

new grand narratives in east-central european art history?

● *It does not mean that any narrative is reliable. By metanarrative or grand narrative I mean various narrations which are supposed to have the function of legitimization. Their decline does not restrain a thousand millions minor stories producing the fabric of everyday life.*

Jean-Francois Lyotard

I. ART HISTORY AND ART MUSEUM

During last two decades in Western countries the discipline of Art History has been splitting into two streams: the “old” and the “new” art history. The old branch is here considered a kind of science with its pedantic, analytical writing full of arguments, scholarly procedures associated with terms such as canon, norm, pattern, idea, artist as genius, masterpiece, development, progress, style, form, meaning, etc. On one hand, there is a “technical prose” of art history but on the other art historian’s writing related to history: a kind of “narrative” must be told. Both phenomena have contributed to the scholarly framing and institutional power of the discipline of Art History as constituted in 19th century.

The New Art History has been trying to expand beyond the borders of traditional art historical notions and paradigms intersecting with Visual and Cultural Studies (e.g. Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Postcolonial Studies). Interdisciplinarity and a wide range of new approaches (e.g. semiotic, poststructuralist, deconstructivist, psychoanalytic) show how the discipline of Art History is no more a single unified science with firm rules, criteria and methods. There is no doubt that the academic/university art history shaped by traditional disciplinary conventions has been recently questioned. Moreover, “*recent Art History has been more concerned with the circumstances in which an artwork has been made, especially with patronage and with the social, economic, political and institutional factors that shape art.*”¹ Institutional factors and the social functioning of art, as well as power relations have been the most relevant issue of poststructuralist theory which was extremely challenging for the traditional discipline of art history.

One of the most important institutions - let’s say parallel to the academic discipline of art history - is the art museum. The art museum is the site where the objects of art (as well as the objects of art historical

research) are displayed. In his essay “Collecting/Museums” Donald Preziosi put it: “*The museum is one of the most brilliant and powerful genres of modern fiction, sharing with other forms of ideological practice - religion, science, entertainment, the academic disciplines - a variety of methods for the production and factualization of knowledge and its sociopolitical consequences. Since its invention in the late eighteenth-century Europe as one of the premier epistemological technologies of the Enlightenment, the museum has been central to the social, ethical, and political formation of the citizenry of modernizing nation-states. At the same time, museological practices have played a fundamental role in fabricating, maintaining, and disseminating many of the essentialist and historicist fictions which make up the social realities of the modern world.*”²

No doubt, modern practices of the discipline of museology could be considered parallel to the discipline of art history. Here I don’t want to draw a simplistic analogy between writing and exposing/putting on display. The written word is, of course, an important adjunct to exhibits, incorporated both within them and in accompanying publications and catalogues. But “*the museum scholar’s principal medium is not the written word, but visual material itself and its physical setting.*”³ The point is, how they both support each other, moreover, how they belong to the wide range of mechanisms and effects of museological practice. Museum scholars/curators core concern is visual material in the form of organization and public presentation. Here we may well ask: Isn’t this the issue of art history’s own interest? Is not ordering of heterogeneous elements into groups, schools, styles, periods, epoques the fundamental approach of an art historian? Is it possible to escape the normative practice, principles of ordering and classification? The answer is neither yes or no. Moreover, the second set of questions associated with Preziosi’s characteristics of the museum as a “*powerful genre of modern fiction*” might be: is the principle of ordering which looks so “naturally” let’s say “innocent”? And is this kind of ordering/classification/presentation/display *scientific, true* and perhaps *objective*? Or is it construed, and if yes, who does it serve? Here we come to the starting point of our earlier considerations about “old” and New Art History or about their interpretative methods: the old normative/scientific meth-

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¹ Paul Barolsky: Writing (and) the History of Art. In: Art Bulletin, vol.LXXVIII, Number 3, September 1996, p.398

² Donald Preziosi: Collecting/Museum. In: Critical Terms for Art History (Ed.by Robert S.Nelson and Richard Shiff), The University of Chicago Press 1996, p.281

