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Anti-Communism, Authenticity, Individualization, the West
Czech Art History of Modern Art in the Post-Socialist Era

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Abstract

The article explores the construction of the canon of Czech postwar visual art during the 1990s. The concept of post-socialism serves as the framework of the analysis, illuminating the unspoken yet significant oppositional attitude toward the then-recent socialist past. On the scale of individual styles of modern art, the text traces their gradual historicization during the 1990s. Starting with informel, through constructivist tendencies, new figuration to performance art, and new media, the text also situates the canonization processes within the contemporary context of Czech post-revolutionary society and the then-current state and practices of the discipline of art history.

The Czechoslovak Velvet revolution of 1989 was driven by the idea of a new political and social order. It demanded that the new society be different from the practices, conventions, and ideals of the Communist Party and (late) socialism. In the years immediately following, the Velvet Revolution was a powerful source of political legitimacy – especially for the cultural sphere, as national culture, personified by students, writers, playwrights, actors and other artists, had played a central role in November 1989.[1]

Some of the revolutionary ideals persisted in the public sphere throughout the 1990s. In particular, the concepts of humanity and justice, which James Krapfl identifies as key ideals of the revolutionary events,[2] were central to the newly written narrative of Czech art history. The ideal of humanity was quite soon transformed into an expectation of the individualization of history in discussions of the recent past in the early 1990s. The ideal of justice was often seen as a reaction to the socialist past, to be fulfilled by rewriting the postwar history of Czechoslovakia – or Europe, for that matter. The work of art historians in the 1990s was thus generally subject to expectations similar to those of general, political or economic historians: to explain – and largely legitimize – the existing situation by analyzing its genesis.

This widely shared notion of the foundations and nature of the new society was also reflected in the newly constructed narrative of the art produced in the then recent past, during the reign of the

Communist Party of Czechoslovakia [Komunistická strana Československa; KSČ]:

> The first thing that comes to mind is building a bridge between today and what has often remained unrecognized or has already been forgotten – the great names and works of the past twenty to thirty years that have been pushed into apparent non-existence. We may need to look for analogies with a time of relatively free creation, trying to understand the principles of creation unencumbered by constraints, imposed doctrines, and conditions of existence. […] We are now in a phase of reassessment, of reweighing, often of discovering real values. Today's age is a velvety yet, in reality, ruthless sieve.[3]

The transformation of the field of art history was not limited merely to the ethos of the discipline. The practical standards of professional behavior were also changing, shaped by new managers in key positions who redefined them in opposition to the socialist past.[4]

1. Continuity and Inertia

In the texts and exhibition projects in the 1990s, art historians naturally worked with tools they had mastered before 1989. As Milena Bartlová shows, under the authoritarian regime, the idea of "objective" – in the sense of non-politicized – scholarship was attractive to many, and researchers often defined the quality of their work by this standard. Bartlová points out that while such a strategy may have been subjectively viewed as functional, the pursuit of "objective science" was fundamentally impossible – especially for art history, which relies on qualitative initial data.[5]

Despite this impossibility, efforts to achieve a non-politicized form of art history under state socialism persevered persisted and took several forms. Firstly, the degree of required engagement could be influenced by the choice of topic or by focusing on the internal issues of art history. The latter strategy seems to have been especially popular. Secondly, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, art historians focused on the basic register of the "craft" of art history. In modern art research, concepts of style and its development became a means of discussing artistic phenomena without the need for extensive contextualization.

The construction of context was difficult under the conditions of socialist art history, as it inevitably required excursions into areas requiring "engagement", in the sense of specific language, and partisan evaluation of historical phenomena. Many contemporaries therefore saw a more ethical choice in analysis that avoided these implicitly political aspects. Conversely, because the concepts of style and development originated in late 19th-century efforts to "scientify" art history, they were exceptionally well-suited to a research practice intended to fulfill the ideal of a pure, non-political science. As Jaś Elsner further points out, stylistic analysis necessarily had to be highly descriptive. Under state socialism, it was not always a disadvantage, since the focus on descriptive genres of scholarly production provided another proven strategy for avoiding political demands.[6]

But after 1989, the concepts of style and development, which had originally served functions specific to the socialist form of art history, did not disappear. On the contrary, many scholars regarded them

as familiar, proven, and unproblematic tools. The uncritical survival of the socialist-era understanding of these concepts was compounded by Czech art history's skepticism towards methodological debates. In constructing a new canon of Czech postwar art corresponding to the new, post-revolutionary paradigm, the concepts of style and development retained a central role: the transformations of individual styles (or isms) were driven by the modernist progressiveness of form and inevitably oriented toward the present as the best of regimes. Thus, the established notions of style, and of development of art in general, aligned with the broader social demand for progress toward the ideal of liberal democracy and a market economy, which, at least in the first half of the 1990s, often appeared in public discourse.

2. Changes and Disconnects

Even with the context described above in mind, it should be further emphasized that what individual scholars consider essential in contemporary documents – and what they base their historical narratives on – varies. Their interests and perspectives differ according to their generational affiliation, experience and the methodological tools they employ. In the canonization of Czech postwar art, this situatedness is particularly evident in the importance that individual art historians had attached to an artist's degree of opposition to socialism. The answer to whether the studied artist belonged to the Czech underground, the dissent[7] or the so-called grey zone[8] of the Czechoslovak normalization was of great significance. Often, it was used as proof, or at least a symptom, of artistic quality. The "official" scene was not perceived as a legitimate object of art historical research. The consensus on this specific ethos of Czech art history was reflected in the reviews of an exhibition opened at Galerie Rudolfinum in Prague in 2002. Devoted to socialist realism and curated by Terezie Petišková, it was titled *Czechoslovak Socialist Realism 1948–1958* [Československý socialistický realismus 1948–1958]. The strongly worded reactions show the paradigmatic positions which did not need to be articulated in standard art historical practice.

