eurocommunist axis by political agents from Southern Europe—, it also confirms to what extent actors from Italy, France and Spain operated as intermediaries, or transmitters of information on dissidence and unofficial art from the Eastern bloc. As we will see, they also contributed to the spread ideas that call for “making dissidence global” and connecting it to struggles that were not exclusively inscribed within the socialist sphere. This phenomenon reinforces our hypothesis on the specificity of Southern Europe as field of reception in relation to socialist Central Europe.

## **1. Political and cultural premises**

### **1.1. The “Nuova Biennale” and its third controversial edition**

The cultural sector was not immune to the movements of social protest that shook Italy in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Cultural institutions underwent indeed a critical re-evaluation of their structures, art academies and public exhibition spaces across the country were occupied—in 1968, the Triennale of Milan was occupied two weeks before the opening of the Venice Biennale, making the Biennale’s organisers fear possible overflows. The manifestation finally opened in a climate of tension and protest, with many artists boycotting it or organising demonstrations and actions to protest. The historical institution was accused of being an “instrument of the bourgeoisie aimed at codifying a policy of racism and cultural underdevelopment through the commodification of ideas”.<sup>5</sup> Called into question, the Venice Biennale experienced a break in its organisational structure and function. After two editions

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<sup>4</sup> Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L'orda d'oro (1968-1977). La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* (Milan: SugarCo Edizioni, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> “La Biennale è lo strumento della borghesia per codificare una politica di razzismo e di sottosviluppo culturale attraverso la mercificazione delle idee”. Students pamphlets against the biennial, cited in Enzo di Martino, *La Biennale di Venezia 1985-1995. Cento anni di arte e di cultura*, 60. See also *Le muse inquiete. La Biennale di Venezia di fronte alla storia-The disquieted muses. When La Biennale di Venezia meets history*, exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2020).

that experienced new formats and sought to restore a certain form of moderation and pluralism (the “Biennale/Ricerca” directed by Umbro Appollonio in 1969, and the 1972 edition directed by Mario Penelope), the Italian Parliament adopted a new statute of the organisation the 26 July 1973, thus authorising the setting up of a “Nuova Biennale” (New Biennale).<sup>6</sup> To get out of the model perpetuated since its creation in 1895, this new version focused on research and experimentation, in order to transform its relationship with the public and become more democratic. The new Biennale represented a different model of cultural event with greater social involvement. Among the first transformations were the suppression of historical references such as the name “Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte” and the Roman numbers that had characterized each edition so far, as well as the elimination of the Biennale’s traditional awards and prizes. Also eliminated, the event’s openly commercial dimension that had favored economic transactions between collectors, galleries and art dealers.

One of the central agents of this transformation was the Biennale’s president Carlo Ripa di Meana, appointed for four years in March 1974.<sup>7</sup> Ripa di Meana was a socialist intellectual from Milan, affiliated to the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) since the late 1950s—previously, he was a member of the PCI. Ripa di Meana was determined to implement a use of cultural structures and artistic events that would encourage popular participation and turn passive spectators into active users, protagonists and even promoters of culture.<sup>8</sup> His programme adopted a clearly democratic and anti-fascist orientation through the denunciation of authoritarian regimes, and a focus on individuals and collectives in resistance. In fact, the first edition of the Nuova Biennale held in 1974 claimed its solidarity with Chile, only one year after the military coup of Augusto Pinochet. A section of the following edition of 1976

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<sup>6</sup> See Paolo Rizzi and Enzo di Martino, *Storia della Biennale 1895-1982* (Electa, Milan, 1982), 59-67 and di Martino, *La Biennale di Venezia 1985-1995. Cento anni di arte e di cultura*. As these authors point out, while the organizational structure kept a Board of Directors with representatives from local bodies and trade unions, the change resided mainly in the programmatic orientation, which tried to set a new relationship with the territory based on the temporary and interdisciplinary nature of the event and its propensity to experiments.

<sup>7</sup> We should note that this temporal arc (1974 to 1978) overlaps almost perfectly with that of the centralised Biennale de Paris (1973 to 1977) discussed in the previous chapter. Although a direct link cannot be established between the two manifestations, these episodes of transformation and reconsideration of a model of international exhibition testify to a similar desire to move away from the national schemes and democratise the Biennale by opening it up to other spaces and geographies and making it accessible to a broader audience.

<sup>8</sup> Carlo Ripa di Meana, communication read at the XXIIth Assembly of the Unione Internazionale di Architetti, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 30 April 1975, Venice. Fondo storico, arti visive, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Porto Marghera.

titled “Ambiente, partecipazione, strutture sociali” was dedicated to anti-Francoist and democratic Spain (“Spagna/avanguardia artistica e realtà sociale/1936-1976”).<sup>9</sup> Both projects had been supported by the Biennale’s executive board (Consiglio direttivo) and had been well received by the public opinion.

In January 1977, Ripa di Meana announced a third edition, focused this time on cultural dissent in Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the previous editions that denounced right-wing dictatorships, this one turned a critical gaze towards the opposite side of the ideological spectrum and thus confronted the Western lefts to a major dilemma: whether to support the initiative in solidarity with the cause of dissidents from the Eastern bloc, or to join forces with Eastern European socialist regimes. As Ripa di Meana himself pointed at retrospectively, what initially surged as “a major survey of culture in the soviet ice” rapidly turned into “an international political and cultural case”.<sup>11</sup>

Since the repression of the Prague Spring in 1968, and even more since the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s book *The Gulag Archipelago* in 1974, the repressive nature of Soviet-type regimes had been recurrently tackled in Western media and intellectual circles. While the origin of dissidence in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe dates back to the beginning of de-Stalinisation, the movement started to gain greater visibility in the 1970s, especially after the Helsinki Agreements, in 1975.<sup>12</sup> In its broadest definition, the word “dissent” or “dissidence” refers to disagreement with a prevailing doctrine, belief or conduct. According to the word’s Latin etymology, a dissenter is someone who refuses to sit in the same circle and to participate. Dissidence thus implies, on the one hand, the existence of a set of rules

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<sup>9</sup> Regarding the other Biennales presided by Ripa di Meana and part of his new strategy, see Paula Barreiro López, “Vanguardia artística y realidad social: una batalla por el significado del arte moderno,” in *Arte y transición*, ed. Juan Albarrán (Madrid, Brumaria, 2018), 517-544; Paula Barreiro López, *Caso de Estudio. España Vanguardia Artística y Realidad Social 1936-1976*, exhibition catalogue (Valencia: IVAM, 2018); Maria Vittoria Martini, “La Biennale di Venezia 1968-1978: la rivoluzione incompiuta,” PhD Dissertation, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> “Ripa di Meana anticipa: Sul dissenso dell'est la Biennale '77”, *Corriere Della Sera*, 25 January 1977. For a detailed chronology of events, see Carlo Ripa di Meana and Gabriela Mecucci, *L'ordine di Mosca. Fermate la Biennale del Dissenso* (Rome: Liberal Edizioni, Rome, 2007), 32-37.

<sup>11</sup> “Intervista di Guido Vergani a Carlo Ripa di Meana”, in *Carlo Ripa di Meana: Le mie biennali 1974-1978*, Lucrezia Lante della Rovere, Andrea Ripa di Meana Cardella, Lorenzo Cappellini, eds. (Milan: Skira, 2019), 25.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Chiama and Jean-François Soulet, *History of dissidence: oppositions and revolts in the USSR and in popular democracies, from the death of Stalin to the present day* (Paris: Seuil, 1982). For a comprehensive history of the notion of dissidence, see Kacper Szulecki, *Dissidents in Communist Central Europe. Human Rights and the Emergence of New Transnational Actors*, (Cham: Palgrave MacMilan, 2019). His book mentions the Venice Biennale but does not enter in details about this episode.

established by a dominant collective body (state, government, party, church) and, on the other hand, its formal rejection, expressed in most cases on an individual basis. Furthermore, the very existence of dissent depends on its appearance in the social sphere: indeed, it is the public dimension of the gesture through which one disagrees or expresses his or her disagreement that makes it recognisable as such. Therefore, it is not so much denial or rejection that constitutes a dissident, than the public appearance, or staging, of this rejection, whether in the first person or through a person or organism that mediates it (the press, human rights organisations or other individuals out of the regime's sphere of influence).

Could this type of attitude be recognised in the world of art? The most publicised antecedent to the Biennale was undoubtedly the famous “Bulldozer Exhibition”, an open-air initiative on the outskirts Moscow violently (and disproportionately) repressed by the authorities in September 1974. The event, attended by a large public including foreign journalists, became a visible symbol of the Soviet regime's repressive action against non-conformist artists, leading to national and international denunciations. They resulted for the first time in a small concession for this unofficial scene: two weeks later and only for a couple of hours, another art display was authorised in a park in Moscow.<sup>13</sup>

The Bulldozer Exhibition was cited in the context of the Biennale del Dissenso as a representative example of the suppressed freedom of artists in the Soviet Union and an additional motive for giving voice to those who cannot express themselves freely. In his introduction to the catalogue of “La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale” (“The New Soviet Art. An unofficial perspective”), Ripa di Meana clearly inscribed the Venetian manifestation in a genealogy of initiatives of resistance aimed at liberating gagged artistic and cultural expressions, when he affirmed that “[t]he new trends were not extinguished by the bulldozers on 15 September 1974 in Beliaevo, south of Moscow, nor by the police arrests for “parasitism” of Oskar Rabin”.<sup>14</sup> In his view, the Venice

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<sup>13</sup> “Russians disrupt Modern Art Show”, *New York Times*, 16 September 1974, 73. [www.nytimes.com/1974/09/16/archives/russians-disrupt-modern-art-show-with-bulldozers-unofficial-outside.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1974/09/16/archives/russians-disrupt-modern-art-show-with-bulldozers-unofficial-outside.html) (Accessed March 2018), The episode is retrospectively analyzed in Viktor Tupitsyn, *Bul'dozernaia vystavka/The Bulldozer Exhibition* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2014); see also “The Bulldozer and Izmailovsky Park exhibitions, Moscow, 1974: Chronology of Events, Letters, and Interviews, in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, eds. Laura J. Hoptman, Tomáš Pospiszl (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2002), 65-78.

<sup>14</sup> “Le nuove tendenze non sono state spente dai bulldozer il 15 settembre 1974 a Beliaevo a sud di Mosca, né dai fermi di polizia per “parassitismo” di Oskar Rabin.” Carlo Ripa di Meana, in *La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale*, exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia/Marsilio Editori, 1977), 7.

Biennale planned to take place in 1977 was the continuation of these courageous initiatives to make dissidence publicly visible, in a post-Helsinki Agreements era.

## 1.2 Premises of a polemical edition

Since its first public announcement in January 1977 in the *Corriere della Sera*, the project of a biennial dedicated to cultural dissent in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe met with a lot of resistance. The project threatened a significant number of diplomatic, political and economic agreements established across the blocs' division, that depended on a tacit strategy of non-recrimination. The Soviet Union reacted immediately in the official press through its ambassador in Italy, Nikita Ryzhov, who threatened to boycott the Biennale's next edition and drag all the Warsaw Pact countries with him—this actually happened, and no country from the socialist bloc participated in 1978. This prompt reaction was partly due to the imminence of the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution, which celebrations and commemorations could be endangered by an event the Soviet authorities saw as clearly anticommunist. In order to divert the public attention from the controversial Biennale and reaffirm the good relations between the two countries, several cultural events were officially planned in Venice and other locations in Italy, in collaboration with the Soviet authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout 1977, a virulent campaign denouncing Carlo Ripa di Meana's project took place in the Soviet media, with the Italian press as a sounding board.<sup>16</sup> In March, Ripa di Meana resigned a first time from his functions to protest against the influence of the Soviet authorities on Italian political bodies. He reintegrated them only once the Italian government had guaranteed the complete autonomy of the biennial. At the same time, the organisation was affected by economic problems that lead Ripa di Meana to resign a second time in June, forcing thus the board to approve the biennial's budget—after which he resumed the presidency back. To further exacerbate management problems, the directors of sections

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<sup>15</sup> These included *L'Oro degli Sciti* (Palazzo Ducale, September-October 1977) and *Classici e romantici tedeschi in Italia* (Napoleonic Wing, September-November 1977). See Bertelé, "Venice 1977: (counter)celebrations of the October Revolution", 67-87. The organisation of "counter-activities" is also implemented by other countries of the socialist bloc, notably Hungary. On this subject, see also Sasvári, "Eastern Europe Under Western Eyes. The "Dissident Biennale", Venice, 1997", 12-22.

<sup>16</sup> On 5 February 1977, an article was published in the Soviet official newspaper *Izvestija*, accusing Ripa di Meana of undermining East-West collaboration and the Helsinki Agreements. In *Sovietskaja Kultura*, Nikolai Tosmki, president of the USSR Academy of Fine Arts, denounced a "bacchanal of abstraction" (*Corriere della Sera*, 9 April 1977).

Vittorio Gregotti, Giacomo Gambetti and Luca Ronconi decided to leave their respective posts in July. Ripa di Meana then appointed an extraordinary commission composed by the Czechs Jiří Pelikán, Antonin Liehm and Mira Liehm, and the Italian-Polish Gustaw Herling. Pelikán was a well known figure of the Czech opposition who had been given political asylum in Italy in 1969, after he was expelled from the Czech Communist Party and deprived of his citizenship—he acquired the Italian citizenship in 1977. From 1970, Pelikán was the main editor of the magazine in exile *Listy* that offered support to “socialism with a human face”, and over the decade he became more and more involved in Italian political life on the side of the Socialist Party. Pelikán and Ripa di Meana had known each other for a long time, since both had been involved in international student organisations—Pelikán as head of the Czech Students Union and Ripa di Meana as director of the journal of the International Student Union in the 1950s (precisely in Prague). As for the Czech writer and editor Antonin Liehm, along with his wife Mira Liehm, he had emigrated to Paris in 1969 and from there, to the United States. Both Pelikán and Liehm were communists intellectuals engaged in political life in Czechoslovakia until the repression of the Prague Spring. A few years older, the Polish writer Gustaw Herling was the author of one of the first account of totalitarian repression, based on his own experience in a Soviet labour camp between 1940-1942. He settled in Italy after the Second World War and in 1946, he founded the Polish emigré journal *Kultura*, first based in Rome and then in London.<sup>17</sup> Compared to the former Italian directors of sections, the profile of these newly appointed individuals revealed Ripa di Meana’s willingness to collaborate with committed intellectuals in exile who were actively engaged with the dissemination of information and cultural production from and towards socialist Central Europe.

In the Italian context, the project for a “Biennale del Dissenso” was viewed with concern by many actors. Besides the PCI, which position on Soviet and Eastern European dissidence remained aligned with that of the CPSU, Italian industrialists and entrepreneurs feared that their fruitful relations and business alliances with the Soviet Union may be at risk. This reluctance gave rise to various refusals to collaborate with the Biennale, including the

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<sup>17</sup> Gustaw Herling’s *A World Apart: The Journal of a Gulag survivor* (*Inny świat: zapiski sowieckie*) was first published in English language London in 1951 and in Polish samizdat in 1980. A fact that points at the reticence of French and Italian publishers confronted with the denunciation of Soviet totalitarianism, its publication in both countries took place only after the release of the Russian edition, in 1986.



suspension of spaces usually lent for the manifestation, or the refusal to loan musical and cinematographic works. All these these difficulties contributed to postpone the event until the end of 1977.

After several months of difficulties and uninterrupted discussions about its intentions and problematic position, the Biennale del Dissenso opened on 15 November 1977 for one month. The city became the epicentre of an ambitious programme of events and activities, brought together under the banner of cultural dissent. [Fig. 6.1] It offered seven thematic conferences (dedicated to history, visual arts, religion, cinema, literature, religion, theatre and scientific research), three exhibitions, several monographic seminars, film screenings, theatre performances and poetry and literature recitals. The Biennale's *Annuario* from 1978 reported the participation of three hundred and fifty artists and intellectuals from twenty-four countries and more than 220.000 visitors (191.000 exclusively for the exhibitions).<sup>18</sup>

While Ripa di Meana had proclaimed his project's inclusive character and denied any anti-communist purpose, the image adopted for the event's promotional material seemed to contradict this view and evoked the will to break a totalitarian model. In fact, the banners and posters displayed on public buildings and monuments in Venice showed a "stella spezzata" (broken star): a five-pointed star with one of its points open or unfinished, referring to a possibility to open to and communicate with the exterior, and vice versa. This appropriation and reinterpretation of the symbol of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 certainly did not help to convince the filosoviet minds that this Biennale was not anticommunist. [Fig. 6.2]

### **1.3. The Western left, Eurocommunism and dissidence**

Before we examine the place attributed to the visual arts in the context of this biennial, we should delve into several political aspects of the time that show how much this particular edition on the sensitive theme of cultural dissidence was embedded in a web of political strategies and manoeuvres that operated both locally and regionally. These operations, in fact, went far beyond the simple dichotomy between a totalitarian East and a democratic West and introduced the question of the political transition from dictatorships of different South European countries (representatives from Spain, but also Portugal, participated in the

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<sup>18</sup> *Annuario 1978: eventi del 1976-77* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1979), 529.

Biennale's symposium "Libertà et Socialismo") and the alliance between different parties with the aim of destabilising the Soviet Union.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Italy had the largest communist party in the West. Deeply shocked by Pinochet's coup against Chilean president Salvador Allende in 1973, the leadership of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) envisaged an alliance with Christian Democracy (DC)—the so-called "historical compromise" backed by the PCI's first secretary Enrico Berlinguer and Aldo Moro, at that time one of the leaders of the DC—in order to achieve its project of coming to power.<sup>19</sup> These decisions contributed to increase the fractures within the Italian society and its polarisation, as other communist militants advocated a more radical revolutionary struggle. The radicalisation of the situation reached its climax with the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, in spring 1978.