³ Ivan Gaskell: Writing (and) Art History: Against Writing. In: Art Bulletin, vol.LXXVIII, Number 3, September 1996, p.404

ods and the new approaches trying to dismantle/question the notions, principles or paradigms appearing as granted, truthful, objective. If we take into account academic art history with its domain of writing/texts and the art museum as the historical practice of displaying art, they seem to overlap. According to Donald Preziosi *"The modern practices of museology - no less than those of the museum's ancillary discursive practice of museography (also known as "art history") are a dimension of the distinctively modernist ideology of representational adequation, wherein it is imagined that exhibition and display may be faithfully <representative> of some extramuseological states of affairs: some real history which, it is supposed, preexists its portrayal or re-presentation in exhibitions or discursive space."*⁴

II. "THE HISTORY OF SLOVAK ART" IN THE SLOVAK NATIONAL GALLERY

In selecting the example of the museum of fine arts to demonstrate the museum's alliance with art history and their claim for *representational adequation* I took a recent exhibition "The History of Slovak Art in the 20th Century" in the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava (2000). The institutional frame is highly important here because in Slovakia the Slovak National Gallery is the most relevant institution having the status of museum. Collecting and preserving the cultural heritage from the middle ages to modernism and contemporary art have been the main aim of the museum since its founding in 1948. At the same time it must be said that the above mentioned exhibition was part of a larger exhibition series entitled "The History of Art in Slovakia" which was intended to map all historical art periods from the middle ages to the 20th century. That's why the frame here is doubled: the frame of the relevant institution (museum) and the frame of art history (books/texts).

The challenge to present a 20th century art exhibition in the year 2000 (as proclaimed in the accompanying book) was not only the turn-of-the-century but also the political change after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many times (despite differences which exist between national cultures) nation states in Europe have confirmed their nationality/national existence through museums. In his essay "Art History and

Museums" Stephen Bann raised the hypothesis *"that the revolutionary period in France, whose effects extended to the rest of Europe, contributed to the rise of the modern museum a distinctive and novel element"*.⁵ After the velvet (not bloody) revolution, in all post-communist countries there was a need to reconstruct the past and to confirm/legitimize the "new" political and national identity. Moreover, Czechoslovakia split into two independent states in 1993. No wonder the need to legitimize the nation state through reliable instruments and to tell the "true" story in particular of the second half of the century. *"One simply cannot today be a nation-state, an ethnicity, or a race without a proper and corresponding art, with its own distinctive history or trajectory which reflects or models the broader historical evolution of that identity-which bodies forth its <soul>"*.⁶

The exhibition could be read as a chronological historical concept beginning traditionally with Art nouveau, Symbolism and Impressionism. In this linear concept the "national school" follows because in 1918 the first Czechoslovak Republic was founded and the "national school" represented the myths of the country and heroic people (for the first time). The national myth would be repeated again during WWII and after, always associated with threads and the struggle for freedom (including the creative freedom of the artist). In the exhibition folder we can read: *"The history of 20th century Slovak art reflects the struggle for artistic, personal and political independence. Apparently, art documents that history repeats and totalitarian political systems alternate with periods of relaxed atmosphere and cultural development. It illustrates that power and ideology can be demonstrated by words as well as by works of art, which reflect their own value, providing testimony of time."*⁷ Despite parochial rhetoric is there palpable evidence that this kind of concept places history (or better to say national history) at its center and that history is accompanied by art works. At the same time art works function as evidence of historical change and when ordered as evolutionary development they are understood as "portraying history". The exhibition concluded with contemporary "young art" of the nineties and the full circle was closed with perfect naturalness. What seemed to be supportive to this kind of exhibition concept were "chapters" with inscriptions on the walls deploying the key

⁴ Donald Preziosi, *ibid*, p.281-282

⁵ Stephen Bann: *Art History and Museums*. In: *The Subjects of Art History* (Ed. by Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey), Cambridge University Press, p.236

⁶ Donald Preziosi, *ibid*, p.290

⁷ *The History of Slovak Art in the 20th Century* (Exhibition folder), Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava 2000

ideas of the historical narrative.