The basic argument was formulated in different ways but, in principle, rather similarly by art historians and members of the public.[9] The curatorial concept, the selection of exhibits, and the nature of the installation, i.e. the technical aspects of the project, had already been subject to severe criticism.[10] However, it was the very act of granting attention to official socialist art that was deemed immoral.[11]

The intensity of these reactions stemmed from the Czech anti-communism of the 1990s. Jiří Koubek and Martin Polášek define Czech post-socialist anti-communism as an ideology of the elites that "is a fixed and self-evident part of cultural hegemony in the Gramscian sense. It co-creates the dominant public discourse of the contemporary Czech Republic."[12] They also point out a relatively common tendency among anti-communist-oriented persons to essentialize anti-communism – specifically, to reject a range of distinct phenomena on the basis of their perceived allegiance to the same ideology.[13] Boris Buden further explains the noetic limitations imposed by this approach when describing post-socialist anti-communism as an "arrested awareness" that can only be reproduced through fetishized stereotypes.[14] In other words, the prism of anti-communism, so prevalent among

Czech art historians of the 1990s, was effectively an ideologically-motivated refusal to study historical phenomena with an awareness of one's own situatedness.

Since anti-communism was a significant – albeit unexamined – feature of the situatedness of art historians studying Czech postwar art in the1990s, it is evident that the perspective shaping the new historical narrative was distinctly specific. However, it was not perceived as such. Contemporaries, whether they were directly involved in the field of art history or part of the broader cultural community, typically shared an anti-communist conviction. Thus, even though anti-communism was a key axiom of the post-socialist consensus, it was rarely articulated explicitly.

Its inclusion in the analysis of the canonization of Czech postwar art is the only way to identify the specific functions of the newly constructed narrative: in the eyes of most art historians involved, the new story was not simply a representation of the past. Rather, historical actors, artworks, and events were to be legitimized or directly rehabilitated through their inclusion in the narrative. They merited such treatment because they were the result of creative efforts that had overcome "[…] the unnatural position of art in the totalitarian state".[15]

3. Canonization of Czech Postwar Art in the First Half of the 1990s

3.1. Informel and the Criterion of Authenticity

The first major topic of post-revolutionary art history was the canonization of postwar abstraction. Art historians almost unanimously agreed that in the second half of the 1950s it was essential for contemporaries to rediscover and build on the pre-war tradition of modern art. They identified two dominant milieus that pursued this goal, though they differed in their artistic and communicative strategies.

The first were the so-called creative groups, whose formation was made possible by the change in the statutes of the Union of Czechoslovak Fine Artists [Svaz československých výtvarných umělců] in 1956.[16] They were perceived as a key breakthrough in the effort to reengage with the modern tradition: "[…] others [artists besides the creative groups] remained for a long time on the sidelines in resistance to the ruling ideology, e.g. the surrealists or members of the youngest class, whom the authorities were at first reluctant to allow to speak at all - non-figurative tendencies, art informel, etc."[17]

A few years later, in 1960, the second circle formed from artists active in the non-public, one-day exhibitions *Confrontation I* and *Confrontation II* [Konfrontace I, II]. The key difference between these two positions in postwar art was seen in the degree of their participation in public life. The question of the legitimacy of artists who functioned within the structures of the socialist state – but used them for their own, often perceived as non-conformist, purposes – was a key theme in the normalization-era[18] dissident circles.

An important concept that translated these considerations into discussions of art history was authenticity. In the new pluralistic context after 1989, authenticity represented an uncontentious and widely accepted criterion of art history – so much so that, on the occasion of the exhibition *Situation 92* at the Mánes Gallery [Výstavní síň Mánes] in Prague, the president of the Czechoslovak Section of the AICA, art historian Petr Wittlich, declared it to be a historical and national quality of Czech art.

However, it is also significant that the broad consensus on authenticity as a positive attribute of visual art did not prompt participants to formulate a more precise definition:

> After the collapse of all the programmes and ideologies through which the Czech mentality has passed in the course of the twentieth century a sense of art has originated here which understands it as the last institution in which it is possible to regenerate the relationship between the Man and the world authentically, in the living space, but without its falsely conflicting hypostasis. Rather like what manifests itself miraculously only on the surface of human creativity.[19]

Establishing an unproblematic and widely acceptable, if vague, criterion for evaluating artistic quality was a necessary prerequisite for all further operations in constructing the new canon of Czech modern art. Before art historians could begin formulating specific research questions, establishing chronologies, and interpreting works, they first had to delineate the field in which they would be working. The category of authenticity was a useful tool: authentic works were deemed legitimate subjects of art historical study, while the rest of visual production was excluded from the discourse, as it was not considered art.

The concept of authenticity gained credibility among both art historians and the public due to its origin. Already in pre-revolutionary Czechoslovakia, the notion of authenticity appeared most frequently in texts emerging from the milieu of dissent and cultural opposition. In this context, the term did not describe the nature of works of art but rather referred to the qualities of everyday life. Historiographical works on oppositional environments emphasize “living in truth” as an ethical challenge for contemporaries or directly as the ideal *habitus* of these circles. However, as sociologist Josef Alan reminds us, this ideal is rooted in philosophical concepts rather than serving as a practical guide to a fulfilling existence.[20] Authenticity was thus based on the actions of individual actors – particularly in how meaningful their actions are or were to themselves and in the eyes of their circle.