In the national elections of 1976, the PCI reached a score of 34.4%, thus becoming the third national political party. This success was tempered, however, by the accession of Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti as a prime minister, who eventually excluded communists and socialists from his coalition government. Confronted with the rise of the PCI, the recently-elected first secretary of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) Benedetto (Bettino) Craxi strongly defended the idea of a left alternative, on the basis of a policy of autonomy from the social-communist tradition. Part of his strategy included attacking the PCI's still strong links with the Soviet Union and the search of a stronger connection with other European socialist and social-democratic parties.<sup>20</sup> In this context, the question of human rights became an important motive for Italian socialists, who searched to differentiate themselves through their endorsement of the cause of dissidents. An example of this polarisation of Italian political life and its public staging through various activities and debates reported in the press was the discussion between members of the PSI and the PCI organized by the monthly journal of the PSI, *Mondo Operaio*. The conclusions drawn by a reporter from Radio Free Europe are enlightening:

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<sup>19</sup> "Erri De Luca: "La mort d'Aldo Moro n'était pas le début de quelque chose, c'était le sommet de rien"", interview with Rico Rizzitelli, *Libération*, 8 May 2018, [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/05/08/erri-de-luca-la-mort-d-aldo-moro-n-etait-pas-le-debut-de-quelque-chose-c-etait-le-sommet-de-rien\\_1648619/](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/05/08/erri-de-luca-la-mort-d-aldo-moro-n-etait-pas-le-debut-de-quelque-chose-c-etait-le-sommet-de-rien_1648619/) (Accessed May 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Information retrieved from [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partito\\_Socialista\\_Italiano](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partito_Socialista_Italiano).

The special interest of this discussion lies in its demonstration of the extent to which dissent in Eastern Europe has become a central factor in the dialogue (or dialectic) between the communist and the noncommunist Left in Western Europe. More precisely: it shows how the “Eurocommunists” are being challenged by the “Eurosocialists” to draw the logical consequences from their insistence that democracy and socialism must go together, and apply that conclusion to their relations with the regimes of the East.<sup>21</sup>

It is certainly indicative that the debate organised by *Mondo Operaio* and made available to its readers also appeared, translated into French, in the February 1977 issue of *Politique Aujourd'hui*, a monthly magazine which aim was to report on “socialist researches and practices in the world”. The magazine, created in 1969, welcomed contributions from a wide range of non-communist intellectuals and claimed to be anti-Stalinist and close to different left-wing tendencies. Its founder, Paul Noirot, had been a member of the French Communist Party (PCF) but was excluded from it in 1969.

The question of supporting dissidence was thus discussed in a quite similar way within the circles of the French and Italian socialist parties, while communists from both countries tended to follow the Soviet orthodox line. In contrast, the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) immediately positioned itself in favor of Soviet and Eastern European dissidence. This can be in part explained by the fact that the PCE itself was an illegal and clandestine party since its foundation in 1921 (except during the Second Republic’s short existence between 1931 and 1933), until its legalization the 9 April 1977. Already in 1968, the Spanish communists condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact troupes, thus distinguishing themselves from their Western pairs. In its official–yet clandestine–media *Mundo Obrero*, the PCE denounced the violent repression of Polish workers’ demonstrations at the beginning of the 1970s and claimed its support to the Chart 77 in Czechoslovakia.<sup>22</sup> In an issue of *Mundo Obrero* from January 1977, the party’s spokesman Jorge Montoliu took an open stance against the official Soviet policy against dissidents. He criticised the use of law and judicial mechanisms (up to detention in mental-health institutions) instead of public debate, and

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<sup>21</sup> Kevin Devlin, “French leftists back Eastern dissidents”, Radio Free Europe RAD Background Report/180, 8 September 1977, 4. Open Society Archive, Budapest.

<sup>22</sup> It should be pointed at however that at that time, the PCE avoided direct attacks on the Soviet Union and focused instead on other real socialist regimes. Emanuele Treglia, “El PCE y el movimiento comunista internacional (1969-1977)”, *Cuadernos De Historia Contemporánea*, no. 37, 2015, 231. [https://doi.org/10.5209/rev\\_CHCO.2015.v37.50993](https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_CHCO.2015.v37.50993) (Accessed March 2020). Also Emanuele Treglia, “La elección de la vía nacional. La Primavera de Praga y la evolución política del PCE”, *Historia del Presente*, no. 16, 2010, 83-96.

pointed out that not all the dissidents have the same posture: it was not possible, according to him, to compare “reactionaries of the Solzhenitsyn type with Marxists who, as a fundamental basis of their “dissidence,” call for the democratic functioning of the party and of the institutions that have emerged from the revolution”.<sup>23</sup> Recalling the growing number of individuals and groups in Europe asking for a public debate on the issue of political reforms, Montoliu warned against the consequences of restraining fundamental political rights and liberties. This repressive action could be counterproductive and become “a breeding-ground for forces genuinely opposed to the development of socialism”, especially in the context of capitalist societies in which people was struggling “to build a new type of society, based upon the reign of liberty and total democracy”.<sup>24</sup> This position cannot be understood without taking into consideration the death of Franco in 1975 and the aspiration of the PCE to play an active role in the process of the Spanish transition to democracy and convert socialism into a fundamental option. In this context, the backing of totalitarian practices was not an option because it would have been eminently counter-productive for the participation of Spanish communists in the democratic process.<sup>25</sup>

The rise of Eurocommunism confirmed the Spanish party’s position of independence from the Soviet Union and its attachment to a democratic model of socialism. The first elements of a Eurocommunist movement were formulated in July 1975 during a meeting of delegations of the PCE and the PCI in Livorno, Italy. At that time, the PCE already maintained a privileged relationship with the PCI and both shared the same view in terms of international relations. This close tie can be also explained by the strength of the Italian anti-Franco solidarity movement.<sup>26</sup> In its XXII Congress in February 1976, the PCF gradually moved closer to the

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<sup>23</sup> Jorge Montoliu, “La “disidencia” en los países socialistas”, *Mundo Obrero*, 24-30 January 1977. Translated and cited in Kevin Devlin, “Spanish CP Spokesman Backs East European Dissidence,” Radio Free Europe, RAD Background Report/26, 4 February 1977, 2. Open Society Archive, Budapest.

<sup>24</sup> Montoliu, “La “disidencia” en los países socialistas”.

<sup>25</sup> José M. Faraldo has argued that “the debates about the transformation in Eastern European communism played a major part in developing the new line of the Spanish communists, and in shaping their central role during the Spanish transition to democracy.” José M. Faraldo, “Entangled Eurocommunism: Santiago Carrillo, the Spanish Communist Party and the Eastern Bloc during the Spanish Transition to Democracy, 1968–1982.” *Contemporary European History* 26, no. 4, 2017, abstract. Doi:10.1017/S0960777317000339 (Consulted March 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Emanuele Treglia, “El PCE y el movimiento comunista internacional (1969-1977)”, *Cuadernos De Historia Contemporánea*, no. 37, 2015, 232.

positions expressed by the other two parties, advocating full autonomy and a commitment to individual and collective freedoms as elements of a progressive democratic political force. This alliance sought to promote a new left internationalism that would break with the bloc logic of the Cold War. Establishing a dialogue between Western communists and social democrats, Emmanuele Treglia observed, “implied overcoming the limits of the communist movement to move towards the configuration of a broader progressive and anti-imperialist front on a European and world scale”.<sup>27</sup> The rupture was completed at the conference of the European Communist and Workers’ Parties held in East Berlin in June 1976. While the CPSU hoped to restore the convergence of the Parties, what finally prevailed was the divergence of perspectives. In March 1977, the first trilateral meeting between secretaries Santiago Carrillo (PCE), Enrico Berlinguer (PCI) and Georges Marchais (PCF) took place in Madrid, and resulted in a communiqué that reaffirmed their independence and their intention to build socialism in democracy. The PCF and PCI, however, were more lukewarm than the PCE and refused Carrillo’s proposal to take position against the violation of human rights in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Ukrainian dissident Leonid Plyushch (Léonide Pliouchtch), locked up in a psychiatric hospital between 1972 and 1976 and able to reach France after his expulsion in 1976 thanks to an international campaign of denunciation, also expressly asked the three parties to take a position in a letter sent before their meeting.<sup>28</sup>

The Soviet Union felt its authority threatened by this new alliance of three important communist parties in the West and expressed its concern in a letter that warned the PCI of the risks of a schism within the communist movement.<sup>29</sup> The PCF was the first to return to a position closer to the CPSU, at the end of 1977, marking the beginning of the decline of the Eurocommunist possibility. Without their French partner, Italian and Spanish communists couldn’t hope to play a significant role on the international political chessboard. Despite this,

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<sup>27</sup> Treglia, “El PCE y el movimiento comunista internacional (1969-1977)”, 240.

<sup>28</sup> Treglia, “El PCE y el movimiento comunista internacional (1969-1977)”, 247-248.

<sup>29</sup> Treglia, “El PCE y el movimiento comunista internacional (1969-1977)”, 247.

the PCE maintained this position, in part as “an indigenous strategy” for adapting the party to the democratic transition.<sup>30</sup>

With these elements in mind, we better understand why the Venice Biennale of 1977 dedicated to cultural dissent was such a crucial arena for socialist and communist political actors on both sides of the Iron Curtain. It is in fact in the light of the rise of Eurocommunism as a political alternative for the European left and its threat to the authority of the Soviet Union that we must understand the strong crystallisation of conflicts and expectations (but also disappointments) around the event. The debates regarding the respective merits of a democratic socialism or an orthodox one (i.e. in line with the CPUS), as well as the need to take human rights into account, left the confidential space of internal discussions between political leaders and activists to be transposed to a public stage, thus acquiring considerable international visibility and media coverage. With the Biennale as a sounding board, the question of dissidence was likely to interpellate a broader range of people who had remained little informed about this issue and this aspect, obviously, was a concern for Soviet and Eastern European authorities.

Carlo Ripa di Meana’s decision to open the Biennale del Dissenso with a historical symposium titled “History/Freedom and Socialism Historical moments of Dissent” (“Storia/Libertà e socialismo Momenti storici del Dissenso”) bringing together dissidents, intellectuals and politicians from Eastern and Western European undoubtedly contributed to give public visibility to these debates.<sup>31</sup> The presence of a large number of participants from France, Italy and Spain was indicative of their interest in these issues.

Without dwelling too long on this event, it can be said that two main visions clashed. The first, close to the orientation of Eurocommunism, sought to implement a new relationship between socialism and democracy while remaining within the framework of the Marxist-

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<sup>30</sup> Faraldo, “Entangled Eurocommunism: Santiago Carrillo, the Spanish Communist Party and the Eastern Bloc during the Spanish Transition to Democracy, 1968–1982”, article’s abstract. Emanuele Treglia has observed that this decision will have negative consequences on the PCE, since it emanates from the head of the party (Carrillo and Azcárate) and not from the base, which is still largely made up of pro-Soviet militants who are reticent about extending links with social democracy. Emanuele Treglia, 252.

<sup>31</sup> The symposium was organised by Paolo Flores d’Arcais and took place in the Napoleonic Wing of the Correr Museum, 15-18 November 1977. A few days before (11-13 November), still in Venice, the symposium “Power and opposition in post-revolutionary societies” (“Potere e opposizione nelle società post-rivoluzionarie”) took place in the initiative of the communist daily *Il Manifesto*. Some of its participants will also contribute to the congress “Storia/Libertà e socialismo Momenti storici del Dissenso”.

Leninist doctrine and the structure of political parties; the second was more interested in abandoning this framework to promote above all the defense of human and citizens rights, without necessarily putting forward a political ideology and an apparatus for defending this ideology—this position, endorsed by the French “Nouveaux philosophes” was often described as “right-wing” by orthodox socialists. While the position of French and Italian participants was distributed across the whole range of orientations, those from Spain and the Iberian Peninsula remained close to the first option, a fact that can be explained by their countries’ recent emergence from right-wing dictatorships and their desire to convert left-wing political parties into central players in the democratic transition. Among the Spanish participants to the symposium “Storia/Libertà e socialismo Momenti storici del Dissenso” were Pedro Vilanova, Fernando Claudín and Jesús Izcaray. Vilanova talked about the “eurocommunist phenomena” from his own experience of young Spanish (Catalan) militant and pointed at the relations between the PCE and stalinism (“The new dissent and eurocommunism”/“Il nuovo dissenso e l’eurocomunismo”), Claudín addressed the sociopolitical character of the soviet system (“Sociopolitical aspects of the Soviet system”/“Caratteri sociopolitici del sistema sovietico”) and the communist writer Izgaray evoked the cultural situation.<sup>32</sup>

We should also mention the presence of other participants from the Iberian peninsula, the Portuguese Melo Antunes and César Oliveira. The latest would then publish a report of the event in the cultural magazine *Triunfo*—already mentioned in Chapter four in relation to the Pamplona Encounters—in which he highlighted the huge differences in positions between the participants in the symposium “Storia/Libertà e socialismo”. [Fig. 6.3] While pointing out the contributions of participants from the Iberian Peninsula (including Spain and Portugal as cultural spaces with affinities), who, according to him, were situated “from a perspective closer to that of the European peoples—that is, aiming at maintaining socialism while seeking a new model based on freedom and democracy—the author also signaled the presence of right-wing positions. In particular, he ironised on the participation of the new French philosopher André Glucksmann, this “star of Mr Giscard d’Estaing’s television” who proclaimed the death of Marxism. Glucksmann, observed the journalist, “was especially interested in putting on a “show” of contestation to everything, like a modern Bakunin without, however, the

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<sup>32</sup> *Annuario 1978: eventi del 1976-77*, 535-536.

seriousness of authenticity”.<sup>33</sup> At the end of his report, Oliveira recalled that the symposium on “Post-revolutionary experiences” organised a few days earlier by *Il Manifesto* would be followed by another meeting in Barcelona, in 1978.<sup>34</sup>

In the same issue, *Triunfo* gave voice to different readings of the event which. Another article expressed the adhesion of its author to Glucksmann’s ideas and behaviour, confirming how polarised and complex was the Western left’s understanding of dissidence at that time.<sup>35</sup>

The discussions in Venice clearly demonstrated that the Western leftists who were seeking to define their own position and power in the shifting field of European politics were viewed mostly critically by the other participants. Edit Sasvári has observed that “the relationship between western and East European intellectuals was like that of two parallels never meant to meet in infinity”, referring to a “vividly grotesque” situation in which poets and intellectuals in exile had to listen to Western intellectuals glossing over the culture of their own country.<sup>36</sup> Reporting on her experience with these debates, Russian poet Natalya Gorbanevskaya also insisted on the opportunism of certain politicians and intellectuals: “What also struck me in Venice was the willingness of some Eurocommunists to take dissent in their arms, to make it their object and use it for their own purposes”.<sup>37</sup> Gorbanevskaya, who was the only woman to participate in the symposium “Storia/Libertà e socialismo Momenti storici del Dissenso”, also denounced the attempt to apply to Russian dissidents some systems of value that were foreign to them and did not correspond to their own. Citing the Russian poet and writer Alexander Galitch, she insisted on the importance to differentiate the idea of a “dissident literature”

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<sup>33</sup> The author, César Oliveira, is a Portuguese anticolonial and socialist militant. César Oliveira, “El carnaval de la disidencia”, *Triunfo*, no. 775, 3 December 1977, 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> There is no historical trace of such sort of meeting in Barcelona, which leads one to believe that it was eventually cancelled.

<sup>35</sup> In another article about the Biennale del Dissenso, the socialist intellectual Ignacio Sotelo—who had emigrated to Germany in 1960 due to his persecution as an antifrancoist—criticised the European communists who have failed to see and denounce Soviet totalitarianism. He instead celebrated Glucksmann’s stand in favour of human rights. Ignacio Sotelo, “Libertad y socialismo”, *Triunfo*, no. 777, 17 December 1977, 27-28. See also Fernando Savater’s review of Glucksmann’s book *La cocinera y el devorador de hombres*, just translated to Spanish: Fernando Savater, “El Gulag y la revolución”, *Triunfo*, no. 777, 17 December 1977, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Sasvári, “Eastern Europe Under Western Eyes. The “Dissident Biennale”, Venice, 1997”, 20.

<sup>37</sup> “Ce qui m’a frappée également à Venise, c’est la volonté de certains eurocommunistes de prendre la dissidence dans leurs bras, d’en faire leur objet et de l’utiliser à leurs propres fins.[...]” Gorbanevskaya, who spent two years in a psychiatric hospital in the early 1970s for taking part in a demonstration against the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, emigrated to France in 1975. Natalya Gorbanevskaya, “Le droit à notre propre discours,” *Artpress* no. 15, February 1978, 19.



from that of a “literature by dissidents”. Such distinction was, in fact, also relevant in the field of the visual arts.

## **2. Visual arts at the Biennale del Dissenso**

### **2.1 Dissident art, poetics of the crisis or mediocre art?**

While the public perception of the event passed mainly through a political grid, how was its artistic dimension envisaged? We will focus now on a series of exchanges between the art critic and historian Giulio Carlo Argan and the president of the Biennale Carlo Ripa di Meana. I argue that in the context of the Biennale, the discussion between Argan and Ripa di Meana illustrates an important shift from a (geo)political to an aesthetic-artistic approach. At the same time, the tone and the content of the discussions regarding the quality of the dissident art exhibited at the Biennale and its legitimacy to appear in this context leaves no doubt as to their political subtext, which reflected Ripa di Meana and Argan’s respective political and intellectual engagements. The analysis of these exchanges, reported in the press, makes it possible to problematise the relation between artistic production and political ideology and, at the same time, to give an account of the place—both imaginary and real—attributed to Central and Eastern European art in the framework of this particular edition of the Biennial.