When the first reading of the exhibition is historical, within particular chapters we can read the particular themes (Signs of the homeland), styles/formal approaches (From abstract to figurative painting), tendencies (the art of action, Fluxus and Conceptual art), techniques or media (From the environments to the installation, The metamorphosis of the object, Architecture 1950-1970). Under the historical “umbrella” two different paradigms could be found: national/regional uniqueness combined with modernist formalism (1930s) or neo-modernism (1960s and 1970s). The mixture of both paradigms is typical for the territory of East-Central Europe where “*what is national in art often turns out to be the content of the painting (folk motifs, depictions of particular places in the country) and what is international turns out to be the style.*”⁸ Still, both paradigms may be understood as convenient for producing a historical narrative because the historical circumstances seem to be unavoidable and “responsible” for the closeness or the openness of a society (in the arts understood as keeping track with Western-European development or styles). Of course, this kind of method (because we are actually speaking about methodology) reminds us of Marxist social history of art with its supplementary backdrop of “context” which comprehends the art work as mirroring and synthesizing the social and cultural circumstances in which it was produced. Here we find a certain perpetuation (probably unconsciously) of a previously official Marxist method of art history, even if it doesn’t concern social-realist art but the avant-garde. Surprisingly, the remnants of the Marxist sociology of art is still present in our milieu. The simplistic method combining the art work with its background/circumstances, even if it is an abstract painting, acknowledges the lack of theory, not only in the period of socialism but nowadays, as well. And in my view there are certain normative methods in art historical and museological practice where the historical account of styles as a kind of genealogy is dominantly used. Here we must emphasize that the same is practiced in art historical writing (in particular within exhibition catalogues) and display.

Paradoxically, a similar kind of problem is encountered, if we look at the second half of the century (after WWII) within the exhibition of 20th century Slovak art. This is the period of socialism with the dichoto-

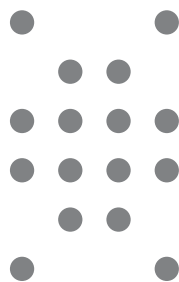
my of official and unofficial art production. To reconstitute the ideal past through art where art was both art object and instrument, is not easy. Moreover, there was the challenge to re-construct or re-define the recent history of art.

III. NEW GRAND NARRATIVE AND NEW HEROES

The expected “new reading” did not happen despite its best efforts. The chapter entitled “Utopia and tricks of socialist realism” was not only the smallest one but located in the corridor (1950s) and under the stairs of the main building (1970s). The location and the mode of installation were clearly designative: socialist realism was something that almost did not exist. On the contrary the neo-modernist tendencies or so-called alternative unofficial art produced outside official institutions was given a lot of space. The reason was that unofficial art production “was unknown to the public” and now it must be legitimized. This means that the crucial aim to *redefine* recent art history turned into a new grand narrative (as formerly the Marxist one) positioning unofficial art into the center and replacing the former official version. The proportions and the new ordering clearly showed the political change. But what actually happened was the turn of the previous “unofficial” art into today’s “official” which is now canonized by the institution. Moreover, the “museification” happened during the artists’ own lives, they “entered” into history and the history of art in the same museum which legitimized approximately ten years ago socialist realist artists.

This kind of paradoxical situation is remarkable but not exceptional in either history or the history of art. The permanent modern collection in the National Gallery in Prague, where socialist realism has been hidden behind a panel as an unimportant and embarrassing episode in the history of Czech art, shows a similar structure. The new exhibition of Czech modernism was set out by the artist Milan Knížák, the director of the National Gallery and as proclaimed in an interview “*the aim was the presentation of particular artists because in the former regime the works of artists served only for art historical constructions.*”⁹

Here, actually, we might open the issue of interpretation (or the prevailing/dominant interpretation) in the former com-



⁸ John Elkins: S.A.Mansbach: Modern Art in Eastern Europe: >From the Baltic to the Balkans 1890-1939 (book review). In: Art Bulletin 82, December 2000, p.782