It is not surprising that in the early 1990s, when dissident discourse was being rehabilitated, art historians applied similar considerations to historical material. The difference between creative groups such as Trasa, UB 12 or Máj 57 – which publicly sought to transform or at least supplement contemporary artistic production with alternative artistic positions – and the artists of the *Confrontations* circle, who initially made no attempt to enter the public space at all, was perceived in morally charged terms: “Work that wanted to continue the tradition of radical movements of the past and respond in a new way to the adversity of the times had to develop away from the official exhibition halls.”[21]

There was also consensus on the events that shaped the context of the interest in abstract art in the 1950s. Art historians emphasized the EXPO 58 not only because of the success of the Czechoslovak pavilion but also as a source of information about contemporary art in the form of the exhibition *50 Years of Modern Art*.[22] They also pointed out the widespread use of abstract forms in applied art as a kind of parallel strand of abstraction, shielded from political oversight.[23]

It was an exhibition of gestural or structural abstraction, usually referred to as informel, that sparked the first major debate shaping attitudes towards the historicization of postwar art. In the late 1980s, Mahulena Nešlehová, as a curator of Prague City Gallery [Galerie hlavního města Prahy], took over the project from her late colleague František Šmejkal. It eventually developed into a pair of exhibitions: at the beginning of 1991, Nešlehová opened *Czech Informel. Pioneers of Abstraction 1957–1964* [Český informel. Průkopníci abstrakce z let 1957–1964] and a retrospective of informel painter Antonín Tomalík. To accompany the exhibition, the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague [Akademie výtvarných umění v Praze; AVU] prepared a symposium and later published its proceedings. As proven by the large number of articles, commentaries, and reviews, the topic was generally regarded as a crucial one.[24] The fact that the project was prepared concurrently with the revolutionary events of 1989 undoubtedly shaped the perception of Czech informel as embodying a particular spirit. As a result, this chapter of Czech art was assigned extraordinary developmental significance and moral weight.[25]

The stark contrast between art informel and socialist realism attracted great interest, extending beyond art historians to the wider public. In the catalogue, Mahulena Nešlehová described the creation of an informel artwork as a revelation of oneself and one's true attitude to the world, which strongly resonated with the contemporary interest in penetrating beyond the authoritarian socialist discourse. She interpreted informel as an expression of the struggle between "pretended reality" and "raw truth": "Unlike in the Western world, where no filter was placed between the human subject and the world, in our country 'pretended' and false reality was subsumed into this nexus, encapsulating the true face of reality in illusions, optimistic prejudices and delusions."[26] She was not alone in this view; a number of speakers at the aforementioned symposium at the Academy expressed similar ideas.[27]

Furthermore, the art collectives Šmidrové[28] and the Order of Crusaders for Pure Humour without Banter [Křižovnická škola čistého humoru bez vtipu] were perceived as a certain continuation of informel, although with their own specific interests and poetics. It was partly due to the participation of overlapping artists, such as Zbyšek Sion, who took part in the *Confrontation* exhibitions and in the events of the Order, in both cases employing various forms of gesture as his primary means of expression. Věra Jirousová, the curator of the first post-revolutionary exhibition dedicated to the Order of Crusaders, approached the connection more broadly. She emphasized the ethos of personal responsibility of artists and their pursuit of authenticity in personal expression as values that directly stemmed from the ideal of material abstraction of the *Confrontations* circle.[29] Despite the emphasis on exploring the *habitus* of non-conformist artists, integrating the Order into the new narrative of

postwar art was instrumental to establishing the concept of dematerialized artworks in Czech art history and opening up new ways of thinking about alternative forms of authorship.

3.2. The Actuality of Constructivism

A slightly younger circle of abstract artists, using entirely different forms, methods, and aesthetics, were those associated with constructivist tendencies. While informel artists explored their psyche through an existential lens, the artists of Czech constructivist tendencies focused on questions of geometry, randomness and order. The first exhibition devoted to this work opened at the end of 1990, a few months before the *Czech Informel* exhibition, and the second major show, both curated by Josef Hlaváček, took place at the end of 1993.[30]

Like informel, constructivist tendencies were conceptualized as a local variant of Western postwar abstract art, but its emphasis on historicization was specific. The primary difference lay largely in the application of historical context. However, compared to informel, constructivist tendencies were far less often perceived through the prism of resistance to ideology or power. Instead, they were more frequently framed as an integral part of the socially and technologically optimistic 1960s, and thus as an analogy to modern Western history.[31]

Hlaváček understood constructivist tendencies as a field of work connected with the Western tradition, but at the same time he emphasized their ties to socialist countries, for example, through the *New Tendencies* [Nove tendencije] exhibition in Zagreb in 1965. In the more extensive catalogue for the second exhibition, he linked constructivist tendencies to a modern lifestyle increasingly defined by an artificially created environment.[32] In his view, the art of constructivist tendencies represented a robust and significant part of modernity. He supported his conclusion by noting that the style did not easily fit into any established artistic tradition.

Hlaváček even seemed, to a certain degree, to agree with contemporary reviewers who praised the exhibition's overlap with contemporary artistic practice: "It [the *Constructivist Tendencies of the 1960s* exhibition] presented not only a historical probe but also a lively and ever-open artistic approach."[33] Constructivist tendencies were therefore still viewed as relevant. Perhaps this is why they provoked much less scholarly debate than informel, which, by contrast, was perceived as a phenomenon belonging to the past and therefore fully within the purview of art history.

In the new narrative, abstract works were counterpointed by new figurative works. This represented a legitimate position, but compared to abstraction, especially informel, it was also seen as developmentally much less impactful: "While at the beginning of the 1960s there was basically one tendency (the structural non-figurative work from the *Confrontation I* and *II* exhibitions) that brought original values, at this time [the second half of the 1960s] there were several such phenomena."[34] Eva Petrová's catalogue for her major exhibition of new figuration established its chronology in the West and situated Czech art in relation to it. She stressed the individual nature of the style, demonstrating it through the wide range of media, practices, and themes of the works exhibited.[35] In

the new story of postwar Czech art, figurative or, more broadly, representational work was thus a legitimate but less interesting topic for art historical research than abstraction.