In a letter published in the weekly *L'Espresso*, Argan expressed his doubts about the idea of a “Biennale del dissenso”. He insisted on the fact that his comment was not motivated by “the fact that dissident artists from socialist countries are dissidents, but [by] the fact that they are, as far as I know, artists of mediocre importance”.<sup>38</sup> While he ironically recognised that he was sensitive to the “red cross nurse’s pawn with which the Biennial runs as soon as a political victim complains”, the art historian pointed out that the role of the international exhibition could not be reduced to a simple expression of human solidarity. Argan warned of the consequences of a “Solzhenitsyn parade” and the lack of discernment this new fascination

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<sup>38</sup> “[...] non certamente dal fatto che gli artisti dissidenti dei paesi socialisti fossero dissidenti, ma dal loro essere, per quanti lo conoscevo, artisti di mediocre importanza”. Giulio Carlo Argan, “È una Biennale o un mercato?”, *L'Espresso*, 27 February 1977, 27. Quote retrieved from Franco Escoffier, “Dissidenti sì, ma artisti mediocri”, *Il Gazzettino*, 28 October 1977.

for the exiled Russian writer and his pairs could imply.<sup>39</sup> The title under which his letter was published, “Is it a biennial or a market?”, confirmed that for the Roman art historian, the inclusion of art and artists in an international artistic event in the name of solidarity was not a satisfactory option.

Ripa di Meana’s answer was not long in coming and the president immediately suggested that Argan’s supposed concern for the quality of art at the Biennale was hiding in reality his complicity with other political interests. At that time, Argan was the mayor of Rome elected with the support of the Communists. Ripa di Meana’s allusion to Argan’s alliance with the PCI and, by extension, the PCUS, was manifest: “I prefer to be a nurse for political victims than to be like Argan, a tailor, a hairdresser for the powerful, a warlord in the aesthetic service of power”.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to Argan’s aesthetic judgement, in which he saw a mark of snobbery based on an elitist “high quality criterion”, Ripa di Meana insisted on his willingness to stage the relationship between culture and power in an expanded field:

As soon as Brezhnev arches his eyebrows, Argan hastens to lecture him on the bad quality of dissident painting, as if dissent in Eastern European countries was and is only manifested by those few semi-clandestine abstractionists who seem more provincial to him than the official Zdanovists. Poor little painters, poor men, you haven’t managed to do anything good, so better to continue with the others: is that what you mean? I answer him that here we intend to operate in the field of the observation of a phenomenon that also includes painting, but is much broader.<sup>41</sup>

Quite significantly, these exchanges were taking place in February 1977, when the Biennale’s general theme was known, but not its specific contents. The discussions were therefore based on speculation more than on reliable information, which gave a measure of the protagonists’

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<sup>39</sup> “Apprezzo lo zelo da crocerossina con cui la Biennale corre là dove una vittima politica si lamenta [...]” Argan, “È una Biennale o un mercato?”, cited in Giancarlo del Re, “Dissenso sul dissenso”, *Il Messaggero*, 3 March 1977, 13.

<sup>40</sup> “Preferisco essere una crocerossina di vittime politiche che essere come Argan un sarto, un parucchiere di potenti, un caudatario al servizio estetico del potere.” Carlo Ripa di Meana, cited in del Re, “Dissenso sul dissenso”.

<sup>41</sup> “Appena Breznev inarca le sopraciglia, Argan si affretta a fargli lezione sulla cattiva qualità della pittura del dissenso, come se il dissenso nei Paesi dell’Est lo avessero manifestato e lo manifestassero solo quei pochi astrattisti semiclandestini che a lui sembrano più provinciali dei pompieri zdanovisti. Poveri pittorelli, poveri untorelli, non siete riusciti a combinare niente di buono, perciò meglio meglio continuare con gli altri : questo vuol dire ? Gli rispondo che qui si intende operare nel campo di osservazione di un fenomeno che comprende anche la pittura, ma è enormemente più vasto”. Carlo Ripa di Meana, cited in del Re, “Dissenso sul dissenso”.

concern. We can wonder indeed if Argan would have taken the trouble to criticise in such a virulent manner other non politically-connoted exhibitions without knowing their contents.

Later the same year, Argan traveled to Moscow, partly to plan in collaboration with the Soviet government a major exhibition of Russian avant-garde art from the 1920s, scheduled the following year in Rome. In an interview with the official newspaper *Izvestija* reported in the Italian press, he reiterated his attacks on the Biennale.<sup>42</sup> Italian journalists highlighted Argan's "philo-Soviet" spirit but the Socialist leader in Rome's municipality, Pierluigi Severi, reproached him his attitude and reminded him of his duties, as the "first citizen", to represent the political expression of the coalition that governed the city.<sup>43</sup> Argan in reaction invoked his freedom of opinion as a critic and art historian, thus sustaining the thesis of a successful separation between his professional activity and his political responsibilities. "All dissent is lawful, but a weak art is a weak expression of dissent", he insisted, relating in this case aesthetic value with a supposed moral virtue a way that contradicted his previous comments, claiming for a complete separation of artistic production and politics. For Argan, turning dissidence into an artistic category was culturally risky especially because "[t]he art of dissidence does not exist. There are artists who are also dissidents. In what they do, however, there is no "poetics" of the "crisis", no artistic intention that can be linked to their political condition".<sup>44</sup>

The above-mentioned exchange regarding the quality of dissident art—of which only a brief selection is transcribed here—reflects two diverging approaches. **[Fig. 6.4]** On the one hand, in accordance with the principles of his New Biennial, Carlo Ripa di Meana contemplated dissidence from a sociological perspective, as a political intervention in the social fabric that could be perceived and explored through various cultural forms. On the other hand, we can read Giulio Carlo Argan's reticence towards the idea of dissident art in relation to his own conception of art and art criticism articulated, since the end of the 1950s,

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<sup>42</sup> "Se dovessi scegliere io. Colloquio con Giulio Carlo Argan", *L'Espresso*, 29 October 1977, 103 ; Claudia Giannini, "Argan ribadisce le accuse (fatte a Mosca) alla Biennale del Dissenso", 27 October 1977. Publication name unknown, article retrieved from the press dossier, ASAC, Fondo storico, arti visive.

<sup>43</sup> Giannini, "Argan ribadisce le accuse (fatte a Mosca) alla Biennale del Dissenso." See also Escoffier, "Dissidenti sì, ma artisti mediocri."

<sup>44</sup> "Non esiste un'arte del dissenso. Esistono degli artisti che sono anche dissidenti. In ciò che loro fanno però non c'è una "poetica" della "crisi", non c'è un'intenzione artistica che possa legarsi alla loro condizione politica." "Se dovessi scegliere io. Colloquio con Giulio Carlo Argan", 103.

as two strongly connected fields in the context of society.<sup>45</sup> We have seen earlier in this dissertation in fact that as a militant critic, Argan gave art criticism a creative dimension and an organic role within the social and political system.<sup>46</sup> Let's recall that for him, art criticism was an act of "total solidarity" with the artist that entails a co-responsibility towards the world.<sup>47</sup> Keeping these aspects in mind, we can understand Argan's critical perspective on "dissident art" as a rejection of any kind of production that would respond directly (as a mere illustration) to a social and political reality experienced by the artists. This kind of approach would suppress art criticism's central creative role, promoted by Argan.

Paradoxically, Argan's conception of art criticism had also been accused of instrumentalising artists and altering their own creative processes. In the early 1960s, in the context of the debates around art informel and their posterior developments in San Marino and Verucchio, Argan's idea of the moral responsibility and social function of the art critic was contested by various artists and critics. Among them was the young art historian Carla Lonzi, who saw in his position an "anguished and anguishing" gesture that did not respect the artwork's own discourse and temporality.<sup>48</sup> The alternative between, on the one hand, Argan's position and, on the other, that of the communist painter Renato Guttuso—the most "socialist

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<sup>45</sup> Carlotta Sylos Calò suggests that Argan's idea for an art with a socially and politically committed art can be found in the model developed by the Bauhaus in the years that precede the Second World War years. Carlotta Sylos Calò, "Giulio Carlo Argan e la critica d'arte degli anni Sessanta tra rivoluzione e contestazione," *Horti. Hesperidum*, III, 2, November 2013, 201.

<sup>46</sup> Argan's position regarding militant art criticism, in particular in the 1960s, has been analysed in depth in Paula Barreiro López in the section "Militant criticism "all'Argan"" of her book. Paula Barreiro López, *Avant-garde and Criticism in Francoist Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 137-149. See also Paula Barreiro López, "La critique militante: culture et revolution," in *Entre élection et sélection: la critique face à ses choix*, dir. Claire Leroux and Jean-Marc Poinot (Paris, Presses du Réel, 2017), 206-207.

<sup>47</sup> See Giulio Carlo Argan, "L'essence de la critique", in *Actes. XIe Congrès de l'AICA "Art et critique"*, Prague, 1966, Ref. FR ACA AICAI BIB IMP005, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Sylos Calò, "Giulio Carlo Argan e la critica d'arte degli anni Sessanta tra rivoluzione e contestazione", 142-143.

realist” of Italian artists—was a recurrent issue in that context.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, both Argan and Guttuso would position themselves against the Biennale del Dissenso a few years later.<sup>50</sup>

We should also mention the fact that in 1977, Argan was almost seventy years old. It was said that his insistence on art’s social function and the intellectual’s role as a guide for the society prevented him from acknowledging the importance of the present and its reality in new artistic tendencies such as Pop Art, arte povera or conceptual art.<sup>51</sup> In the 1970s, the art historian and critic started in fact to feel disconnected from the new artistic tendencies and was progressively forced to abandon his position as a militant critic, as he admitted in an interview with Tommaso Trini in 1980:

I feel unprepared to deal with the problem of art today, which cannot be set up in terms of value because values and the idea of value are being contested; and there is no unit of measurement that does not have the privilege/legitimacy of value. Hence, my fear, my reluctance to pronounce judgements.<sup>52</sup>

From this perspective, we could also understand Argan’s reaction to the idea of dissident art as an outburst against a rhetoric that was more familiar to him (art at the service of ideology *versus* art at the service of society), which allowed him to take position and support the

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<sup>49</sup> Regarding her reaction to Argan’s position expressed in 1963, Carla Lonzi remembered: “At the time, critics had reproached me for my position and accused me of discrediting modern art in Italy by hitting one of its official defenders, and of strengthening Guttuso’s power. ...] I could not, in all conscience, accept this reasoning. Indeed, the problem was to get over Argan’s position, to get out of the Argan/Guttuso alternative” (“À l’époque, des critiques m’avaient reproché ma position et m’avaient accusée de discréditer l’art moderne en Italie en frappant l’un de ses défenseurs officiels, et de renforcer le pouvoir de Guttuso. [...] Ce raisonnement, je ne pouvais, en conscience, l’accepter. En effet, le problème était de passer par dessus la position d’Argan, de sortir de l’alternative Argan/Guttuso.”) Carla Lonzi, *Autoportrait* (1969) (Zürich: jsp ringier, 2012), 106.

<sup>50</sup> Luca Guido, in his critical revision of the Biennale del Dissenso, observed that “Renato Guttuso disapproved of the media clamour raised by Meana and underlined the cultural inconsistency of his project, recalling that “Soviet laws [...] do not allow participations that are not decided by official bodies.” Renato Guttuso, “Biennale e dissenso: i problemi, i pretesti”, *L’Unità*, 17 March 1977, 4, cited in Luca Guido, “La Biennale del Dissenso del ’77”, *Archphoto*, online publication 14 August 2013. <https://www.archphoto.it/archives/1712>

<sup>51</sup> Carlotta Sylos Calò observes that from the 1960s on, he keeps his distance from contemporary poetics, whose implications he hardly manages to grasp. In 1964, while Rauschenberg’s has already won the prize at the Venice Biennale, Argan declares that pop art is marked by the depreciation and negation of the operative process. Sylos Calò, “Giulio Carlo Argan e la critica d’arte degli anni Sessanta tra rivoluzione e contestazione”, 214-215 and 217.

<sup>52</sup> “Mi sento impreparato—scrive—ad affrontare il problema dell’arte di oggi, che non può impostarsi in termini di valore giacché proprio i valori e l’idea di valore sono contestati; e manca una unità di misura che non abbia il privilegio del valore. Di qui, la mia paura, la mia riluttanza a pronunciare giudizi.” Giulio Carlo Argan, in Tommaso Trini, *Argan. Intervista sulla fabbrica dell’arte* (Bari: Laterza, 1980), 49. Cited in Sylos Calò, “Giulio Carlo Argan e la critica d’arte degli anni Sessanta tra rivoluzione e contestazione,” 205.

values he believed in, in the context of a contemporary debate from which he felt distant or even excluded.

Despite their differences, both the idea of dissident art conveyed by Carlo Ripa di Meana and its interpretation by Giulio Carlo Argan had something in common: their lack of contact and dialogue with the true protagonists of their debate. While Natalya Gobanevskaya reclaimed the “right to our own discourse and our own value systems”, the debate on “dissident aesthetics” held in the context of the Biennale del Dissenso hardly involved artists who were designated as dissidents and as such, it did not rely on equal exchange between the different parts.<sup>53</sup> This unbalance was reinforced by the fact that most of the artists invited to participate in the event couldn’t be physically present or, even worse, had their works exhibited without giving their consent.

Among the participants, the Russian writer and poet Joseph Brodsky—resident in the United States since 1972—took a public stand in the debate. He became the protagonist of a debate in the press with the Italian Slavist, literary critic and translator Vittorio Strada who, in the newspaper *La Repubblica*, compared the Biennale with a “charity party” and a cultural manifestation in Uganda.<sup>54</sup> Brodsky came from the field of literature, however, and no visual artist publicly expressed similar positions, which is also indicative of the lack of concern and identification of visual creators with a condition of dissidence.

At the same time, while criticising its instrumental use and its irrelevance, the discussions about the quality of dissident art seemed to imply that such a category existed. This is, in my view, one of the most crucial issues raised by this Biennale, on which consensus was reached between participants, organisers and spectators: what exactly was meant by “dissident art” or “cultural dissidence”, and did this category exist at all?

## **2.2. An unrealised exhibition. Central European art at the Biennale**

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<sup>53</sup> “Finally, I would like to say that the most important thing for us is that our right to our own discourse and our own value systems, which we have been most cruelly deprived of until now, is finally recognised here.” (“Pour finir je dirai que l’essentiel pour nous est qu’on reconnaisse ici, enfin, notre droit à notre propre discours et à nos propres systèmes de valeurs, c’est-à-dire ce dont nous avons été le plus cruellement privés jusqu’à maintenant.”) Gobanevskaya, “Le droit à notre propre discours”, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Quite paradoxically, Strada, who is a member of the PCI and will not participate in the Biennale, has on the other hand been a crucial contributor for the diffusion of dissident literature in Italy. Simone Guagnelli, “Rane, elefanti e cavalli. Vittorio Strada e la Biennale del 1977”, *eSamizdat*, VIII, 2010-2011, 317-329; Carlo Ripa di Meana and Gabriela Mecucci, *L'ordine di Mosca. Fermate la Biennale del Dissenso* (Rome: Liberal Edizioni, Rome, 2007), chapter on “The Cowardice of the intellectuals”.

A closer look at the organisation of the artistic part (visual arts section) of the Biennial will allow us to address this issue and its treatment by different actors. In the context of the Biennale del Dissenso, three exhibitions covered different aspects of cultural production in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: “La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale” at the Palazzetto dello Sport, “Grafica Ceccoslovacca: Undici anni di ricerca 1965-1975” at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia and “Libri, Riviste, Manifesti, Fotografie, Videotapes, Samizdat” at the Museo Correr.

“La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale” was the most extensive of the three exhibitions and brought together over five hundred works by Russian artists residing in the Soviet Union and abroad. Its curators, Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella Moncada (today, Gabriella Di Milia Moncada), were appointed by Ripa di Meana in summer 1977 and were expected to organise the whole visual section. Neither of the two was in favour of using the term “dissident” to refer to art produced in socialist territory outside the spheres authorised by the government. An art historian and a Slavist, Gabriella Moncada had previously written about the situation of unofficial art in the Soviet Union. In 1975, she already exposed her scepticism about the use of the term “dissent” in a review titled “Three painters beyond dissidence” (“Tre pittori oltre il Dissent”):

There is a bad habit of describing Soviet artist as “dissident.” But then one is forced to admit that they are almost always “conformist” from a pictorial standpoint. However, there do exist in the Soviet Union a number of artists who are truly independent from the dominant cultural models, and who won’t disappoint a Western viewer. Among those whom I met in the past few years, I found the most interesting ones to be Ilja Kabakov, Vladimir Jankilevskij and Jurij Sobolev, all based in Moscow.<sup>55</sup>

Enrico Crispolti was already a consolidated professional who had played a precursory role in the diffusion of art from the Soviet Union and socialist Eastern Europe in Italy, from the mid-1960s onwards. Trained in Rome, he belonged to the generation of art historians that came after Lionello Venturi and Giulio Carlo Argan, of whom he had been a student. One of Crispolti’s main fields of expertise was Futurism. His reading of the movement had extended

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<sup>55</sup> Gabriella Moncada, “Tre pittori oltre il Dissenso”, *Il Giorno*, 8 June 1975. Translated and cited in Frimmel and Bertelé, “Salon Suisse-Criticism and Dissent: 1977 Re-enacted: La nuova arte Sovietica”, 2. In this event, Bertelé and Frimmel reconstructed the history of the exhibition before and after its opening, relying on archival and press documentation, with the participation of Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella Moncada.

its chronological limits (until 1944, when Marinetti died) and made its relations with Italian Fascism more complex. In the previous decades, Crispolti had also shown interest for art informel and, more generally, European painting of the second half of the twentieth century. He had remained at the margins of the debates around the role of art criticism led by Argan and other militant critics. In fact, while considering himself a militant critic, he was not at ease with the designation's political connotations. In the framework of the series of exhibitions "Alternative Attuali" organized in L'Aquila between 1962 and 1968, Crispolti had exhibited Russian artists Francesco Infante, Lev Nussberg and Ilya Kabakov as well as the Czech surrealists Toyen and Jindřich Štyrský (1965 and 1968) without insisting, however, on their relation with the socialist sphere.<sup>56</sup> Before the Biennale del Dissenso, the art critic had been already involved in the new model of Venice Biennale as the curator of the Italian section "Environment as social" ("L'Ambiente come sociale"), in 1976. It is in part for his previous involvement in the Biennale and his experience that Crispolti was solicited in 1977.<sup>57</sup> Documentation from the Biennale's archive reflects his strong involvement in the organisation and his repeated, yet unsuccessful attempts to collaborate with the socialist authorities and bring artists from Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland to the Biennale.