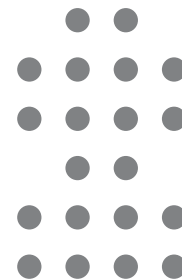
⁹ Irena Goldscheider: Rozhovor s Milanem Knížákem, generálním ředitelem Národní galerie a Stanislavem Kolíbalem, autorem architektonického řešení o nové expozici ve Veltržním paláci. In: Atelier 2001/2, p.1

munist countries. Or better: the need for many different interpretations and approaches instead of “one correct interpretation” (which in my opinion does not exist). And this concerns both Slovak and Czech exhibitions (despite their differences - the Slovak concept could be designated as “Kunstgeschichte” and the Czech one “Kunstlergeschichte”). The point is the proclaimed autonomy of alternative art as well as the unsettled meaning of this notion. The greatest misunderstanding comes from the emphasis put on autonomous alternative art produced outside institutions and thus deemed to be apolitical, pure, untouched by official claims and dogmas while on the contrary, official art was political and serving art. Such interpretation of the culture seems to be aprioristic and simplifying because anything and anybody acts outside of social, political or art system but is a part of it. Apparently, both official and unofficial art reflected and were actively (politically) engaged in the social and cultural environment in which they were located. Moreover, we could discover art production which was neither official nor unofficial. It was the co-existence of both streams and a lot of mixed phenomena that produced culture during socialism. It is not difficult to see that Czech and Slovak art and art criticism still have a problem with interconnecting the social, political and artistic spheres. There is still a black-and-white polarity of the political and the apolitical, autonomous and in fact elitist (studio) art emphasizing the universal/metaphysical/“high” values which are elevated above “low” political functions of art. The apology of this kind of art production (with a moralizing undertone) was highly appreciated among dissident artists and art critics and is still alive. It helped to create a specific status for the unofficial (exclusively male) artist as a charismatic personality producing authentic art looking for the Truth. An apology for universal truths and values against degenerated ideology was actually produced as part of the dialogue with totalitarianism. The artist was the performer and “apostle of freedom” on the socio-political scene as against the official model of the artist as obedient servant. Despite the widely spread myths about the avant-garde (autonomous) art and artist, critique of the dissident paradigm in the former communist countries is not rare.¹⁰

Of course, it is extremely difficult to visualize the socio-political background of certain historical periods.. What I want to

point out, is that what was needed was text/interpretation. However, the accompanying book doesn't show any affiliation with the exhibition and one might say it is a separate project. The book consists of chronologically ordered chapters concerned with particular artistic genres - painting, sculpture, prints, architecture, video art or new media. The essays (written by different art historians) are in various styles. Mostly in chronological order the authors of the essays enumerate names of the artists and their own personal style or development. Of course, many of the artists wouldn't be there in the previous regime but a formal or stylistic analysis seems to be insufficient. The common denominator of both the exhibition and the book is “*a certain historical dramaturgy which unfolds with perfect naturalness - all kinds of genealogical filiations appear reasonable, inevitable, and demonstrable.*”¹¹ The historical approach is largely a repetition of the old schemes (old art history methods) instead of “seeing the unseen”. Instead of revealing the mechanisms of power, politics and aesthetics there is a revival of historical mythologies.

The legacy of modernism seems to be very powerful. Nowadays, in the “advanced” postmodern era certain modernist cliché can be seen very easily. In his essay “Re: Post” Hal Foster wrote: “*Purity as an end and decorum as an effect, historicism as an operation and the museum as the context, the artist as original and the art work as unique - these are the terms which modernism privileges and against which postmodernism is articulated. In postmodernism, they form a practice now exhausted, whose conventionality can no longer be inflected.*”¹² The same questioning could be extended for writing or art historical methods. The basic questions perhaps could be: Is art history only the modern positivist and formalist methods and simplified sociological explanations of art production? Can we at the beginning of the 21st century believe in the metaphysical truths and the grand historical narratives? Do we need some new grand narrative, a totalizing history/theory, universalist disciplinary and institutional? Do we need other heroes? If not, how can we envisage a “new reading”, the need to re-read our past? ●



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¹⁰ See: Jan Bakoš: The Artist in the Cage, Bratislava 2000

¹¹ Donald Preziosi: Museology and Museography. In: Art Bulletin, vol. LXXVII, Number 1, March 1995, p.14

¹² Hal Foster: Re: Post. In: Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation (Ed. by Brian Wallis), New York 1984, p.191