A key project in the early phase of the canonization of Czech postwar art was the exhibition *Focal Points of Revival. Czech Art 1956–1963* [Ohniska znovuzrození. České umění 1956–1963] organized by art historian Marie Judlová-Klimešová.[36] She brought together a collective of researchers whose texts not only expanded existing knowledge of postwar art but also integrated it with other disciplines and media. In keeping with standard art historical practices that require scholars to maintain temporal distance from the material they examine, they focused on the establishment and oeuvre of the 1960s artistic generation. In her introduction, Judlová explicitly thematized the moral dimension of the period under study and the ambition to re-introduce the public to art created during this time:

> One of the tragic phenomena of our contemporary history is a gradual loss of continuity. […] If this applies to a certain extent to the overall development of Czech society in this century, it applies especially to the development after the Second World War, which was characterized by so many destroyed lives, so many taboos, so many intentional misinterpretations.[37]

The focus of the individual texts largely confirmed the relevance of the topics that the field has dealt with since the revolution. The authors covered the creative groups of the late 1950s, informel, and constructivist tendencies. At the same time, however, they did not merely focus on styles but sought to reconstruct the transformations of broader themes or creative strategies, thus in many ways refining and contextualizing the existing understanding of postwar art. The chapters devoted to film,[38] architecture,[39] music[40] and, to some extent, sculpture[41] were particularly revelatory, helping to situate postwar visual art within the broader landscape of Czech cultural production.

3.3. Memories as History

The importance of informel in writing a new narrative of postwar art in Czechoslovakia and later Czechia lay not only in expanding knowledge of the 1950s and 1960s. The style became a touchstone for the questions, themes and values that interested art historians in the following years. First and foremost, it was about establishing an alternative to the interpretation of the world and history presented by authoritative socialist discourse. This position was supported not only by the study of contemporary sources but also by the new narrative writers' own experience of late state socialism, which was characterized by a schism between the rhetoric of authoritative discourse and actual practice. In their efforts to complete the narrative of Czech postwar art, art historians old enough to have lived through the period seem to have drawn significantly on their own memories. They did not rely on memory solely to fill in dates, exhibition venues or names of participants, but also to explain the intentions and context of historical actors' actions. Given the contemporary, much sparser mode of citing sources, the line between memory and history is often not clearly apparent.

As some of the formulations suggest, contemporaries were somewhat aware of the problematic nature of mixing the genres: "The recollection of a memoirist and theoretical reflection, if not historical evaluation, are apparently quite different things, and I confess that I am looking in vain for a way to

combine the two."[42] However, given the strong ethical component, this did not seem to be a detriment in their eyes. From their perspective, art historical texts became a testimony to the past. Obtaining legitimacy through memory as a supplement to historical study was more common in the early 1990s, most strikingly when the phenomena being remembered were at odds with the authoritative discourse of socialism:

> It is being forgotten, or has been forgotten, that the "other art" existed in this country, that it asserted itself and had its own distinctive specificities that distinguished it from European informel abstraction. It is forgotten that the impetus for its development came from the non-public exhibition manifestations *Confrontation I* and *Confrontation II* in 1960. The names of those with whom the emergence of this art in this country was associated may have faded from memory.[43]

Similarly, art historians relied on memories of historical actors. However, due to their position as "witnesses," their recollections were not verified. Artists, in particular, often participated in the scholarly discourse of the time with the same authority as art historians.[44] The seriousness with which art historians treated their accounts stemmed from a typical feature of historical texts written in the early 1990s, namely the emphasis on the friendship and community of the artists under study. This is a characteristic that is very difficult to capture in official written sources. Its frequent appearance in textual and exhibition production in the early 1990s suggests how crucial the memory of the actors was.

3.4. Westernization of Art, Individualization of History

The historicization of informel at the beginning of the 1990s shaped the common perspectives and practices of art history to a great degree. Texts on postwar art usually assumed that the isolation from Western artistic production was considerable, if not absolute. Scholars were therefore interested in the ways in which Czech artists acquired information about Western production, emphasizing personal ties and paying considerable attention to the impact of individual journeys by historical actors to the West. Recognizing that the entirety of the Czechoslovak federation, which existed until the end of 1992, was not widely considered even during its existence greatly helps in understanding the formation of the Czech post-war canon. The federalization of the state remained the only political task to survive the collapse of the reformist socialism of the Prague Spring. To a considerable degree, it reflected the long-standing practice of separate cultural discourses. While there were certainly individuals working in both contexts, this was not common. Fascination with the West overshadowed even the closest Eastern neighbors and Slovak political demands for an independent state of the early 1990s further normalized the idea of separating the nations entirely. A unified Czechoslovak canon of post-war art was never formed.

The usual approach, especially in exhibition catalogues, was to first establish the history of relevant Western art and then proceed to interpret the Czech variant of the given style through its prism. As in post-socialist politics, where many decisions were motivated by the goal of catching up with the West,

Czech art historians did not doubt the universality – or even the outright supremacy – of the Western tradition and its criteria. They aimed to use these frameworks to integrate politically separated modern traditions into a single cultural whole. As a result, however, they often constructed the story of Czech postwar art as a kind of history of banishment – art that belongs to Western culture but was separated from it for the duration of socialism.

One of the key measures of artistic quality also became established at the beginning of the decade. The nature of informel, as the first historicized chapter of post-revolutionary Czech art history, further stimulated art historians' interest in the forms of opposition to the socialist regime. Despite difficulties in obtaining relevant sources, this perspective led to the common practice of examining not only the work or *habitus* of artists but also their political beliefs after the communist coup of 1948. The insights gained about the relationship of individual artists to socialist reality were morally charged and formed an important part of the historical narrative. Although moral evaluation was accepted as an integral criterion of quality from the outset, historical reality was often more complex, which conflicted with historians' beliefs about the merit and relevance of modern art production under the conditions of the Communist Party dictatorship. This contradiction was resolved by considering all modern art as non-conformist, since its very existence was understood to demonstrate at least the internal resistance by its creator to the regime.