The main visual arts exhibition of the Biennale del Dissenso was initially conceived as a survey of the artistic avant-garde in socialist Europe, including recent art from Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, as well as from the Soviet Union. Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella Moncada insisted on the didactic dimension of the exhibition and wanted to complement it with several explanations and a catalogue including essays that would address situation of the visual arts in the four countries. We can find in the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC) documents related to this abandoned project, initially titled "Aspects of research in USSR/Czechoslovakia/Poland/Hungary" ("Aspetti di ricerca in URSS/Cecoslovacchia/Polonia/Ungheria"), then "Visual avant-garde in Eastern Europe" ("Avanguardia visiva nell'est europeo") and also "New tendencies in the field of visual arts in Eastern Europe" ("Le nuove tendenze nel campo delle arti visive in Europa

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<sup>56</sup> Regarding the artists from the Soviet Union shown in L'Aquila, Crispolti had specified that their works were "part of the exhibition, not as representatives of Soviet art, but as interesting artists." Maria-Kristiina Soomre, interview with Enrico Crispolti, in the framework of the exhibition "Archives in translation. Biennial of Dissent'77" at the KUMU Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia, 23 June 2007 (Accessed in April 2017, not available anymore).

<sup>57</sup> Soomre, "Art, Politics and Exhibitions: (Re)writing the History of (Re)presentations", 116.



dell'est"). [Fig. 6.5] Documentation includes correspondence with artists and collaborators, lists of artworks, as well as some essays commissioned for the catalogue, eventually not published due to the program's change.

Crispolti and Moncada were well aware of the differences between the contemporary art scenes in the three countries and their respective official policies: marginalised and censored in Czechoslovakia, contemporary art enjoyed, according to them, an "official space" in Hungary and Poland.<sup>58</sup> While the Czech and Slovak scenes were more familiar to them, in the case of Poland and Hungary they consulted exhibitions catalogues or other publications in order to establish a first list of participants: the catalogues of "Aspects of Polish Arts" held at the Galeria Współczesna in Warsaw (1975), "Hungria '74" at the CAYC in Buenos Aires (1974) and "Neue Kunst aus Ungarn" organized by László Beke at the Galerie Lometsch in Kassel (1977), as well as an article on the Hungarian scene by Dieter Honisch, published in *Kunst-Magazin* (January 1977). In the case of Czechoslovakia, contacts and names were provided by Alexej Kusak, a Czech literary scholar and editor based in West Germany who collaborated with the organisation of the exhibition.<sup>59</sup>

In October 1977, Enrico Crispolti traveled to Warsaw and Budapest in order to find artists and arrange their participation. In a letter sent to Janusz Przewoźny, director of the section of plastic arts of the Polish Ministry of Culture and Arts, Carlo Ripa di Meana asked the government to collaborate by facilitating Crispolti's meeting with Polish artists, critics and organizers. The letter included a list of artists among whom Zbigniew Dłubak, Andrzej Lachowicz, Natalia LL, Roman Opalka, Andrzej Partum, Józef Robakowski, Jarosław Kozłowski, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and many others. The two contacts designated as "art critics and organizers" were Alicia Kepinska and Zdzislaw Sosnowski, for the *Współczesna*

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<sup>58</sup> Anonymous, "Biennale 1977/Arti Visive. Aspetti di ricerca in URSS-Cecoslovacchia-Polonia-Ungheria", document, ASAC, Fondo storico, arti visive, Box 271.

<sup>59</sup> At the end of 1977, Kusak tried to organise the circulation of the exhibition (then entitled "New cultural trends in Eastern Europe") to different institutions in the United States and Western Europe. The scale of the proposal, which numbered 400 works, generally led to a refusal, also motivated by scheduling issues. Among the institutions that answered positively were the Oregon State University, through its Director of International exchange exhibitions, Gordon W. Gilkey and the Kunsthalle of Nuremberg, whose director Curt Heigl told Kusak he was preparing an exhibition on East/West relations for 1979. The large list of organisations contacted by Kusak (from MoMA, the Smithsonian to Fine Art Museums and museums in France, Germany and the UK) reflects his ambition of having the exhibition on display in prestigious institutions. ASAC, Fondo storico, arti visive, box 268.

Gallery.<sup>60</sup> The difficulties faced by Crispolti, in particular the lack of cooperation from the local authorities and the reluctance of certain artists to participate in the exhibition, forced him to abandon the idea of including Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the exhibition programme:

I spent two or three days there trying to meet the necessary people. Every time I went to an office, I received a reply that the required officials had already left. Yet, I did manage to communicate with different artists, of course under strict supervision. I met an abstractionist who worked in the spirit of Vasarely and was officially also very high valued, As far as I know, he even belonged to the Central Committee. Hence, there probably was no official opposition to the avant-garde. Nevertheless, I was unable to achieve anything. The Hungarians were very slow: for two or three days nothing happened.<sup>61</sup>

As Edit Sasvári pointed out, the Hungarian authorities had their own action plan to counter the organisation and prevent their nationals from participating in an event which, in their opinion, was interfering with the country's internal affairs—and that of the socialist bloc.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the hindrances put up by the socialist authorities, what Crispolti's anecdote—and also the excerpt from Gabriella Moncada's article quoted above—reveals is the confusion that reigned at that time concerning the idea of “dissident” art: it was not necessarily associated with an avant-gardist or experimental attitude. As Crispolti recalled, some of the works displayed in “La Nuova Arte sovietica” had already been exhibited in the context of official exhibitions organised by the Soviet authorities abroad. This confirms the thickness (or even in some cases, the inexistence) of the line between official and unofficial art. In fact, the Venetian exhibition included a slide-show where images of official events, some of them held in the United States, could be seen. They confirmed the curators' interest in escaping from the

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<sup>60</sup> Carlo Ripa di Meana to Janusz Przewoźny, letter dated September 21, 1977. While the names of numerous Polish artists appeared on the list, those of Kwiekulik, Jan Swidzinski, Ana Kutera, Romuald Kutera and Lech Mrozek did not. We also find in the same folder a note with Crispolti's itinerary: 10 to 15 October in Budapest, 15-16 October in East Berlin, 16 from 21 October in Warsaw. ASAC, Fondo storico, arti visive, box 270.

<sup>61</sup> Soomre, interview with Enrico Crispolti.

<sup>62</sup>“Among other things, the plan of action recommended the rejection of passport applications of those intending to travel and the persuasion of all invited “artists with a professional reputation” to turn down the invitation. Another proposal was to identify which cultural events planned to take place across Italy under the duration of the Biennale could be used for purposes of counterpropaganda”. Sasvári, “Eastern Europe Under Western Eyes. The “Dissident Biennale”, Venice, 1997”, 17. On counter propaganda and cultural events parallel to the Biennale, see also Bertelé, “Venice 1977: (counter)celebrations of the October Revolution”, 67-87.

frame of “dissident art” to provide a broader perspective on artistic developments in the Soviet Union and Central Europe.<sup>63</sup>

Confronted with the socialist authorities’ refusal to cooperate, Crispolti and Moncada turned to Western institutions (even the Paris Biennale was solicited for the work of Czechoslovak artists) or private collectors, as an ultimate attempt to get some artworks from Central European artists. In the meantime, however, some artists from the region started to express their refusal to participate in the Biennale. In a telegram to Carlo Ripa di Meana, Jiří Valoch vehemently refused to be involved in the congress “Avanguardie e neoavanguardie nell’est europeo” and prohibited the use of his works.<sup>64</sup> Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch also expressed their disagreement about the inclusion of their work in the exhibition, considering that its orientation did not match with their own reading of their work.<sup>65</sup>

In parallel with the search for works of Central European artists, various authors were asked to write an essay for the catalogue the curators planned to publish along with the exhibition.<sup>66</sup> The French art historian Geneviève Benamou and the Czech writer and art historian Véra Linhartová were solicited. At that time, Benamou was working on her book *L’Art aujourd’hui en Tchécoslovaquie*, which was the result of an extensive research carried out as a student during. She spent two-years in Czechoslovakia, during which she was in straight contact with the local art scene.<sup>67</sup> This well-illustrated book Benamou self-published in 1979 has remained relatively unknown until today, despite the fact that provides valuable

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<sup>63</sup> “There was also an informative side to the exhibition. There were pictures of how unofficial exhibitions were taking place in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, there was also one slide show from the official art exhibition discourse, for example, on official exhibitions in the USA, and on exhibition catalogue. It is highly interesting that my exhibition and the official exhibitions organized by the Soviet Union also had common elements. Some artists were represented in both selections. For me, this was extremely interesting”. Soomre, interview with Enrico Crispolti.

<sup>64</sup> Telegram from Jiří Valoch to Carlo Ripa di Meana, dated 2 November 1977, ASAC, Fondo storico, arti visive, box 276.

<sup>65</sup> Štembera and Mlčoch’s reaction is reported in Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, London, 2012), 149.

<sup>66</sup>The catalogue should have included an introduction by Carlo Ripa di Meana and texts by Enrico Crispolti (one introduction and one regarding the situation in the Soviet Union), Pierre Gaudibert, Gabriella Moncada, Igor Golomstock, Vera Linhartová, Geneviève Benamou, as well as two unidentified authors on the situation in Poland and Hungary. “Schema provvisorio del catalogo della mostra “Avanguardia viva all’est Europeo”, ASAC, Fondo storico, arti visive, box 270.

<sup>67</sup> Geneviève Benamou, *L’Art aujourd’hui en Tchécoslovaquie* (n.p., n.p., 1979). Benamou also published *Sensibilités contemporaines. 70 artistes d’origine Tchèque et Slovaque hors de Tchécoslovaquie 1970-1984* (Paris: Imprimeurs Libres, 1985). In 1984, she became the director of the Centre d’Art Plastiques in Aubervilliers (converted in Centre d’Arts Plastiques Camille Claudel in 1986), from which she retired in 2014.

information on art in Czechoslovakia, with distinctions between different centres (Prague, Bratislava, Brno) and several sections dedicated exclusively to women artists.<sup>68</sup> While Benamou's essay for the catalogue focused on Czech recent art, Vera Linhartová's contribution was supposed to address Czech art between 1900 and 1970. Linhartová, who had emigrated to Paris in 1968, was also invited to the symposium "Avanguardia e neoavanguardia nell'est europeo" but she refused to attend such a "big gathering of "politicians" from the East." "I frankly wonder what I will do in it", she wrote to Enrico Crispolti, mentioning a recent article in *Le Monde* covering the Biennale in which "they talk all the time about "dissidents" and so forth. We won't take this idea away from the journalists, and the Biennale will be marked by it if we want it or not".<sup>69</sup> Apparently, Linhartová had not been convinced by Crispolti's assertion that "[t]he exhibition will be strictly critical, devoid of political issues, despite being an exhibition set up in the West by people from the left, but with no official connection to the USSR or Czechoslovakia (I don't know yet about Poland and Hungary)".<sup>70</sup>

Confronted with so many obstacles that made it impossible to organise an exhibition with Polish, Hungarian and Czechoslovakian artists, the duo Crispolti-Moncada reconsidered its aspirations and decided to focus on the Soviet Union.

### 2.3 "La nuova arte sovietica". From dissident to unofficial art

"La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale" offered a comprehensive view of artistic creation from the early 1960s to the present. For the first time, the Biennale occupied a new location in the Arsenale area, the Palazzetto dello Sport. The recently inaugurated brutalist architecture contrasted the eclecticism of the national pavilions or the imperial

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<sup>68</sup> We find various references to Geneviève Benamou, as well as letters related with her research in Czechoslovakia in Pierre Restany's archive (including letters from Chaloupecký that mention her and her work on Czechoslovak artists, and correspondence between Restany and Benamou, PREST.XSEST14), as well as in the archives of Raoul-Jean Moulin (MAC/VAL) and Hervé Fischer (Bibliothèque Kandinsky).

<sup>69</sup> "[...] ce sera surtout un grand rassemblement des "politiciens" de l'est, et je me demande franchement ce que je ferai là-dedans". Regarding the article in *Le Monde*: "on parle sans arrêt des "dissidents", et de tout le reste. On n'enlèvera pas cette idée aux journalistes, et la Biennale en sera marquée si l'on le veut ou non". Vera Linhartová to Enrico Crispolti, letter dated 11 October 1977. ASAC, Fondo storico, arti visive, box 275.

<sup>70</sup> "Cette exposition sera rigoureusement critique, sans questions politiques, même si elle sera une exposition réalisée en Occident par des gens de gauche, mais sans aucun lien officiel au moins pour URSS et Tchécoslovaquie (je ne sais pas encore pour Pologne et Hongrie)". Enrico Crispolti to Vera Linhartová, letter dated 7 September 1977. Cited in Frimmel and Bertelé, "Salon Suisse-Criticism and Dissent: 1977 Re-enacted: La nuova arte Sovietica", 6.

splendour of the Napoleonic wing, where the symposia were held. The works on display in “La nuova arte sovietica” came exclusively from private Western collections, most of them based in Germany, Italy and France. The loan of works had thus not required direct contact with the artists, nor their personal agreement. If, on the one hand, this condition “protected” the artists from possible reprisals for participating in a demonstration considered hostile by the Soviet authorities, on the other hand, this participation mediated by third parties (recalling the Czech and Slovak presence mediated by the CAYC in the Pamplona Encounters) confirmed the creators’ lack of agency and the fact that their own position and opinion with regard to the Biennial and the issue of dissent was not a central issue at all.

The title of the exhibition, however, already claimed its curators’ willingness to stay out of the quarrels on dissidence by putting an emphasis on the “unofficial” character of the art on view. From the outset, Crispolti and Moncada questioned the applicability of the notion of dissidence to artistic production. The day the Biennale opened, the newspaper *La Repubblica* published a statement by Crispolti—presumably an extract from the Biennale’s press release—titled “What is the value of new Soviet art?” (“Che valore ha la nuova arte sovietica?”). The interrogative tone already indicated that this value was not given. As the heated exchange between Argan and Ripa di Meana has shown, the perception of the art of the socialist bloc in the Western context was rooted in a vertical system of values and judgement. Forced to defend his project and Soviet art in general from the accusation of being a “provincial artistic culture”, Crispolti was convinced that the exhibition itself would refute these considerations.

He also added: “[a]fter all, we are talking of the Soviet Union, not of some small Third World country. [...] This art can engage on a par with Western avant-garde, proposing its own wealth of results”.<sup>71</sup> Crispolti seemed forced to compare the Soviet Union and the Third World in order to demonstrate the obviousness of the first’ major development, unwittingly reiterating discriminatory distinctions between a more advanced first and second world on the one hand, and a retarded third world on the other—the same division manifest in the centralised editions of the Paris Biennale, from 1973 to 1977. The presence of the Third World as a “repoussoir” or as an element of depreciatory comparison was far from unusual at

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<sup>71</sup> “D’altra parte si tratta sempre dell’Unione Sovietica e non di un piccolo paese del Terzo mondo. [...] È un’arte che può dialogare con l’avanguardia occidentale contrapponendo, alla pari, un proprio patrimonio di risultati”. Enrico Crispolti, “Che valore ha la nuova arte sovietica?,” *La Repubblica*, 15 November 1977, 6-7. Cited in Frimmel and Bertelé, “Salon Suisse-Criticism and Dissent: 1977 Re-enacted: La nuova arte Sovietica”, 9-10.

that time, if we remember Vittorio Strada comparing the Biennale to a cultural event in Uganda to underline its provincial and mediocre character.

In his introductory essay to the catalogue of “La nuova arte sovietica”, Crispolti insisted on the difficulty of “giving a real cultural content to a theme which is actually related to a cultural and political-social symptomatology, rather than to the actual constitution of cultural categories, much less to aesthetic categories”.<sup>72</sup> He observed that cultural production couldn’t be defined on the basis of its relationship with a standard, either by acceptance or by opposition, but required to be examined case by case. He signaled the difficulty of attributing a cultural content to a phenomenon such as dissidence and provided his own definition of it: “a practical condition, a bureaucratic circumstance, the consequence of a prohibition, not always ideologically motivated, which could be of a provisional nature.”<sup>73</sup> Following this logic, “La nuova arte sovietica” was not intended as a display of forbidden art or an art of opposition, but “proposed” instead cultural facts and documented a situation. It presented Soviet art as an intrinsically plural phenomenon, with internal tensions and contradictions.

Crispolti’s text also insisted on the distance between “La nuova arte sovietica” and the conceptual framework of the Biennale del Dissenso. He returned several times to the difficulty of adapting the content of an exhibition devoted to the visual arts to the formula of “cultural dissent” that characterised the event as a whole:

Undoubtedly, I think that the actual political consequences of an event like the Biennale could be adversely affected by its initial strong political connotation, crystallised as such in the immediate reactions that favoured the implicit political nature of the word “dissent” over its declared and inseparable adjective “cultural”.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> “[...] più arduo è poi riuscire a dare un effettivo contenuto culturale a una tematica che è relativa in realtà a una sintomatologia culturale e politico-sociale, anziché all’effettiva costituzione di categorie culturali, e men che mai categorie estetiche”. Enrico Crispolti, “Una Mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica”, in *La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale*, exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia/Marsilio Editori, 1977), 12.

<sup>73</sup> “Il dissenso insomma, anziché una categoria culturale, è una condizione pratica, una circostanza burocratica, la conseguenza di un divieto non sempre ideologicamente motivato, e che comunque può rivestire carattere meramente provvisorio”. Crispolti, “Una Mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica”, 12-13.

<sup>74</sup> “Indubbiamente penso che possa pesare negativamente sulle effettive conseguenze politiche di una manifestazione come quella della Biennale la sua accentuata connotazione politica di partenza cristallizzata come tale nelle reazioni immediate che hanno privilegiato l’implicita politicità della parola “dissenso” sulla sua pur dichiarata e non scindibile aggettivazione di “culturale””. Crispolti, “Una Mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica”, 15.

This position echoed that of other art historians and critics involved in the diffusion of art from the Soviet Union in the West. An important precedent for this approach was in fact the above-mentioned exhibition “Unofficial art from the Soviet Union”, inaugurated on 18 January 1977 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London. The exhibition was largely based on the collection of the Russian Museum in Exile, a para-institution established in Montgeron, near Paris, by Alexander Glezer. The remainder came from other private collections in the West. On this respect, the exhibitions in London and Venice were very similar and in fact, if we compare the list of exhibited works in each event, we see that a significant number of them were displayed in both locations. The preface of the London catalogue clearly stated: “None of these artists [...] has openly sought a conflict with the political authorities and it is for this reason that we have eschewed such emotive terms as “dissident” or “underground” for this art and prefer to describe it more neutrally-and comprehensively-as unofficial”.<sup>75</sup> The author of these words was no stranger to the condition of dissidents, though: writer, translator and Slavist Michael Scammell was in fact the founding editor of the magazine *Index on Censorship*, dedicated to the dissemination of information on press freedom around the world.<sup>76</sup> The fact that a Western intellectual like Scammell, familiar with the living conditions and repression of political opponents in different parts of the world, was himself reluctant to use the term “dissident” to refer to visual artists is particularly telling regarding the discrepancy between political and cultural approaches to this notion. ““Unofficial””, Scammell wrote, “implies nonconformity with official prescriptions and a preference for individual judgement, but not necessarily adherence to any alternative ideology, nor unanimity as to the kind or degree of independence desired”.<sup>77</sup> He however

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<sup>75</sup> Michael Scammell, “Preface”, in Igor Golomshtok and Alexander Glezer, *Unofficial art from the Soviet Union*, exh. cat., (London: Secker & Warburg), 1977, VII. Besides essays by Igor Golomshtok and Alexander Glezer, the catalogue included an introduction by Sir Roland Penrose and a section titled “Manifestos by leading artists” that consists in transcriptions of conversations between Alexander Glezer and them, conserved in the archive of the Russian Museum in Exile. In his introduction, Penrose stressed that the scope of such exhibition supporting unofficial artists was not to struggle against the state structure, but rather “to protect essential human rights.” Roland Penrose, “Introduction”, in Igor Golomshtok and Alexander Glezer, eds., *Unofficial art from the Soviet Union*, exh. cat., (London: Secker & Warburg), 1977, XVI.

<sup>76</sup> *Index on Censorship* was created in 1972 by Michael Scammell with the support of the non-profit organisation Writers and Scholars International, to give voice to censored writers and authors and reported on the violation of the freedom of expression performed across the globe. It had its origin in an Open Letter addressed “To World Public Opinion” by Pavel Litvinov and Larisa Bogoraz in 1968, who urged the international community to publicly condemn the Soviet unfair trial against dissidents Alexander Ginzburg Yuri Galanskov.

<sup>77</sup> Scammell, “Preface”, VIII.

signaled the set of ambiguities that accompanied the condition of unofficial artists allowed in some cases to show, and even sell their works to foreign visitors, but not to a local public.

Despite similar positions on the idea of dissent and the use of the same collections of Soviet art, “La nuova arte sovietica” in Venice differed from London’s “Unofficial art from the Soviet Union” and previous exhibitions in Paris and Washington, in that it tried to provide a critical articulation for a deeper understanding of these practices. The Venise exhibition was thus divided into seven sections that corresponded to different expressions and trends, including figurative painting, expressionism, abstraction, surrealism, conceptual and abstract art. The collective Dvizhenie, for its part, benefited from an entire section.<sup>78</sup> Besides the original pieces, the public had also access to documentation in the form of slides, photographic reproductions and catalogues of previous exhibitions. Conceived as “a propositional moment” (“momento propositivo”) and “an invitation to discussion and confrontation”, the exhibition sought to historicise unofficial Soviet art and the critical discourse that had focused on it. On this last aspect, Crispolti cited names of art critics and historians, as well as publications from Czechoslovakia, Italy, France, the anglo saxon area, Germany and Austria that had shown earlier attempts to diffuse Soviet art.<sup>79</sup>

Regarding the contradictions in the reception of Russian art, Matteo Bertelé has explained that the Russian painter Mikhail Koulakov, who left the Soviet Union for Italy in 1976, participated in “La nuova art sovietica” with a significant amount of works, exhibited in the section “Gesto, materia, immagine” (Gesture, matter, image). This section, intended to document the birth of Soviet unofficial painting, was considered outdated: numerous art critics in fact “took it as a clear demonstration of the backwardness of Soviet contemporary art at large”.<sup>80</sup> Despite Koulakov’s efforts to disassociate himself from any political approach,

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<sup>78</sup> The exhibition catalogue identifies the following sections: 1. Expressionist figuration and lyrical figuration, 2. Gesture, matter, image, 3. Post-constructivist abstraction and organic abstraction, 4. “Dvizhenie” Collective, 5. Surreal figuration, 6. Irony and other, around the daily life, 7. Conceptual mediation, behaviour and collective actions.

<sup>79</sup> Regarding France, Crispolti cited the early contributions of Paul Thorez and Raoul-Jean Moulin (“Moulin”), and successively those of Gérald Gassiot-Talabot (“Gassiot-Talabor”), Michel Ragon (“Ragon”) and Jean Clair (“Claire”), as well as publications like *Opus International* and *Chroniques de l’art vivant*. Crispolti, “Una Mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica”, 18.

<sup>80</sup> Matteo Bertelé, “Between “Academicians” and “Dissidents”. Russian Emigré Artists in Italy during the Cold War”, in *Transcending the Borders of Countries, Languages, and Disciplines in Russian Emigré Culture*, ed. Christoph Flamm, Roland Marti and Ada Raev (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2018), 167.



his participation in the Biennale del Dissenso led to a distancing from communist intellectuals and artists, in particular Renato Guttuso, who had strongly supported him as long as he was residing in the Soviet Union.<sup>81</sup> Bertelé's article highlights the extent to which the reception of Russian émigré artists in Italy (another case discussed is that of Gregorio Sciltian, from an older generation and absent from the Biennale del Dissenso) was subject to the geopolitical context and, in the case of Koulakov, oscillates between the poles of "official and unofficial, conformism and non-conformism".

Crispoliti's text in "La nuova arte sovietica" also pointed out an essential aspect of the problem of dissidence in relation to the countries of Central Europe. He first recalled that there was not a single approach to unofficial art and culture in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and showed to what extent the different degrees of liberalisation of the respective scenes had conditioned and complicated any attempt to include elements from this region in the exhibition.

If, on the one hand, the official refusal to collaborate prevented the presence of Polish and Hungarian artists with materials they themselves had chosen and given, thus forcing them either to go underground, which was unacceptable in terms of correct political relations, and in any case with little possibility of culturally adequate results, or to use only materials that already existed in museums or private collections in Western Europe, which were unequal and often insufficient, on the other hand, the effective margin of freedom otherwise possessed by Polish artists (at home or abroad) or Hungarian artists (more at home than abroad), their not being effectively marginalised, unrecognised, and therefore their possibility of access to official avant-garde exhibitions, placed these artists in the condition, in professional terms, of a conditioned interest in the Venetian initiative, seen as too politicised, seen as in a certain way ghettoising Eastern European artists, seen, in short, as an occasion that was anything but unique, anything but exceptional, and in which they risked not being represented—precisely professionally—to the best of their ability. In short, it was seen as an opportunity that was far

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<sup>81</sup> Bertelé noted that "Guttuso's attitude is very representative of the biases of the art world, which often affected the critical reception and the personal approach to Russian émigré artists and encouraged misleading generalisations and segregations." Bertelé, "Between "Academicians" and "Dissidents". Russian Emigré Artists in Italy during the Cold War", 167.

from unique, far from exceptional, and in which they risked not being represented—precisely professionally—to the best of their ability.<sup>82</sup>

We find in this large paragraph a confirmation of the fact that the notion of dissidence, already problematic in the case of Russian artists, could in no way be applied to Central European artists whose relationship with the state was, as Crispolti well observes, far more ambiguous and heterogeneous. It evolved in that grey area where collaboration with official institutions and organisations—whether for economic reasons or because artists adhered to the principles of Marxism-Leninism and still believe they could participate in the construction of a socialist society—is far from excluding the search for an alternative and the expression of critical gestures. His description of the situation shows that the Italian curator and art critic was aware of the complex and far from univocal role of unofficial art and culture in Central Europe. According to him, this state of affairs justified the focus on Soviet/Russian art as a more “typical” and “somewhat univocal situation” since it was “almost entirely officially not recognised” and could be akin to a “possible condition of cultural dissent”.<sup>83</sup> While this idea of the dissident idiosyncrasy of Soviet Art in the 1970s could be discussed and contrasted as well, it certainly reveals how problematic and equivocal could the notion of dissent be in the context of visual arts production.

Crispolti’s words suggested then that attention to avant-garde Soviet art was justified because, unlike Eastern or Central European avant-garde art, it had no official space of visibility and was, therefore, far more marginal. Compared with Soviet unofficial art, Central European unofficial art was thus attributed the privileged position of an art either accepted or tolerated by the authorities in the countries concerned. The international visibility of

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<sup>82</sup> “Se cioè da una parte il rifiuto ufficiale di collaborazione impediva di realizzare la presenza di artisti polacchi e ungheresi con materiali da loro stessi scelti e dati, costringendo cioè o a muoversi in termini di una clandestinità inaccettabile in una correttezza di rapporti politici, e comunque con scarsa possibilità di esiti di adeguatezza culturale o a utilizzare soltanto materiali già esistenti in musei o collezioni private nell'occidente europeo, ineguali e spesso insufficienti, dall'altra l'effettivo margine di libertà altrimenti posseduto dagli artisti polacchi (in patria o fuori) o anche dagli artisti ungheresi (più in patria che fuori), il loro non essere effettivamente dei emarginati, dei non riconosciuti, e dunque la loro possibilità di accesso ad esposizioni d'avanguardia a carattere ufficiale, poneva tali artisti nella condizione, in termini professionali, di un interesse condizionato per l'iniziativa veneziana, vista appunto come troppo politicizzata, vista come in certo modo ghettizzante gli artisti dell'est europeo, vista insomma come un'occasione dunque tutt'altro che unica, tutt'altro che eccezionale, e nella quale rischiavano di non essere rappresentati - appunto professionalmente-al meglio delle loro possibilità. Artisti, dico, anche in certo modo dissidenti, sul piano della discussione e del dibattito, ma non perciò emarginati, né esclusi: forti invece dei diritti, sempre ove occorra da rivendicare, di una loro adeguata presenza”. Crispolti, “Una Mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica”, 15.

<sup>83</sup> Crispolti, “Una Mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica”, 16.

unofficial Russian art seemed however to contradict Crispolti's view. In fact, its circulation was at its high, with a succession of exhibitions in prestigious institutions (Paris in 1976, London and Washington in 1977).<sup>84</sup> Paradoxically, in seeking to justify the absence of art from Central Europe from their exhibition, a situation to which himself and Gabriella Moncada had been forced due to a lack of materials and the local authorities's refusal to collaborate, Crispolti comes to minimise the still highly controlling and inhibiting character of the socialist authorities of these countries regarding art and culture.

#### **2.4 “Avanguardie e neoavanguardie nell'est europeo”**

In parallel with “La nuova arte sovietica”, a two-days symposium was programmed to address different aspects of the artistic situation in the Eastern bloc, from the historical avant-gardes to the present. “Avanguardie e neoavanguardie nell'est europeo” brought together some thirty artists, critics and art historians from different backgrounds.<sup>85</sup> A preliminary list dated 29 August 1977 revealed the names of personalities Crispolti and Moncada proposed to invite, but who did not participate in the end. All of them committed with the study and diffusion of Eastern European art: from John Berger, Jindřich Chalupecký, Helena Kontova Politi, Jean Clarence Lambert, Dan Haulica, Ryszard Stanisławski, to Renato Guttuso and Piero Dorazio.<sup>86</sup>

The absence of participants from Czechoslovakia was due to the post-Charter 77 situation. Only Jan Kotík, who was living in Berlin since 1969, was present in November 1977. Contacted by Carlo Ripa di Meana, Jiří Setlík accepted the invitation in August and planned to talk about the problems of the development of Bohemian artists of the 60s and 70s. He recalled however that his presence depended on the authorization to travel delivered by the authorities. In the end, he did not appear among the participants, nor does Jiří Padrta, who

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<sup>84</sup> Regarding the circulation of Soviet unofficial art, see May, ““Biennale of Dissent” (1977): Nonconformist Art from the USSR in Venice”, 357-368.

<sup>85</sup> “Avanguardie e neoavanguardie nell'Est europeo,” Museo Correr, Venice, 19 and 20 November 1977. Participants are Mirella Bentivoglio, Achille Bonito Oliva, Enrico Crispolti, Federica Di Castro, Gillo Dorfles, Vittorio Fagone, Roland Feldman, Murielle Gagnebin, Pierre Gaudibert, Alexander Glezer, Igor Golomstock, Klaus Groh, Dieter Honisch, Jan Kotík, Michail Kulakov, Alexander Leonov, Barbara Majewska, Enzo Mari, Alexander Melamid, Franco Miele, Gabriella Moncada, Ernst Neizvestnyj, Lev Nusberg, René Passeron, Franco Passoni, Geza Perneckzy, Pierre Restany, Peter Spielmann, Paul Thorez, Dina Viesny and Eduard Zelenin. See summary in *Annuario 1978 : eventi del 1976-77*, 538-542.

<sup>86</sup> ASAC, Fondo storico, arti visive, box 270.

had also accepted the invitation. Jaromír Zemina also expressed doubts about the possibility of travelling to Venice, and the poet and literary theorist Vratislav Effenberger stated that as a signatory of Charter 77, he wouldn't take the risk of not being able to come back home. To compensate his absence, he proposed a written communication on the current state of surrealism in Czechoslovakia. The issue of the participation "by delegation" was constantly raised in the context of the Biennale del Dissenso, during which the voices of those absent were heard through various devices. This kind of "spectral" presence started with the event's inaugural symposium, at the beginning of which the voice of Russian physicist and Nobel laureate Andrei Sakharov was broadcasted to the public, after it reached Venice clandestinely.<sup>87</sup>

While most of the symposia took place within the framework of the Biennale gave rise to publications of proceedings or collections of papers, this was not the case for "Avanguardie e neoavanguardie nell'est europeo". The proceedings were somehow replaced by the exhibition catalogue *La nuova arte sovietica*. The papers of some participants conserved in the archive confirm however that the vast majority of the contributions did not directly address the issue of dissidence in art, but rather focused on providing information on different facets of artistic creations and experiences in socialist territories. The symposium had thus the merit of showing the diversity and richness of the Soviet and Central European scenes, while reaffirming the importance of a contextualised and non-homogenising approach.