The prevalence of this approach stems from the demand for the individualization of history, which was already strongly asserted in the Czechoslovak public discourse in the early 1990s. Individualism was regarded as the foundation of both liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism. Thus, even the national, shared identity was to be articulated through the examples of exceptional artists. In fact, although authenticity became a critical concept in the new paradigm of the 1990s, it did not appear much in the language of art history itself. Instead, it was often an implicit, shared value that operated in the background of specific analyses. If we look for a concept that translates this value base into art historical practice, exhibition-making, and the art-reviewing discourse of the time, we find the artist at its center. Josef Alan pointed this out at the beginning of the millennium:

> The focus of alternative culture was not culture itself, but the position of the actor-creator who sought a space of self-realization within it. The boundaries of this space were fixed and closed, but they were also winding and mobile, and the "border zone" was crisscrossed with paths through which contacts with the "other side" could be maintained.[45]

By the mid-1990s, a single period of historical study escaping the negative connotations of the socialist era drew great interest of art historians and public alike: the 1960s. Research projects focusing on the art of the 1960s as a positive anomaly became frequent. French historian Françoise Mayer, in her analysis of the Czech relationship to the socialist past, points to the specific position of historiography stemming from the general understanding of history "as a source of identity."[46] She also emphasizes that after 1989, no political party was able to establish a widely appealing official memory. It became most evident in the case of dissident voices, whose positions were too diverse and, moreover, too distant from the majority's experience. Soon after the Velvet Revolution, it seemed

that this function of official memory could be fulfilled by the rejection of socialism – particularly the political practices of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. However, Mayer notes that, on a practical level, decommunization was far from successful. The main consensus that remained was on the immoral nature of the past regime – even at the cost of turning most of the population into "people without a story," unable to identify with former communist cadres, former political prisoners, or former dissidents.

The described context might help to explain the interest in Czech art of the 1960s. The decade, largely due to the Prague Spring, escaped the established tropes of remembering the socialist past. In contrast to the "grey" normalization period, the "golden" 1960s became the last chapter of the recent past that was remembered fondly. Although continuities and similarities could also be found between the then-present and all other socialist decades, the will to do so was limited to the 1960s. The perceived affinities between the 1960s and the 1990s were reflected not only in individual texts but also in the conception of certain exhibition projects. In the 1990s, Czech art historians and curators prepared several remakes of exhibition originally opened in the 1960s, such as *New Sensitivity* [Nová citlivost][47] or *Czech Imaginative Art* [České imaginativní umění].[48] While the intended goal might have been to document cultural continuity, the effect was a version of the past that reinforced the notion of post-socialism of the 1990s as the "right" historical outcome. By interpreting the 1960s as a time oversaturated with new ideas and characterized by the varied and deeply individual nature of artistic creation – and by linking these characteristics to the current situation of the 1990s – Czech art historians constructed a teleological narrative of postwar art that, despite difficulties and detours, ultimately arrived at a happy end.

4. Czech Postwar Canon in the Second Half of the 1990s

4.1. Synchrony Instead of Diachrony

Art historians in the second half of the 1990s understandably continued the research they had begun. At the same time, however, many began to reassess the existing narrative of Czech postwar art. The task they had set for themselves at the beginning of the decade – namely, to establish the continuous story of modern Czech art and to prove that it had not been interrupted even by the unfavorable conditions of the dictatorship of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia – had already been successfully accomplished. However, the emphasis on continuity of artistic development strongly implied linearity. By this point, the existing knowledge of postwar art, supported by ongoing research and exhibition activities, no longer aligned with a strictly linear development scheme:

> Between the two extremes [of public recognition of an artist and their separation from society] lay the main field of artistic production, associated above all with a strong generation of art school graduates who, with varying degrees of success, removed the aftertaste of ideology from art and sought to find new contents of modernity.[49]

Researchers began placing greater emphasis on understanding parallel historical phenomena. While the basic chronology of postwar art, established in the first half of the 1990s, remained unchanged,

the focus shifted toward a more nuanced interpretation of the already historicized chapters of Czech postwar art history. In the second half of the 1990s, projects dealing with the art of the 1970s and 1980s – particularly the “unofficial” scene – became more common. The dramatic post-revolutionary transformation of Czech society was generally regarded by scholars as a sufficiently effective substitute for the temporal distance that was still an unquestioned convention in Czech art history.

Many art historians therefore began to pay more attention to the artistic production of the 1970s and 1980s, during the so-called normalization period. One example is the exhibition *Art When Time Stood Still*. *Czech Art Scene 1969–1985* [Umění zastaveného času. Česká výtvarná scéna 1969–1985]. Its curator, Alena Potůčková, explained the genesis of the project, which was originally supposed to open at the National Gallery immediately in 1990. Her account of the events did not portray the postponement as negative, on the contrary:

> It [the time since 1989] allows us to approach Czech “art of stopped time” as a historical phenomenon, without the pressure to defend or promote certain programmatic positions. We believe that in the late 1980s, a part of our critical community tended to succumb to such a simplistic, intentional vision. We consider it necessary to take the first steps toward a gradual and sober assessment of what now seems to be a bygone era.[50]

As the curator’s formulation suggests, the belief that the time had come to historicize the art of the 1970s and 1980s did not equate to an effort to create a definitive form of historical narrative. The cautious approach, however, was not linked to the broader postmodern turn. Rather, it reflected the importance Czech art historians placed upon ongoing heuristic research. Similarly, it also reflected the common and continued reliance on the memories of historical actors, albeit without an interest in using oral history methods.

The contemporary effort to capture the layered nature of artistic production, the duality of artistic work, and the movements of artists between different circles only emphasized a growing awareness of the complexity of this historical chapter. In terms of art historical methods, this led scholars to prioritize careful heuristics in studying art or, in the case of intangible works, their documentation.

4.2. New Media, New Narrations

Although art historians were primarily concerned with interpreting and contextualizing the artistic production of the 1970s and 1980s, heuristics remained a highly valued dimension of their research. This is evident in the structure of the anthologies *Forbidden Art I* and *II* [Zakázané umění I, II], whose editors, Marcela Pánková and Milena Slavická, compiled and published an extensive collection of memoirs and interviews with actors from the Czechoslovak art scene of the 1970s and 1980s in two volumes, in 1995 and 1996, respectively. Although they did not aim to produce a summative text, they succeeded in clearly outlining the directions for further research by collecting accounts of exhibition venues, art symposia, and non-public exhibitions. They shed light on the need to broaden research interests to encompass other artistic media and tendencies, especially practices that were significant

at the time, such as performance, happenings, or environments, or to include a range of conceptual practices.

In 1999 the exhibition *Action Word Movement Space. Experiments in Art of the 1960s* [Akce slovo pohyb prostor. Experimenty v umění šedesátých let] was held, accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue. That same year, Pavlína Morganová published her book *Action Art* [Akční umění]. Both projects mark a key moment in the construction of the new cannon, when action art became a major topic of Czech art history. The sudden emergence of this interest – despite much earlier initial probes[51] and ongoing interest among contemporary artists[52] – suggests that media questioning the traditional concept of the artist, especially their individuality, has been considered secondary compared to sculpture and, especially, painting.

Both projects also drew parallels between historical art and the art of the 1990s, although each focused on a different area. Vít Havránek, the main curator of the exhibition *Action Word Movement Space*, emphasized that he intended to complement and problematize the existing understanding of postwar art.[53]

The curators of the *Action Word Movement Space* project also wrote a companion volume in which they successfully integrated newly explored experimental strategies of visual art into a cohesive narrative. They also managed to reconstruct the relations between experimental visual art and other art forms, such as music or literature. The project was one of the highlights of the aforementioned efforts toward a more nuanced understanding of Czech postwar art. Although in the first half of the 1990s there were already exhibitions showcasing postwar production beyond painting and sculpture,[54] it was only at the end of the decade that the integration of various media became an explicit goal.

Pavlína Morganová's book *Action Art* followed similar considerations as the *Action Word Movement Space* project. It also explored creative strategies such as the dematerialization of the artwork, the emphasis on process, and interdisciplinarity, but over a longer time span. Even more pronounced is the awareness of the relevance of these practices to contemporary art: "Action art definitively ended the era of modernist movements and opened up new possibilities for art, whose conjecture and development can be traced to the present day."[55]

At the same time, Morganová situated her subject of research – postwar Czech action art – within the Western tradition, starting with Italian Futurists and explaining the originally English terms used in the following chapters. Given the prominent role of American radical art in her text, she paid considerable attention to Milan Knížák, who had lived in the USA in the 1960s. Her extensive study is among the projects that could only have been produced in the second half of the decade.

Morganová not only wrote about the art of the normalization decades but also looked at well-known chapters of Czech postwar art from a new perspective. For example, the actions of the Order of Crusaders for Pure Humour without Banter, which had previously been only briefly mentioned in earlier texts, became a substantial chapter. This addition of new aspects to an already familiar artistic

production is the strength of the project. Jiří Valoch, who had devoted himself to conceptual art not only as an artist but also as a scholar and collector, explained in the afterword the missing links in contemporary art historical discourse:

> All permanent exhibitions of modern art in the Czech lands have one thing in common – they pretend that in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the then current Czech art consisted of more or less decent paintings, sculptures or drawings. […] In this way, they manage to give the general public the impression that there was probably nothing else – and some theoreticians, either out of conviction or opportunism, agree.[56]

4.3. Binary Art History

The task of the second half of the 1990s – a more nuanced reassessment of the already historicized postwar artistic production – was carried out by art historians in a specific way. There was a consensus on the scope of art history, as evidenced by art produced during the normalization decades of the 1970s and 1980s. The then recent art was approached by scholars as material that not only legitimized but, in many ways, directly required the memorial writing of art history. In general, however, the importance of friendships and shared creative work in the period they were historicizing made it much more difficult for them to critically engage with memories – whether their own or those of others – as sources.

They continued the practice of the first half of the decade. In both periods, they relied on memories, partly because of the absence or unavailability of written sources, but primarily as a moral appeal for the historical rehabilitation of artists who had worked under state socialism. This emphasis, however, led to the consolidation of a binary understanding of postwar art, which was presented to the public almost exclusively as divided into “official” and “unofficial.” The division came with a qualitative judgment not only about the art itself but also about the ethical profile of the artist. Modern art was seen as synonymous with unofficial production, as were the moral, non-compromised artists.[57]

Such a division was a common and lasting figure in transition discourse in Central and Eastern Europe. Alexei Yurchak first identified it in his analysis of Soviet practices of late socialism.[58] In politics, economics, and public debates, it provided a boundary defining what was worth preserving in the post-socialist world and what was too closely linked to the past. The division between official and unofficial art was fundamental to the interpretation of postwar Czech art, even though a similarly firmly established element of the same narrative was the uncertainty surrounding the criteria for access to exhibitions and public space.[59] As a strategy of regime control, this period-typical uncertainty was not considered a relevant subject for further research. Instead, scholars usually focused on identifying the relevant artistic production and distinguishing it from regime art and official demands.[60]

In his analysis of this interpretive approach to the socialist past, Czech historian Michal Pullmann demonstrates that it is not just a banal rhetorical figure but a conceptualization that enables a specific interpretation of recent past: “The conception of the regime as an acting agent with specific interests

and psychology reveals a dimension that is crucial to the entire narrative structure [of Czech historiography on the socialist past] – namely, the imaginary dividing line between ‘regime’ and ‘society’.”[61] Pullmann argues that “regime” in this sense is a concept that both preserves the power hierarchy between the rulers and the ruled and creates a sharp boundary between them. He further points out the contradictions within this particular interpretation model of the socialist past: “On the one hand, images are painted of the oppression of defenseless and righteous people by an all-powerful and perfectly organized totalitarian ‘regime.’ However, these images are very closely intertwined with completely opposite images: images of absence of order, unprofessionalism, incompetence, superficiality, dysfunctionality, etc.”[62] As Sheila Fitzpatrick noted in her analysis of paradigm shifts in Soviet history, the totalitarian model conceptualizing the socialist societies as monolithic and tightly controlled by power elites originated in the years of Cold War and was typically funded by US governments and foundations,[63] and therefore aligned with American international policy. In Czech post-socialism, the widely accepted totalitarian paradigm similarly depicted an evil enemy – the “regime”. Although this enemy resided solely in the past and had already been defeated, it served an exculpatory purpose because it was also clearly different from “society.”