Among the contributions, the Italian artist Mirella Bentivoglio addressed the interaction of iconic and verbal language in Eastern Europe, confirming her good knowledge of Central European visual poetry, especially from Czechoslovakia (Hiršal, Novák, Kolář, Hável), but also from Poland and Yugoslavia. She described this scene as "vigorously embedded in a network of international cultural exchanges" and emphasised its connections with concrete

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<sup>87</sup> On this respect, a line of approach and reflection could be possibly developed on the Biennale del Dissenso through the objects and devices through which the public was able to hear, feel and become conscious of the dissidents' voice and its experience. Regarding this issue, the exhibition "Libri, Riviste, Manifesti, Fotografie, Videotapes, Samizdat" was particularly significant, since the very materiality of the object, its fragility and its collective dimension called for an appreciation based more on emotions than on reflection on the literary or intellectual content itself. I have addressed this issue in Debeusscher, "Debates en torno al Disenso: el arte del bloque soviético en la Bienal de Venecia de 1977," 440-442.

poetry from Latin America.<sup>88</sup> The art critic Gillo Dorfles insisted on differentiating art in Poland from that of its neighbours: the former, he observed, has greater freedom in the field of visual arts and theatre. Dissident painting was approached by Murielle Gagnebin, a scholar from the University of Geneva and a specialist in Polish painting, who offered her “Reflexions sur le pictural” (“Reflexions on the pictorial”) based on the example of Polish artist Jan Lebenstein, who lived in France since 1959. Let’s also mention Klaus Groh’s presentation focused on alternative artistic production in Eastern Europe. Without positioning himself against any system and ideology, Groh claimed tolerance in creativity as a way of rehumanising humanity:

In a rigid environment, constantly conditioned by others - and in this context it does not matter whether this environment is a socialist or capitalist one - man (the individual) is threatened, in danger of losing his own identity. Only through tolerant creativity can a new “humanisation” of humanity take place.<sup>89</sup>

Only the interventions of Igor Golomshtock and Pierre Gaudibert were translated into Italian and reproduced in the catalogue of “La nuova arte sovietica.” This is perhaps due to the fact that both of them directly addressed the issue of dissent and tried to provide a historical and theoretical frame to reflect on the phenomenon. We will focus here on Gaudibert’s text, which deserves attention for at least two reasons. First, it provides a precise analysis of how to envisage the notion of dissent both from a theoretical point of view and from the perspective of the visual arts, in relation the notion of “contestation” (“protest”), central in the past decade. Second, it allows to reflect on the way a French participant to the Biennale, who was not particularly close to the art scene in the Soviet Union and Central Europe, contemplated these issues and resituated them in a broader frame.

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<sup>88</sup> “Hiršal, Novák, Kolář, Hável, e vari altri, rielaborano in modo autonomo il messaggio latino-americano. Vigilmente inseriti in un tessuto di scambi culturali internazionali, alcuni di essi sono traduttori.” Mirella Bentivoglio, “Interazione di linguaggio iconico e linguaggio verbale nell’est europeo”, unpublished paper presented at the congress “Avanguardie e neoavanguardie nell’Est europeo,” ASAC, Fondo storico, arti visive, Convegni.

<sup>89</sup> “In un ambiente rigido e costantemente condizionato dagli altri, -e in questo contesto non ha importanza se questo ambiente è di natura socialista o capitalista – l’uomo (l’individuo) è minacciato, nel pericolo di perdere la propria identità. Solo con una tollerante creatività può avvenire una nuova “umanizzazione” dell’umanità.” Klaus Groh, “Produzione artistica alternativa in Europa Orientale,” paper for the congress “Avanguardie e neoavanguardie nell’Est europeo,” ASAC, Fondo Storico, Convegni.

## 2.5 Pierre Gaudibert, “From contestation to dissidence”

Pierre Gaudibert was an atypical figure in the French cultural landscape, known for his commitment to popular education and the democratisation of access to culture. A marxist close to the French Socialist Party (PSF), his ideas were also tinged with anarchism and libertarianism. We have mentioned earlier Gaudibert’s leading role in the dissemination and diversification of new artistic expressions as director of the A.R.C. (for Animation Recherche Confrontation), a branch of the Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris he founded in 1967 and directed until 1972. In this context, projects related to the “nouvelle peinture” and narrative figuration were presented, in resonance with the rise of the protests movements in France.

Gaudibert’s text “From contestation to dissidence” served as a preliminary clarification of the uses and meanings of both terms and their application in the visual arts field. From the beginning, he suggested that there was a temporal relationship between contestation and dissidence.<sup>90</sup> Dissidence seemed in fact to succeed or even supplant contestation and Gaudibert wondered whether this variation in terminology simply reflected the “wear and tear” of the term due to its extensive use in journalistic discourses, or whether this change reflected a deeper shift in meaning. While these two terms seemed a priori interchangeable and likely to be used to describe similar situations, Gaudibert warned that this was not the case:

Religious or political dissidence means a disagreement with an orthodoxy that implies a separation, indeed a schism, whereas contestation develops within a church or a political party and leads to an internal struggle over opposing positions, which are, however, somewhat symmetrically supportive.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> The translation of the term ‘contestation’ into English is not straightforward; while the terms ‘dispute’ or ‘protest’ are suggested by translators, I will keep using the term ‘contestation’ here. While being less used in English, it also emphasises the temporal anchorage of the term and its great popularity in the 1960s in southern Europe and in the context of the social protest movements of the end of the decade.

<sup>91</sup> “Per dissidenza religiosa o politica si intende un disaccordo con una ortodossia che implica una separazione, anzi uno scisma, mentre la contestazione si sviluppa all'interno di una chiesa o di un partito politico e porta a una lotta interna su opposte posizioni, che sono però in qualche modo simmetricamente solidali.” Pierre Gaudibert, “Dalla contestazione alla dissidenza”, in *La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale*, exh. cat. (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia/Marsilio Editori, 1977), 21.

Religion and politics appeared then as two privileged spheres for the expression of contestation and dissent. What about the sphere of artistic practice and visual production? Before coming to this point, Gaudibert first developed a reflection on the socio-political foundations of each of the two attitudes. He recalled that contestation was “a form of opposition that involves rebellion within a system or organisation”, without aiming at a position of power. This was what distinguished it from traditional political struggle, strategically oriented towards power and governance. The nature of the struggle conduced it to privilege “sectorised” and “sporadic” confrontations that brought bring “mini-powers” into discussion (Gaudibert named Foucault), thus making it possible to shed light on certain mechanisms of the dominant and hegemonic ideology. The result was a frontal and antagonistic struggle, which occupied the same terrain as the power it wanted to fight against.

In the field of the visual arts, Gaudibert sketched out a genealogy starting with the tradition of critical realism and, in the 1960s, pop art and its European manifestations such as the new figuration, inspired by mass culture. He also identified a continuity of contestation in the form of self-contestation (fairly close to the idea of institutional critique), through which artists reflected critically on their practice, its social dimension and its relationship with, on the one hand, the cultural industries and, on the other, the public, whose passive character was called into question”.<sup>92</sup> Sociological art and its representatives, addressed in this dissertation’s Chapter two, reappeared here in the context of an evolution of contestation. Finally, Gaudibert identified another segment of artistic contestation in the form of an underground, parallel, marginal, “other” culture. According to him, this branch operating “from the trench” (“lavoro di trincea”) had favoured the emergence and consolidation of the term “dissidence.”

While specifying that this tendency had been present in counter-cultural field in the United States, Gaudibert nevertheless connected dissidence to the geography and history of the “socialist camp.” From the outset, as a “form of opposition which implies a secession from a structure, system, organisation”, dissidence was inscribed on a different register,

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<sup>92</sup> “[...] arte collettiva, operatori che intervengono su di un territorio e su di una popolazione determinati, committente sociale nell'ambito del decentramento, arte sociologica, etc.)”. Gaudibert, “Dalla contestazione alla dissidenza”, 22.

connected to a condition of marginality and exteriority.<sup>93</sup> Rather than direct confrontation, Gaudibert explained that it was a refusal of any dialogue, of any positioning on a same ground. This refusal of horizontality was, Gaudibert notes, determined by an essential factor: the claim of human rights, “in particular the right to difference and the right to freely choose one's life in a way other than that imposed by state conformity. It is no longer a question of contesting a regime or a social system, but of an aspiration towards open democracy, a defence of the human person”.<sup>94</sup>

In contrast to contestation, Gaudibert was very reluctant to name or describe artistic forms or methods that would correspond to the condition of dissidence. He suggested that dissident art in no way sought to oppose or challenge official culture, but sought instead to achieve freedom and autonomy outside the imposed conventions. For this particular reason, it couldn't be homogeneous in terms of aesthetics or critical content, since it was made up of all “deviant” works in relation to the orthodoxy imposed on artists in socialist territories.

### **3. From a Soviet and Eastern dissidence to a global dissidence?**

#### **3.1 Qui sont les dissidents. David Cooper**

In the last section of “Dalla contestazione alla dissidenza”, Gaudibert observed that “the term dissidence has been taken up by some Western intellectuals to characterise the work of an individual who tries to create his own space, to live his own adventure, to express himself far from the places of power”.<sup>95</sup> This comment brings us to a phenomenon that could be described as the reappropriation of dissent by various theories that left its geopolitical anchorage and its relationship with the socialist bloc apart to make it a more global phenomenon.

Gaudibert was not the only one who suggested an opening towards forms of dissidence that broke away from the socialist context to invest other spaces and fuel other claims, in

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<sup>93</sup> “*Dissidenza*: forma di opposizione che implica una secessione rispetto a una struttura, un sistema, una organizzazione”. Gaudibert, “Dalla contestazione alla dissidenza”, 22.

<sup>94</sup> “[...]in particolare il diritto alla differenza e il diritto di scegliere liberamente la propria vita in un modo diverso da quello imposto dal conformismo di stato. Non si tratta più della contestazione a un regime o a un sistema sociale, ma di una aspirazione a una democrazia aperta, di una difesa della persona umana”. Gaudibert, “Dalla contestazione alla dissidenza”, 22-23.

<sup>95</sup> “Il termine dissidenza è stato tuttavia ripreso da alcuni intellettuali occidentali per caratterizzare l'operato di un individuo che tenta di crearsi il proprio spazio, per vivere la sua avventura, esprimersi lontano dai luoghi del potere”. Gaudibert, “Dalla contestazione alla dissidenza”, 23.



particular those linked to anti-imperialist and anticapitalist struggles. We could establish in fact a parallel between his view and that expressed by Enrico Crispolti, who invited to contemplate dissidence as a “permanent reality” that did not only correspond to Eastern European societies but could be applied to any space “where the arrogance of cultural and political power is exercised”.<sup>96</sup>

At the end of his text, Gaudibert cited a recent book by David Cooper, published in France under the title *Qui sont les dissidents (Who are the dissidents)*—without question mark.<sup>97</sup> Cooper was one of the founders of anti-psychiatry, a current of practice and thought developed since the 1950s that considered traditional psychiatry as a repressive tool and sought to detach it from the field of medicine.<sup>98</sup> For Cooper, mental disorder was not an illness but a reaction of protest against society and in particular the family, whose oppressive structure were responsible for many afflictions. Already in his books *The death of the family* (1974) and *The grammar of living* (1976), he had tended to abandon his role as a professional therapist to become a witness and guide through experiences of de-structuring and re-structuring. Cooper was in fact also close to counter-cultural movements and to the New Left.<sup>99</sup> Between 1972 and 1973, he had travelled to Argentina where he worked closely with the group of the Thirteen at the CAYC, in a process fundamental for the constitution of the

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<sup>96</sup> “[...] the very dimension of dissent can be placed in a more appropriate perspective, which does not attribute it exclusively to the cultural condition of Eastern Europe [...], but recognises it as a permanent reality, even very close to us, wherever the arrogance of cultural and political power is exercised.” (“[...] la stessa dimensione del dissenso può essere ricollocata in una prospettiva più propria, che non l’attribuisca in esclusiva alla condizione culturale dell’est-europeo [...], ma sappia riconoscerla come realtà permanente, anche a noi vicinissima, sempre là dove si eserciti la prepotenza del potere culturale e politico.”) Crispolti, “Una Mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica”, 20.

<sup>97</sup> David Cooper, *Qui sont les dissidents* (Paris: Éditions Galilee, 1977). The book was also in German. David Cooper, *Wer ist Dissident* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1978).

<sup>98</sup> Born in South Africa, Cooper has trained as a psychiatrist in England in the 1950s and this is where his transition from psychiatry to anti-psychiatry happens, through his work in collaboration with Ronald D. Laing in an experimental unit for young schizophrenics called Villa 21, at Shenley Hospital in Hertfordshire. Over the 1960s, Cooper publishes his first book *Psychiatry and anti-psychiatry* (1967) and pursues a practice informed by Marxism, the New Left and revolutionary counterculture. In the same years, he also introduces and translates works by Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault into English; at the end of the decade, is also involved in educational initiatives like the Anti-university of London (1968-1971). Adrian Chapman, “Re-Coopering anti-psychiatry: David Cooper, revolutionary critic of psychiatry”, *Critical and Radical Social Work*, Volume 4, Number 3, November 2016, 421-432. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204986016X1473688814636>. Online version accessed, unpaginated: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5125513/> (Accessed March 2020).

<sup>99</sup> According to Adrian Chapman, Cooper’s relationship with the New Left and counter-culture, as well as his non-academic form of writing, was apparently the reason why his work was later considered as embarrassing and misconsidered, if not forgotten, in the field of psychiatry. Chapman, “Re-Coopering anti-psychiatry: David Cooper, revolutionary critic of psychiatry”, 421-432.

group. Cooper accompanied “an exhaustive analysis of the group’s internal problematic” that led them to analyse of the relation between art and capitalism, ideology and cultural revolution.<sup>100</sup> Back to Europe, Cooper was involved in the foundation of the International Network of Alternatives to Psychiatry (INAP) in 1975, in dialogue with other psychiatrists, including Franco Basaglia, the founder of the movement *Psichiatria Democratica* in Italy. The same year, he settled in Paris and started teaching at the University of Vincennes.

For Pierre Gaudibert, Cooper’s position on dissidence—a “denormalized way to live quotidianity as a free invention”—opened a possibility to “leave the field of an ideological confrontation” and reinvest utopia as a “no place”. Gaudibert indicated that such theoretical perspective “highlight[ed] the uselessness of this ideological confrontation in favour of the subversion of codes and a displacement of the place of politics”.<sup>101</sup>

*Qui sont les dissidents* argued for a sharing of the notion of dissent between East and West, but also for moving from psychiatric institutions to the wider society. Cooper’s book with a critique of Western leftist intellectuals who, while exploiting the situation of Eastern dissidents for their own ends, displayed a “political illiteracy” that prevented them from seeing and understanding the problems of Third World countries engaged in revolutionary processes. Cooper thus called for a shift from “purely formal support for a few heroic figures from the USSR or Eastern Europe” to “building a common basis of understanding and action for dissent worldwide”.<sup>102</sup> His book dealt with different notions in the prism of this question of dissidence and the necessity of a transversal and transnational organisation, among which madness of course, the figure of the intellectual, depression, autonomy, the situation in Third World countries, and mystification. His research on a possible common ground and action between dissidents in the East and the West also relied on reflexions from the Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller (in particular her approach to Marx’s theory of needs) and the

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<sup>100</sup> CAYC, “David Cooper with the group of the Thirteen”, GT-213-A, 9 April 1973. See also Aurore Buffetault, PhD dissertation in preparation, “Poetics of Liberation: The “Centro de Arte y Comunicación”, CAYC (Buenos Aires, 1968-1979)”, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne.

<sup>101</sup> “I dissidenti non combatterebbero più sul terreno dello scontro ideologico ma si approprierebbero dell’utopia, il cui significato etimologico è “in nessun luogo”. Tutto ciò implica una problematica aperta sul piano teorico che sottolinea l’inutilità dell’opposizione ideologica a favore della sovversione dei codici e il radicale spostamento del luogo del politico”. Gaudibert, “Dalla contestazione alla dissidenza”, 23.

<sup>102</sup> “Il est peut-être temps, pour nous, à l’Ouest, de cesser de proclamer un soutien purement formel à quelques personnages héroïques venus de l’URSS ou de l’Europe de l’Est [...]. Il est temps de constituer une base commune de compréhension et d’action en faveur de la dissidence dans le monde entier”. Cooper, *Qui sont les dissidents*, 17.

Italian writer and politician Maria Antonietta Maciocchi (based on her reflections on Gramsci and the non autonomy of intellectuals).

Interestingly, Cooper's ideas captured the attention of Spanish left-wing cultural circles. *Qui sont les dissidents* was reviewed in the magazine *Triunfo*, which provided also important coverage on the Soviet and East European dissidence during the 1970s.<sup>103</sup> The countercultural magazine *Ajoblanco* published in February 1978 a large interview with Cooper, in which he exposed his views on madness, politics and the current struggles in the Third World.<sup>104</sup> **[Fig. 6.6]** It is not insignificant that the same issue of *Ajoblanco* included a dossier on "Marginación" ("Marginalisation") that gave space to different social conditions of marginalization-homosexuality, mental disease, alcoholism, incarceration, the fact of being a worker or a minor. While the law of "dangerousness and social rehabilitation" (ley sobre peligrosidad y rehabilitación social) implemented in 1970 by the Francoist regime was still operating and repressed every element considered as "antisocial", *Ajoblanco's* special issue contemplated the relation of these marginal elements with revolutionary processes, connecting the condition of marginality and dissidence with political agency.<sup>105</sup>

We should open a small parenthesis here to recall the importance of the struggle for the recognition and rights of homosexuals in Spain over the 1970s, in a context on strong repression of any sexual practice considered as a threat to the public order by the catholic right-wing dictatorship (homosexuality could be punished by a sentence up to five years of prison or psychiatric hospital). While the issue of homosexuality and more generally non conventional sexual practice was not directly addressed in the Biennale del Disenso, at the same moment, the Italian activist and founder of the first Italian homosexual association Angelo Pezzana carried out an action in Moscow to ask for the liberation of film director

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<sup>103</sup> Carmen Fernández Ruiz, "Locura y disidencia", *Triunfo*, no. 801, 03 June 1978, 80-81. Articles and interviews regarding dissidence in the Eastern bloc appear in issues 571 (8 September 1973), 651 (22 March 1975), 728 (8 January 1977), 733 (12 February 1977), 775 (3 December 1977), 875 (3 November 1979).

<sup>104</sup> "David Cooper, o la capacidad de estar loco", *Ajoblanco*, no 30, February 1978, 58-62.