In the case of Czech art of the 1970s and 1980s, critical insight was complicated by the role of art historical texts on postwar work as testimony to the moral values of individual artists – one of their functions legitimized in the first half of the decade. Thus, while there was a willingness to critically examine the linear developmental scheme in the case of normalization art, the binary model of postwar artistic production remained intact. Although the building blocks of the new narrative were artistic movements and tendencies, art historians felt primarily responsible for the “just” treatment of individual artists. As Alexei Yurchak pointed out, the binary interpretation model is based on retrospective concepts, rooted in the Cold War biases, and fails to include more nuanced phenomena.[64] Its persistence despite apparent flaws suggests a purpose outside the field of art history.

5. For the Post-Socialism Era or Forever? A Summary

Despite the deliberate rupture of the Velvet revolution, Czech art historians continued to use a variety of tools they had acquired within the socialist practice of the discipline. Specifically in the field of research on postwar art, these included a strong emphasis on artistic intent and the developmental autonomy of art, independent of the political situation. Thus, the structures of thought remained largely unchanged; what did change was the artistic material with which art historians worked and the ethos of the discipline.

Especially the conviction that socialism was a “historical detour”[65] and a criminal regime resulted in a highly biased perspective on the recent past. However, it was by no means a belief shared solely by Czech art historians. Rather, it became a legally binding framework for their work when a law was passed in 1993, whose preamble stating that “the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, its leadership and its members are responsible for governance of our country between 1948 and 1989, namely for the programmatic rejection of traditional European civilizational values” and went on to list offenses

spanning the entire society.[66] Such condemnation – commonly expressed in media, historical essays, and political speeches alike, supported by personal experiences – shaped the unexplored axioms of the new paradigm. Viewed as a whole, no alternative to democracy, capitalism, and westernization was actively sought.

Czech art historians writing the new story of postwar art in today's Czech Republic were genuinely convinced that it was their calling to right a historical wrong and to establish a starting point for an emerging "normal" society and its culture. Only very few of them critically examined the consequences of writing the history of postwar art in direct opposition to the values, rhetoric and concepts of socialism, even in the new situation: "Romanticization and idealization will not help the history of Czech art. And it won't help the artists themselves either, because they too need to look at their work without illusions. Today does not present us with any ideological dictate, and nothing prevents a free view of things. However, we do not seem to take advantage of this."[67] The findings of art historians, and especially their interpretations of these findings, helped to cement the perspective defined by Jürgen Habermas's concept of a *rectifying revolution*, not only for Western audiences but also for themselves and the domestic public.

In a reflection published very shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Habermas noticed "a peculiar characteristic of this revolution: its total lack of ideas that are either innovative or orientated towards the future."[68] His observation is not without merit, yet also not without flaws. As Boris Buden puts it, this interpretation, portraying Eastern European regime changes as belated delayed arrival at modernity, limits the trajectory of change basically only to a Western model.[69] When this perspective was applied to the new narrative of Czech postwar art, however, it condemned it to the position of second-class art – neither sufficiently Western nor willing to be Eastern. Regarding the socialist past through this lens became a long-lasting legacy of the 1990s. It suppressed aspects of socialist visuality that stemmed from non-Western traditions, originated in socialist thought, or simply were not artistically progressive. The new cannon of Czech postwar could therefore hardly be called an unbiased representation of the past. In the end, its greatest strength lay in its service to the new post-socialist paradigm – including its political and economic dimensions.

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2. J. Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Cornell University Press 2013), 94–96. ↩
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5. M. Bartlová, *Dějiny českých dějin umění 1945–1969. Dějiny umění slouží vědě o člověku* (UMPRUM 2020), 418. ↩
6. J. Elsner, “Style,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (The University of Chicago Press 2010), 418. ↩
7. The terms “underground” and “dissent” were used much more loosely in art historical texts on postwar art in the 1990s than in current disciplinary practice. In the absence of historical research on these phenomena, writers typically relied on their own experiences to guide their usage. Today, the distinction between the two concepts is more clearly defined. While dissent initially positioned itself in pre-political spheres, aiming to build a parallel polis and only gradually formulating a political program, the underground is understood as a subculture with a distinct *habitus*, disengaged from social participation – though its members, at least retrospectively, often interpret this disengagement as a political stance. For more on Czechoslovak dissent see P. Bugge, “A Western Invention? The Discovery of Czech Dissidence in the 1970s,” *Bohemia. A Journal of History and Civilisation in East Central Europe* 59, no. 2 (2019): 273–291. For more on Czechoslovak underground see L. Kudrna, ed., *Reflexe undergroundu* (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů 2016). ↩
8. E. Burget, “Zrození šedé z černé a bílé,” *Česká literatura. Časopis pro literární vědu* 67, no. 4 (2021): 425–451. ↩
9. The first issue of the leading artistic magazine *Ateliér* (Studio) in 2003 was entirely dedicated to the topic of Socialist realism. See B. Poláková, “Nejen inter arma silent musae,” *Ateliér. Čtrnáctideník současného výtvarného umění* 15, no. 1 (2003): 3; A. Drda, “Rudolfinské obludy. Přehlídka výtvorů československého socialistického realismu není k smíchu,” *Týdeník Respekt* 13, no. 46, (2002): 21; B. Frajerová, “Socialistický realismus se na chvíli vrací. Nejsnadnější je tomuto umění se vysmát, podstatně těžší však je objektivně je zhodnotit,” *Večerník – Praha. List všech Pražanů*, November 7, 2002, 6. ↩
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12. J. Koubek, M. Polášek, *Antikomunismus: nekonečný příběh české politiky?* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2013), 10. ↩