<sup>105</sup> "Marginalización y proceso revolucionario", dossier, *Ajoblanco*, no 30, February 1978, 33-53. On the ley de peligrosidad social, see Ana Isabel Fernández Asperilla, "Justicia y sociedad bajo el franquismo: de la Ley de Vagos y Maleantes a la Ley de Peligrosidad y Rehabilitación Social, Franquismo, delincuencia y cambio social", in Javier Tusell (et. all), *El régimen de Franco (1936-1975). Política y relaciones exteriores*, Madrid, UNED, Tomo II, 1993, 87-96.

Serguei Parajanov, who had been sentenced to three years in prison for homosexuality.<sup>106</sup> Here again we see the degree of intertwining of different causes and their transnational dimension, far beyond a binary view of the Cold War.

Cooper explained in *Ajoblanco* his reorientation from anti-psychiatry towards non-psychiatry and claimed the necessity to get out of the institutions and politicise madness, by extending it to all the social field. He called for fighting not only against psychiatric institutions, but also against all forms of institutional or institutionalised violence.<sup>107</sup> He describes this change in the following terms:

I think it was my own madness, and therefore my restructuring, which has brought me closer to a broader political dimension. And the research in South Africa. I have also been to the Soviet Union and China to think a bit about politics. In these three or four years, with international contacts and relations, I have rediscovered my “revolutionary” past.<sup>108</sup>

Questioned about his vision of the revolutionary process and in particular the relationship between power and social transformation, Cooper pointed out that power was always present in any common project, even when it was erected against a dominant power, and concluded that “[t]he autonomy of individuals” was “perhaps the only way to communism”.<sup>109</sup> Autonomy thus appeared to him as a radical necessity, the only way to escape all sorts of conditionings.

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<sup>106</sup> “Angelo Pezzana, che aveva costituito con i Radicali italiani la prima associazione di omosessuali, Fuori, nel novembre 1977, collegandosi con la Biennale di Venezia che era negli stessi giorni nel pieno svolgimento del programma Dissenso, si incatenò al Mausoleo di Lenin e Stalin nella Piazza Rossa di Mosca, chiedendo la liberazione del regista cinematografico, un maestro conosciuto in tutto il mondo, Sergei Parajanov, condannato a tre anni di carcere duro per il reato di omosessualità”. [“In November 1977, Angelo Pezzana, who together with the Italian Radicals had set up the first association of homosexuals, Fuori, and in connection with the Venice Biennale, which was in the middle of the Dissent movement at the time, chained himself to the Mausoleum of Lenin and Stalin in Moscow’s Red Square, demanding the release of the world-famous film director Sergei Parajanov, who had been sentenced to three years in prison for the crime of homosexuality”.] Carlo Ripa di Meana, “Con la testa voltata altrove”, *Critica sociale* no.5, 2008, 5.

<sup>107</sup> “David Cooper, o la capacidad de estar loco”, 60.

<sup>108</sup> “Creo que ha sido mi propia locura, y por tanto mi reestructuración, quienes me han acercado a una dimension politics mas amplia. Y la investigación en el Africa del Sur. He estado también en la Union Sovietica y en China para reflexionar un poco sobre política. En estos tres o cuatro años, con contactos y relaciones internacionales, he reencontrado mi pasado “revolucionario”. “David Cooper, o la capacidad de estar loco”, 60-61.

<sup>109</sup> “La autonomía de los individuos es quizás el único camino hacia el comunismo”. “David Cooper, o la capacidad de estar loco”, 61.

It is certainly significant that the contact between *Ajoblanco* and Cooper took place through the intermediation of the Italian organisation Lotta Continua, part of the so-called autonomous movement and the extra parliamentary left.<sup>110</sup> This information not only gives a measure of the existing relations and exchange between different counter-cultural and political bodies in Southern Europe, it also confirms that the notion of autonomy was taking on over the 1970s an increasingly central position in the debates situated at the crossing of culture and politics, in contrast with traditional political sectors.<sup>111</sup> On this respect, the emergence of dissidence as a condition of non acceptance of a system seems to have much to do with this attraction for a form of political and social engagement that abandoned the collective models of the 1960s to claim a way of acting as individuals to reach a common goal.

One of the figures who perhaps best embodied this convergence was Italian writer and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, assassinated in November 1975. In fact, it is not by chance that an issue of the French journal *Tel Quel* published during the summer 1978 and dedicated to dissidence, included an article by Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi entitled “Pasolini: assassinat d’un dissident” (“Pasolini: murder of a dissident”).<sup>112</sup> The article and others from the same issue had been previously read in February 1978 at the conference of psychoanalysis “Dissidence, inconscient et pouvoirs”, where the issues of “totalitarianism, the stalinist question, the political character of the unconscious, the practice of psychoanalysis as dissidence, rewriting ans power [...]” are discussed.<sup>113</sup> In this context, several participants also questioned the validity of the term “dissident” as applied outside the

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<sup>110</sup> “David Cooper, o la capacidad de estar loco”, 58.

<sup>111</sup> According to Chapman, Cooper’s relationship with the New Left and counter-culture, as well as his non-academic form of writing, is one of the reasons why his work was later considered as embarrassing and was even forgotten in the field of psychiatry. Chapman, “Re-Coopering anti-psychiatry: David Cooper, revolutionary critic of psychiatry”.

<sup>112</sup> Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, “Pasolini: assassinat d’un dissident”, *Tel Quel*, no. 76, Summer 1978, 27-39.

<sup>113</sup> Among the participants were Jean-Pierre Faye, Viktor Fainberg, Philippe Sollers, Jean Oury, Catherine Clément, Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, Peter Brückner and Ian Vianu. R.J., “Dissidence, pouvoirs et inconscient,” *Le Monde*, 18 February 1978. [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1978/02/18/dissidence-pouvoirs-et-inconscient\\_2992754\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1978/02/18/dissidence-pouvoirs-et-inconscient_2992754_1819218.html) (Accessed April 2020).

socialist context, even going so far as to propose a term, “dissidental” or “dissidentaux” to differentiate them.<sup>114</sup>

These discussions in the context of a conference that was not centered on the sociopolitical situation in Eastern Europe shows to what extent the idea of dissent was taken up by Western intellectuals, who saw in it more an opportunity to display their own non-conformity than to contribute to the cause of the victims of Soviet-type regimes. Here again, the discussion reached the field of visual arts only in a roundabout way, and it mainly affected Western artists and intellectuals who had already distinguished themselves by taking position against the imperialist logics of the capitalist system.

David Cooper justified the use of the term dissident in relation to non socialist spaces by the existence of a ‘Western gulag’ which, in his view, was far more extensive and monstrous than its Soviet equivalent. While this not-so nuanced view could contribute to minimise the violence of totalitarian communism, on the other hand, Cooper insisted by naming the Third World, whose exploitation by the first capitalist world justified the idea of a Western gulag:

I attach great importance to the rapid advance of liberation in the Third World. I come from South Africa where I have been in “political exile.” What is happening there at the moment is very important for the collapse of capitalism. I have just written my book *Who are the dissidents* in which I attack French intellectuals, especially those in Paris, because they don't understand that Europeans have privileges. Bourgeois freedoms depend on the super-exploitation of the Third World.

France is selling atomic power stations that can produce bombs. But its intellectuals are protesting against the oriental “grand goulag”. But Stalin’s goulag is insignificant compared to the imperialist “goulag”.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> R.J., “Dissidence, pouvoirs et inconscient”. This neologism coined by philosopher and psychoanalyst Roger Dadoun is hardly translatable, as it combines the word ‘dissident’ with the term ‘occidental’, in the plural ‘occidentaux’, meaning Western. The article in *Le Monde* also reported Dadoun’s affirmation that “every Soviet dissident represents something miraculous, every dissidental represents something ordinary” (“chaque dissident soviétique représente quelque chose de l'ordre du miracle, chaque dissidental représente quelque chose de l'ordre de l'ordinaire”).

<sup>115</sup> “Yo doy mucha importancia al rápido avance de la liberación en el Tercer Mundo. Llego del Africa del Sur donde he estado en “exilio político”. Lo que sucede allí, en este momento, es muy importante para el hundimiento del capitalismo. Acabo de escribir mi obra *Quiénes son los disidentes* en la que ataco a los intelectuales franceses, especialmente los de París porque no comprenden que los europeos poseen privilegios. Las libertades burguesas dependen de la superexplotación del Tercer Mundo. Francia está vendiendo centrales atómicas que pueden producir bombas. Pero sus intelectuales protestan contra el “grande goulag” oriental. Pero el goulag de Stalin es poca cosa en comparación al “goulag” imperialista”. “David Cooper, o la capacidad de estar loco”, 58-62.

The contradictions in Cooper's statements showed once again the difficulty for actors critical to capitalism to have a totally coherent position in the face of the repressive excesses in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, especially when Marxism remained, on the other hand, a central reference and a motor in the struggle for decolonisation and liberation throughout the Third World.

### **3.2. Contradictory views on dissidence. CEAC and Strike**

The same contradictions were visible in another statement about the Biennale of Dissent, made by a collective whose taste for polemics and political statements has been addressed earlier in this dissertation: the Centre for Experimental Art and Communication (CEAC) from Toronto (see Chapter two).

In May 1978, the magazine *Strike* edited by the CEAC included a special section on dissidence signed by the "Central Strike Committee" composed of Amerigo Marras, Roy Pelletier, Bob Reid, Bruce Eves, Lily Chiro, and Paul McLellan. [Fig. 6.7] While the primary objective of this insert was to criticise the selection of Canadian artists exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1978 carried out by the National Art Gallery (the selected artists were Ron Martin and Henry Saxe), it also provided several reflections on the use of dissident art in the West. More specifically in the paragraph titled "Eastern dissident art/No regime has a monopoly on repression", the authors affirmed that the art visible at the last Venice Biennale—they referred to "La Nuova arte sovietica" without naming it, citing the different sections of the exhibition—was in no way different from its Western counterpart. They denounced the "mythical proportions" acquired by the preconceived idea according which artists in the East who did not follow the principles of socialist realism risked their lives and were victims of brutal repression, whereas in reality, socialist realism was not the official art since a long time and artistic expressions were already accepted. According to them,

[s]uch myths are perpetrated by capitalism not only because they once more show the East as not "free" and therefore that communism itself is tyrannical while capitalism is the best possible system, but also because an art characterized as a champion of freedom in its alleged battle against repression in the East being similar to Western art reflects on Western art as the

embodiment of freedom itself, and as the product of capitalism reflects the freedom and natural universal quality of that system.<sup>116</sup>

The second part of their reasoning is interesting insofar as it offers a variation on what was expressed by the detractors of the idea of dissident art, who consider it a mediocre copy of contemporary modern art. By claiming that the so-called dissident art couldn't be distinguished from contemporary Western art, and that this was precisely the reason of its instrumentalisation by the capitalist system that had every interest in using the dissident label to demonstrate the absence of artistic freedom under state socialism, the members of CEAC sought above all to demystify the manipulative action of the capitalist system. Following that logic, they even denounced those artists from socialist countries who "used" their condition of dissidents to sell their work in the West, because they perpetuated the idea of repressed art in order to ensure their success in the West and become active agents in the capitalist system.

The issue of *Strike* in which this insert on the Venice Biennale appeared was subject of much controversy. Indeed, the magazine included some extracts of the report from the trial of the Red Brigades that was taking place at that time in Turin. During this trial, forty-nine members of this organisation, considered as terrorist by the authorities and responsible for the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, were tried for various actions carried out over the past two years. While twenty-nine of them faced a sentence up to fifteen years in prison, the accused do not appear and issued a communiqué calling for the military occupation of cities and the militarisation of factories. In addition to excerpts from the trial, *Strike* reproduced photographs of victims of the Red Brigades without any caption, and also some calls from the organisation to strike "against the imperialisation of the transnationals" and "Build the unity of the revolutionary movement".<sup>117</sup> What many denounced as an apology of violence and murder on the part of *Strike's* editors (Suber Corley, Bruce Eves, Paul McLellan, Amerigo Marras, Roy Pelletier, Rob Reid), who didn't hesitate in fact to claim their support

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<sup>116</sup> Joint statement by Central Strike Committee: Amerigo Marras, Roy Pelletier, Bob Reid, Bruce Eves, Lily Chiro, and Paul McLellan, "Dissidence in the 1978 Venice Biennale", *Strike*, no. 2 (May 1978), unpaginated (17-22). Only three issues of *Strike* were published in 1978. According to Philip Monk, "it began as a newsletter for CEAC activities but soon became a broadsheet in which the war of words, with General Idea sometimes as target, eventually escalated." Philip Monk, "Battle Stances: General Idea, CEAC, and the Struggle for Ideological Dominance in Toronto, 1976-78", *Fillip*, 20, Fall 2015, 16.

<sup>117</sup> "Red Brigades on trial", *Strike*, no. 2, May 1978, 6-7.



of “leg-shooting/knee caping to accelerate the demise of the old system” eventually led to the withdrawal of all the public subsidies the CEAC relied on.<sup>118</sup>

In a conversation from the same period with his colleague from CEAC Diane Boadway, Amerigo Marras narrated his recent visit to Italy and his encounter with the milieu of leftist activism in Milan. Questioned on the movements’ relation to terrorism, he was categorical in identifying them to guerrilla:

ok you call it terrorism probably, ok the terrorism is an effect on something that is happening but is also part of the same movement of dissent. That is the whole generation of young Europeans actually rebelling ok, rebelling against the people who have been in power for thirty years. [...] I would call that Guerrilla, because guerrilla gives the better idea of what is happening, in other words the act of rebellion.<sup>119</sup>

Marras also mentioned in this conversation the existence of a magazine called *Dissenso*, associated in his mind with this revolutionary struggle. He was apparently unaware that this magazine, first issued in 1977, was in fact the official magazine of the Fronte per la Gioventù (Youth Front), itself attached to the Movimento Sociale Italiano-Destra Nazionale (MSI-DN), a neo-fascist, Catholic and monarchist political party. The use of the term “dissenso” by this publication reflected a right-wing strategy of dispossessing the left of its own Marxist terminology, at a time when Fronte per la Gioventù was directly opposed to the communist and the extra-parliamentary organisations, in a way that implied also violence and armed action. The paradox, illustrated by Marras’ position and the reappropriation of dissidence—at least, as a word—by a far right ideology thus confirms the confusion reigning at that time in non socialist countries around these issues.

Just as the 1960s “contestations” had ended up being absorbed by the dominant system and some of its branches had been institutionalised, dissidence and dissent were ultimately subject to the same strategy of appropriation. From being a polemical term and a source of

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<sup>118</sup> “Playing Idiots, Plain Hideous,” *Strike*, no. 2, May 1978, 3. For an analysis of this issue, see Dot Tuer, “The CEAC was banned in Canada”, *C Magazine*, no. 11, 1986, 35-36. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/80191867.pdf> (Last accessed May 2019) and Philip Monk, *Is Toronto Burning ?*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2016, 120-124.

<sup>119</sup> “Amerigo Marras at the Bayfront restaurant in Toronto” (27 June 1978), in Diane Boadway, *Confrontation*, self-edited book of conversations, 1978, 29.

disagreement between the Western lefts, it ended up being brandished by their common ideological adversary and incorporated into its own communication and action strategy.

## CONCLUSIONS

### **From the terror of the border to its multiple crossings**

In 1965, the member of *zaj* Ramón Barce performed the reading of a “cartón” titled “Leyenda china” (“Chinese legend”).<sup>1</sup> The text printed on a square green card said the following:

Every border (also those of art, and in this case those of music) is simply a line that separates us from terror. Precisely because of this, every border must be crossed. A Chinese legend can help us to understand this terror of the border myth.<sup>2</sup>

Barce seemed to refer in first place to borders between artistic disciplines, however, his statement could also be understood in relation to a physical border between two territories. In any case, the operation of crossing the dividing line was described as a necessary experience of overcoming one’s fears by engaging into the unknown. The reference to a mysterious and exotic “Chinese legend” was not innocent either, since it suggested that the terror of the unknown existed in all latitudes, even in the far-East that was precisely supposed, for a Spanish audience, to embody the unknown and the “other”.

The artists and intellectuals whose practices have been examined in the six chapters that compose this dissertation did not envisage border-crossing as a terrorising or frightening act. They saw it instead as an opportunity for exchanging with peers, getting information and making their work more visible. Yet, in the context of the Cold War during the period comprised between the late 1960s and the

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<sup>1</sup> The “cartones” were rigid paper cards with printed messages or signs the group *zaj* put into circulation through the mail art network. See chapter one.

<sup>2</sup> “Toda frontera (también las del arte, y en este caso las de la música) es simplemente una línea que nos separa del terror. Precisamente por esto, toda frontera debe ser atravesada. Una leyenda china nos puede ayudar a comprender este terror del mito fronterizo”. Ramón Barce/*zaj*, Cartón, 1965. Collection of the TEA, Tenerife. TEA\_CD-002\_005. Cited in Rosa María Rodríguez Hernández, “La creación *Zaj* de Ramón Barce formulada desde la memoria (1ª parte)”, *Itamar. Revista de investigación musical: territorios para el arte* no. 2, 2009, 250.

early 1980s, crossing the Iron Curtain remained a challenging operation that required to overcome important bureaucratic, economical, linguistic and symbolic barriers.

For these operators, the “terror” mentioned by Barce was not so much due to the confrontation with intellectual codes, modes of thinking and behaving that differed from theirs, as in the prospect of having to conform to an imposed reality at home. Hence their constant attempt to establish and maintain communication with interlocutors abroad and, if possible, to invent forms of organisation that would allow, even for a limited time, to create alternative spaces or situations of interaction beyond their close environment. This situation, as I hope this study has made clear, was not proper to socialist Central Europe and its population of artists and intellectuals. It affected creators living in distinct political and economic systems, with different cultural backgrounds and references. This dissertation opened with a reference to the Iron Curtain as a physical and symbolic border. It quickly moved from this line to a field, namely the geo-cultural area formed by Central Europe and Southern Europe, and the space in-between inhabited by circulating artifacts, agents and ideas.

From the beginning, several interrogations have accompanied this attempt to explore such transregional space. How to envisage the relations between these two different regions, themselves made up of nations with different political systems, social histories and cultural references? Was it possible to propose this type of study without remaining on the surface or, on the contrary, being drowned under the quantity of facts and data intended to contextualise each environment? How to show the vividness of multidirectional artistic exchange between these two regions, their richness but also their often impalpable or elusive character? And above all, what questions did these interactions, marked by commonalities but also by strong divergences, raise?

To answer these questions or at least clarify certain aspects they shed light on, I have opted for addressing the relations between Central Europe and Southern Europe through the lens of two concepts: circulation on the one hand, visibilisation on the other. These two concepts imposed themselves rapidly as complementary working tools to articulate a transnational analysis of artistic exchanges during the Cold War. As the research progressed, elements from the two parts started to relate to each other,

appear and reappear further away, building a circular rather than a linear progression. In fact, if the selection of cases and their organisation has tried to follow a certain chronological progression (starting in the mid-1960s and ending around 1977), it also developed through resonance and echos. Even the concepts that structured the two main parts—circulation and visibilisation—and their related cases overlapped, as a direct consequence of the processes they referred to. Maintaining each side totally separated from the other would have been inconsistent and, probably, impossible: art did not circulate *before* being exhibited, or vice versa. The fact that circulation and visibilisation happened in parallel or synchronically certainly constituted a challenge to their examination, but also allowed to identify a series of transversal topics, present in both processes.

I hope to have been able to show in this dissertation that the space constituted between these two geo-cultural constructs was rich in encounters and shared projects carried out around different creative and intellectual poles. At the same time, considering that artistic transactions within this transregional area implied the collision of different references and codes, it was essential to also address the disappointed expectations, misunderstandings and disruptions that accompanied these contacts. It is in this attempt to highlight these misencounters or cracks in communication that I believe one of the contributions of this dissertation lies.

Without seeing them as negative effects of a supposed impossibility to communicate or to understand each other, however, they should be contemplated as catalysts of actions and decisions. In the same way that artists engaged in sociological and contextual art saw failures as opportunities to learn and to identify certain critical points to explore, challenges and difficulties were constitutive elements of transnational relations and as such, they are a precious material to work with. They tell us as much about the artists' disappointments as about their aspirations.

Some artists opted for withdrawal or refused to keep engaging with the art world through artistic production—Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch stopped practicing action art at the end of the decade, but we could also mention the dissolution of the Sociological Art Collective in 1981, or the decision of Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera

and Lech Mrożek on one side, and Jan Świdziński on the other, to stop collaborating. On the other hand, instead of encouraging them to pull out, the traumatic crushing of the possibility of socialism with a human face and the awareness that their commitment to a revolutionary cause had supported a regime of oppression and violence prompted art critics such as Raoul-Jean Moulin, Louis Aragon to tirelessly pursue their task of accompanying artists without giving in to the temptations of simplistic analyses based on political criteria. A task also carried out with a sense of responsibility by Jindřich Chaloupecký, who saw art and culture as instruments of freedom and collective liberation to which all should have access. A similar tension between the adherence to an ideological doctrine and a more pragmatic sense of responsibility towards art may have led Giulio Carlo Argan, ten years later in the context of the Venice Biennale del Dissenso, to refuse to vouch for dissident art conceived as a mere pretext for political debate and emphasise the need not to abandon the aesthetic search for art. With regard to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, the attraction exerted by certain discourses and interpretative frames of the time and the way in which they were able to impose themselves as dominant narratives, obscured other facets of the artistic practices with which they were associated. The CAYC in Buenos Aires and in particular Jorge Glusberg, first by promoting art systems as an internationalist nomenclature fueled with neo-marxist and post-structuralist terminology and then, a regional approach through the idea of a Latin American profile, neutralised other possibilities of contextualized approach to the projects included in its exhibitions, as saw in case of the Pamplona Encounters. The narrative of dissidence, on the other hand, was also an exclusionary reading and, at the same time, did not even allow the art of socialist territories to reoccupy the space as a legitimate artistic production, as the aesthetic quality of this “dissident art” and its legitimacy to occupy the prestigious space of the international exhibition was constantly questioned.

Between these artistic and disciplinary intersections and their constant negotiations, various issues have emerged as important nodes.

## Critical nodes

### Art's autonomy and its inscription in the social field

An important number of artists and intellectuals from Central Europe and Southern Europe whose work was discussed in this dissertation had in common the use of the term autonomy to frame their work or its aspirations and, more generally, its affirmation as a necessary working condition and an objective to reach.

In the period and places addressed in this dissertation, but also in present historiography, the idea of art's autonomy has been discussed and has generated numerous misunderstandings and discrepancies, in particular regarding the function of art produced in totalitarian or post-totalitarian contexts. Should art claim autonomy without taking a stand—could it do so, did it have the right to do so, or did its authors have an ethical duty to position themselves as engaged artists, and in what form? This question was essential, but even more essential was the identification of what each part meant by “autonomy”.

The search for autonomy of the artists and critics we have dealt with was never understood as a depoliticised and individualistic withdrawal from the world, but rather as a different mode of inscription into reality, anchored in the social field. This was the case for the group of multiple origins who created the Third Front, but it also appeared in the the field of experimental poetry in Spain and Italy, as well as in stances taken by art critics who considered themselves as engaged practitioners. The idea of freedom advocated by Jindřich Chaloupecký is, in my understanding, directly connected with this particular conception of autonomy, often associated with a search for authenticity. We should also recall Ješa Denegri's text in the catalogue of the Paris Biennale in 1977, insisting on the importance of autonomy for art from socialist countries while recalling at the same time the artists' involvement in the social sphere. The centrality of the notion of autonomy for the Italian extra-parliamentary left of that time was, also, an important backdrop that certainly impacted Southern European counter cultural movements, as David Cooper's statements in the Spanish magazine *Ajo blanco* testified for.

As the longing for autonomy started to impose itself in the course of this research as a transversal issue, it also became clear that it was associated with a concern for the

social as a privileged field of action. And here, I would like to stress that the concern was clearly for the social, and not the political.

The appeal to the social and its direct involvement in practices examined in this dissertation was often marked by the reaffirmation of local and small scale projects as the most suitable fields of action, and circumscribed communities as privileged interlocutors and participants. In this respect, we can refer to the actions of the Collective d'Art Sociologique, Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera and Jan Świdziński but also to Jana Želibská's unrealised project for the Paris Biennale with its collective authorship, Jiří Valoch's work as an organiser of exhibitions at the House of Arts in Brno, as well as Neon de Suro's insistence on the Mediterranean context. If most of these authors remained actively involved in international networks and activities of long distance communication, they searched at the same time to have an impact on their close environment and directly relate to a local audience.

On this respect, the notion of "Activity" was recurrent, related to the idea of acting in a particular context. It can be extended to the notions of action and the condition of being "active", as well as the idea of cultural agents as "operators", appeared in the 1960s. Think of Valoch's activities, the "local activities" of the contextualists or the pedagogical initiatives of Hungarian artists Dóra Maurer and Miklós Erdely. This ensemble of terms configures a register of practices aimed not only at observing or analysing reality, but also at operating within it and having a direct impact on it. Coming back to a point previously addressed in this conclusion, the centrality of the notion of activity or the idea of "being active" in the context of this dissertation should be also related to a desire of artists and intellectuals to go beyond the mere enunciation of abstract concepts and ideas and inscribe their practice in the social field. Artists and militant art critics considered important to leave their marks on their proper context, not as an individual signature but as part of a process of co-creation. In this respect, co-creation also found in the conception of new media or visual frames a privileged field of operation: self-organised and auto-financed seminars, publications or exhibitions conceived as public arenas for active discussions. The genealogy and uses of the term could be the subject of a separate study, seeking in



particular to understand the different understanding and application of “activity” in socialist contexts on the one hand, and in counter-cultural circles out of the Eastern bloc on the other.<sup>3</sup>

Such attitude, however, differed from the identification with a particular national frame. In fact, the dimension of disidentification or “defolklorisation”, to borrow Ignacio Gómez de Liaño’s term, was omnipresent in the avant-garde language of the time, in a way that resonated with the internationalist injunction of the exhibitions and biennials of the time and their eagerness to move beyond the national paradigm. Artists and intellectuals rarely affirmed national or regional belonging as an element of strong differentiation and when the question of national or regional identity surged, like in Jindřich Chaloupecký’s writings published in magazines abroad, it stemmed from a desire to compare and to get to know, to confront without judging, but also to dialogue without any provincialist complex.

From that perspective, relations to the center(s) were not envisaged as a motor of comparison that produced a sense of inferiority. In fact, the artists’s willingness to act not as “provincial” authors but as full-fledged actors of a self-defined marginal but international artistic sphere is recurrent in this research. On the other hand, it also became clear that while many Central European artists positioned themselves within the coordinates of a longing for autonomy and a will to escape from the centers’ force of attraction and influence, the perception of their position from abroad, as well as the understanding of their work—when its existence was acknowledged—still strongly relied on the dichotomy official/unofficial or professional/amateur—remember Antoni Muntadas’ appreciation of the Polish scene in the 1970s, in Chapter two, divided between “serious” professionals and amateurs, or Georges Boudaille’s simplistic observation on the political character of Eastern European art at the Paris Biennale.

This tension is particularly interesting: artists in Central and Southern Europe shared a vision of autonomy that implied forms of involvement in reality (seen as a contingent environment in constant transformation) close to each other, an emphasis on local action and, ultimately, a search for decentering the art scene. At the same

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<sup>3</sup> I would also include in this constellation of terms artists’ interest for “exercises” as a creative format. See in Chapter one, Jiří Valoch’s exercises or the *Creativity exercises* developed by the Hungarians Dóra Maurer and Miklos Erdely.

time, they remained subject to distinct interpretations, depending on their connection to a particular geopolitical space. For example, actions in rural or isolated environments in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s have been often seen as a direct consequence of the normalisation period which forced artists to withdraw from the public space, omitting other motives related with their authors' own interest in operating in such specific places and addressing their local coordinates.

### **Left-wing melancholias**

We should mention the pervasive imaginary produced by the period to which this dissertation refers and its political and social history. Being an art historian working on the 1960s-1970s period in a Cold War context implies taking into account the very particular “halo” formed around these years, in Europe and beyond. Given our present situation with no alternative to unbridled neo-liberalism and growing nationalisms on all sides, these two decades are all the more contemplated as a sort of lost paradise of social and political struggles and movements, a time when the revolutionary force of leftist emancipatory projects was combined with internationalist solidarities.

The nurturing energy and political imagination that has characterised the 1960s and 1970s, and the cultural and counter-cultural effervescence that stemmed from it easily explain this fascination. At the same time, while the powerful imaginary (and imagery) related with leftist projects and utopias generate a strong intellectual and emotional attraction, it is important to keep a critical look not only at their proper limitations, but also at the biases and tendentious readings they might have generated a posteriori. Even in the field of art historiography and especially when dealing with practices developed under authoritarian regimes, the nostalgia for a past in which a the perspective of a brighter future still existed—the “melancholy of the left” described by Enzo Traverso—can incite to establish simplistic distinctions between good and bad artists, i.e. those politically engaged who directly confronted dominant ideologies, and those who, on the contrary, affirmed repeatedly their rejection of any kind of ideological instrumentalisation.<sup>4</sup> And in fact, this dichotomy is only relative if we consider the number of artists who positioned themselves directly in a third field and

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<sup>4</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Left-wing melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016)

refused to endorse the values and confrontational strategies of each of the two parties, between the representatives of the Third Front, Tamás Szentjóbó but also Neon de Suro.

The reading of European art (not only in socialist context) through the lens of dissidence and the heroisation of artists and intellectuals who resisted remains one of the narratives favoured by this approach permeated with leftist melancholia. Without wishing to diminish the relevance of these political genealogies and their contribution for the development of an increasingly decentred history of the Cold War period and a critical approach to the present, I would suggest that the interest for territories and regions where processes of decolonisation and struggles against right-wing dictatorships occurred might also be related with this nostalgic need for recovering the force of collective projects of emancipation or resistance and associate them with the socialists ideals that permeated Eastern European societies.<sup>5</sup>

Curiously, Southern Europe, although subject to important social and political transformations in the years that interest us here, has remained excluded from these new global genealogies and geographies of emancipation. On this regard, while in the field of Eastern European art histories, the attention to issues such as the relationship to the processes of decolonisation in the Third World, global south students in Eastern Europe, or approaches to panafricanism and *négritude* in the region, among others, have recently open up the field of research and moved away from the East-West dichotomy, the relationship with Southern Europe has yet to be established and identified in the form of focal points. And yet many elements could be identified... Among them, the relationship to Mediterranean tourism during the Cold War for example, diplomatic relations established by the artists' unions, the role of local or municipal politics in establishing cultural relations with the East in Italy and France, the way Southern Europeans imaginaries in relation to socialist Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union manifested in artistic production. Another possible field of research is proper issue of Southern European workers' emigration to Central or Northern Europe (West Germany, for instance) and their mediated encounters with the East (or

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<sup>5</sup> We can wonder to what extent these attempts are also permeated with new forms of orientalism and exoticism, those which are precisely absent from approaches to Southern Europe for being considered still too European.

an imagined East) leading to a possible modification of their social and cultural horizon; and the question of racism and discrimination experienced in both cases.

### **Opening lines**

Finally, I would like to mention several issues that came across this dissertation and can be retrieved as secondary, yet interesting aspects to deal with.

The first one is the question of generational and inter-generational relations. Although focused on a specific decade, this study convoked various generations of agents who had different conceptions of their role as artists, critics or cultural producers and different relations to their sociopolitical context, in part because of their historical experiences—for instance, the Spanish civil war, the Second World War or the stalinist period in Eastern Europe were defining experiences for the older generation. This generational gap appeared clearly in the discussions regarding art's function and political engagement held on the margins of the Pamplona Encounters, that opposed antifrancoist militants with a younger generation more attracted by counterculture; it was also visible in the case of Jan Świdziński and his role of “mentor” of younger artists or his misunderstanding of feminism, or through Jiří Kolář and Jindřich Chalupecký's critical relation to art as a pure provocation. In other cases, such as the Paris Biennial focusing on young artists, the preponderance of certain artistic languages in the international selection and the reluctance of certain correspondents like Chalupecký to respond to them was also a sign of generational gap, but also a reflection of his broad interests in various facets of artistic production and his refusal to give in to imposed trends.

The relationship to non-urban spaces, rural or remote environments and islands also constitute a terrain to explore in greater depth, for it presents a ground for articulating a decentered view on the history of artistic production and relations from that period. At a time of ecological and eco-social crisis, the possibility of revisiting episodes involving collaboration with smaller communities, with their achievements and their limitations, seems particularly fruitful. It provides a topography of the art of this period anchored in territories and focused on their social history and traditions, as an alternative to the exclusive vision of an international art scene and its capitals.

These projects also raise the question of the motivations and limitations of art with an ethnographic orientation, not always deprived of preconceptions or clichés. While the trajectory of artists from this period (especially in countries East of the Iron Curtain) has been often analysed in relation to Western art capitals as fantasised places of knowledge where to catch up with modernity, returning to these local actions and activities in Eastern European and Southern European environments calls into question the dynamics of circulation and exchange dedicated exclusively to integrating an international scene.

The attention on urban centers is particularly evident in the case of France, where even in the field of art history, “France” still too often means “Paris”, leaving aside vivid scenes and initiatives outside of the capital. The study of exchanges between Central European agents and interlocutors from the French scene should tend at adopting a more decentralised perspective and pay attention to events in other cities and spaces. Although several cases have been identified, they were not included in this dissertation for chronological or thematic reasons. Nevertheless, I wish to name them as possible directions for further research, especially since some of them are located in Southern France and the Mediterranean: the Sigma festivals in Bordeaux (since 1965), “100 artistes dans la ville” in Montpellier (1970), the “Six jours de la peinture” in Marseille (1975), or the relations between the Galerie l’Ollave in Lyon and the Polish scene from the late 1970s on.<sup>6</sup>

We should insist on the fact that this situation of highly centralized culture was proper to France, when artistic topographies were much more varied and disseminated across the territory in Italy, Spain, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

The intention of this dissertation was thus to build a European art space with specific coordinates; an artificial frame that would be used to focus on the topographies of artistic exchange and their corresponding processes of visibilisation and interpretation. It sought-and, I hope, succeeded to some extent-to avoid the pitfall of a simplified reading of transregional encounters by tracking the contradictions and

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<sup>6</sup> The difficulty to access information on some of these events seems to confirm that there is still a great disparity concerning the accessibility of archives on the national territory.

tensions that surged from the inevitable discrepancy between artistic productions, their context of inscription and reception, and their interpretations.

The importance of setting this study in Europe has become an evidence during the research process, insofar as much remains to be done in order not only to shed light on forgotten episodes and cultural production that have had an impact at a regional level, but also to think about how they were articulated within this general European space, which, seen from a world perspective, is so tiny and fragmented, riddled with contradictions between transforming impulses and internal conflicts for power. For it hasn't crystallised deep expectations and iconic representations, Southern Europe is precisely a space from which to contemplate the expectations generated by Central European art and the repercussions on its own trajectory, but also, in the reverse process, the interrogations of the Southern interlocutors and the specificities of these transregional exchanges. The sounding board provided by the two European regions I have set out to explore in this essay, is vast and still has much to offer.

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