13. Ibid., 5. ↩
14. B. Buden, “In Communism’s Shoes: On the Critique of Post-Communist Discourse”, in *Transition to Nowhere. Art in History after 1989,* ed. Boris Buden (Archive Books 2020), 59. ↩
15. M. Klimešová, “O kulturním dialogu,” *Ateliér. Čtrnáctideník současného výtvarného umění* 14, no. 11 (2002): 2. ↩
16. V. Jůza, “Smutná léta padesátá”, in *Záznam nejrozmanitějších faktorů… České malířství 2. poloviny 20. století ze sbírek státních galerií*, ed. A. Krejča and J. Vykoukal (Rada státních galerií, Národní galerie v Praze 1993), 31. ↩
17. J. Šetlík, “Příběh skupiny UB 12,” in *UB 12,* ed. J. Zemina (Galerie moderního umění v Roudnici nad Labem 1994), 3. ↩
18. “Normalisation” is a term describing the period spanning the 1970s and 1980s, roughly from the aftermath of the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact armed forces to the beginning of perestroika in Czechoslovak politics circa 1986. ↩
19. P. Wittlich, “Situation 92,” in M. Nešlehová, A. Hartmann, M. Lamarová, P. Wittlich, *Situace 92* (Československá sekce AICA, Ministerstvo kultury ČR, Unie výtvarných umělců, Sdružení výtvarných kritiků a teoretiků, Český fond výtvarných umění 1992), unpaginated. ↩
20. J. Alan, “Alternativní kultura jako sociologické téma,” in *Alternativní kultura. Příběh české společnosti 1945–1989*, ed. J. Alan (Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2001), 45. ↩
21. J. Kříž, “Imaginace – struktura – divnost,” in *Záznam nejrozmanitějších faktorů… České malířství 2. poloviny 20. století ze sbírek státních galerií*, ed. A. Krejča and J. Vykoukal (Rada státních galerií, Národní galerie v Praze 1993), 35. ↩
22. *50 Years of Modern Art* (International Palace of Fine Arts 1958). ↩
23. M. Nešlehová, “Poznámka ke Konfrontacím roku 1960,” in *Česká kultura na přelomu 50. a 60. let. Kolokvium konané Galerií hl. města Prahy u příležitosti retrospektivy Jiřího Balcara, Dům U Kamenného zvonu, 22.–23. června 1988,* ed. M. Judlová (Galerie hlavního města Prahy 1992), 20. ↩
24. P. Wittlich, “Jak si sáhnout na podstatu,” *Ateliér. Čtrnáctideník současného výtvarného umění* 5, no. 5 (1991): 5. ↩
25. J. Kříž, “Informel nebo strukturální a materiálová exprese?,” in *Informel. Sborník symposia*, ed. J. Ševčíková (Akademie výtvarných umění 1991), 28. ↩
26. M. Nešlehová, “Podoby českého informelu,” in *Český informel. Průkopníci abstrakce z let 1957–1964*, ed. M. Nešlehová (Galerie hlavního města Prahy 1991), 25. ↩
27. V. Jirousová, “Protnutí místa a cesty (K výstavě Český informel),” in *Informel. Sborník symposia,* ed. J. Ševčíková (Akademie výtvarných umění 1991), 32. ↩
28. The title Šmidrové or “the Šmidras” does not have a specific meaning. Rather, it conveys an impression of a confused, perhaps even inept, group or a loosely connected family of individuals. ↩
29. Jirousová, “Protnutí místa a cesty (K výstavě Český informel),” 33. ↩
30. The exhibition *Constructivist Tendencies of the 1960s* [Konstruktivní tendence šedesátých let] curated by Josef Hlaváček opened in Litoměřice in October 1990 and was repeated in Prague

in December of the same year. The second edition of his next exhibition, *Poetry of Rationality. Constructivist Tendencies in Czech Art of the 1960s* [Poesie racionality. Konstruktivní tendence v českém výtvarném umění šedesátých let] took place again in Prague, co-organised by the Louny Gallery in October 1993. ↩

31. J. Sekera, “Racionalita poesie aneb poesie racionality,” in *Záznam nejrozmanitějších faktorů… České malířství 2. poloviny 20. století ze sbírek státních galerií*, ed. A. Krejča and J. Vykoukal (Rada státních galerií, Národní galerie v Praze 1993), 40. ↩
32. J. Hlaváček, “Český konstruktivismus 60. let a jeho vyznění,” in *Poesie racionality. Konstruktivní tendence v českém výtvarném umění šedesátých let*, ed. J. Hlaváček, (České muzeum výtvarných umění, Galerie Benedikta Rejta v Lounech 1993), 56. ↩
33. A. Svoboda, “Konstruktivní tendence – pojem a tradice,” *Ateliér. Čtrnáctideník současného výtvarného umění* 4, no. 4 (1991): 6. ↩
34. V. Tetiva, “Skutečnost a iluze (Druhá polovina 60. let v českém umění),” in *Záznam nejrozmanitějších faktorů… České malířství 2. poloviny 20. století ze sbírek státních galerií*, ed. A. Krejča and J. Vykoukal (Rada státních galerií, Národní galerie v Praze 1993), 55. ↩
35. E. Petrová, *Nová figurace* (Galerie výtvarného umění Litoměřice 1993), 21. ↩
36. M. Klimešová, née Černá, later married Judlová and Klimešová. ↩
37. M. Judlová, “Focal Points of Revival: Czech Art 1956–1963,” in *Focal Points of Revival. Czech Art 1956–1963*, ed. M. Judlová (Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Ústav dějin umění AV ČR 1994), 331. ↩
38. M. Bregant, “From Ideological Doctrine to Plurality of Styles,” in *Focal Points of Revival. Czech Art 1956–1963*, ed. M. Judlová (Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Ústav dějin umění AV ČR 1994), 399–401. ↩
39. R. Švácha, “Czech Architecture 1956–1963,” in *Focal Points of Revival. Czech Art 1956–1963*, ed. M. Judlová (Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Ústav dějin umění AV ČR 1994), 389–396. ↩
40. J. Doubravová, “Music,” in *Focal Points of Revival. Czech Art 1956–1963*, ed. M. Judlová (Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Ústav dějin umění AV ČR 1994), 397–398. ↩
41. V. Erben, “Sculpture,” in *Focal Points of Revival. Czech Art 1956–1963*, ed. M. Judlová (Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Ústav dějin umění AV ČR 1994), 375–380. ↩
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43. M. Nešlehová, “Úvodem,” in *Český informel. Průkopníci abstrakce z let 1957–1964,* ed. M. Nešlehová (Galerie hlavního města Prahy 1991), 9. ↩
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