

KUNSTCHRONIK

MONATSSCHRIFT FÜR KUNSTWISSENSCHAFT
MUSEUMSWESEN UND DENKMALPFLEGE

MITTEILUNGSBLATT DES VERBANDES DEUTSCHER KUNSTHISTORIKER E.V.
HERAUSGEGEBEN VOM ZENTRALINSTITUT FÜR KUNSTGESCHICHTE IN MÜNCHEN
VERLAG HANS CARL, NÜRNBERG

45. Jahrgang

April 1992

Heft 4

Diskussion

SCIENCES AND THE HUMANITIES IN A POSTCOMMUNIST SOCIETY
(WITH PARTICULAR REGARD TO ART HISTORY IN SLOVAKIA)

This paper was written as a contribution to the International Meeting of Art Historical Institutes held at Zurich, June 18–20 1991.

Before talking about the situation of art history in Slovakia I should like to make some general remarks concerning the position of scientific research under a totalitarian regime. The role the sciences had to play during the communist era is not only very significant for the status of scientific investigation and erudition in a totalitarian system, but it is also an important source of difficulties, the sciences and the humanities have to cope with even nowadays in the post-totalitarian period. The period of transition from totalitarianism to democracy does not merely mean the transition from „feudal“ to neo-capitalist forms of social organization or from the primacy of ideology to the primacy of economics, but also the renewal of the superiority of scientific knowledge over political religion.

I. It is the main intention of every totalitarian system to immortalize itself. The so-called „closed societies“ (K. Popper) try to perpetuate their „status quo“. Therefore, each and every novelty, progress of learning or artistic experiment is regarded as dangerous in totalitarian regimes, as something endangering social „harmony“. As a consequence, all cultural activities are conceived as means of ideology, instruments of political propaganda. The arts as well as the sciences were regarded as servants of the ideological rituals and tools of collective brainwashing instead of being instruments of investigation and

research. What I should like to emphasize here is a specific characteristic of communist totalitarianism, namely its effort to „disguise“ its very nature. It does also find its expression in the relation between political power and the arts, sciences and the humanities. We may call it the principle of deception or – if you like – the principle of simulation, the principle of lie. It is very peculiar how much energy the communist powers spent on pretending that this was a higher form of democracy and individual freedom (organizing the „show“ of so-called free elections, maintaining the illusion of parliamentary pluralism etc.), a genuine kind of humanism and realism, based on proper scientific knowledge. In fact, the very contrary was the case: Communist totalitarianism was an anti-democratic (totalitarian), anti-individual (collectivist), anti-scientific (almost religious) formation. The glorification of dialectics alone – being another proof of the irrational nature of the communist ideology – made it possible to maintain such contradictory conceptions – or, if you like, such nonsense – like „democratic centralism“, „socialistic realism“ or „scientific ,Weltanschauung‘ “.

During the first period of communist totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia there were two pillars of total ideologization of the arts, the humanities and sciences: On the one hand the fear of the cruel political power, on the other the illusion on the side of many intellectuals that it could be possible to harmonize centralized political power and individual creativity. During the second period the intellectuals lost their illusions and tried to reform the social system. But at the same time a new party-oligarchy was rising, which based its position on the principle of obedience to the imperialist superpower and aimed at the appropriation of the entire property of the society, misusing them for their egoistic pursuits and group advantages. Nevertheless, the ideological principles proclaimed disabled an explicit recovery of private property or a reestablishment of the principle of heredity. Therefore the new oligarchy was to suffer from paranoia and had to develop new means to mask the usurpation mentioned above. They introduced craftier ways of total social control: The principle of auto-censorship, based on a feeling of permanent jeopardy and the trust in human vices, relying especially on controversies between different people and on human envy.

As for the sciences, this principle of misusing divergencies and differing interests was to work very efficiently: Seeking to transform the humanities into a mere servant of ideology – though without having a final success, as I should insist – politicians tried to evoke distrust in the camp of scientists, questioning the scientific nature of the social sciences and the humanities as such. Thus scientists waived all philosophy and rejected any attempt to challenge the sense of scientific research and its moral implications. As a consequence natural sciences became mere technologies and, paradoxically, were very easily controlled by the political powers. This development was to evoke contempt „for the blindness“ of the natural sciences in the quarters of humanists and philosophers. Distrust and mutual accusations among scientists and humanists

are the main results of the communists' cultural strategies. Another one is the present process of disintegration and particularization of the scientific disciplines, which, to a certain extent, parallels the process of a revival of political nationalism in the countries belonging to the former Soviet empire. Both are the results of the previous centralization as a means of total political control. The concentration and accumulation of different sciences within greater science-centres was introduced as a token of the interdisciplinary trend, but never functioned as it should. Therefore the process of particularization and disintegration can be no surprise. Nevertheless it is a pity that this process is still in function at a time, when – in western thinking as well as politics and economics – the search for integration is gaining prevalence.

II. The period when it was considered the main task of art history to support a „myth of nations“ has long been overcome. Art history is now also free from the illusion that it could gain the status of an exact science. In spite of the fact that the polemics between different conceptions of art history – as a rigorous science and as a mere part of ideology – does still persist, we may say that the main stream of art historical research has – up to now – rested on the conception of art history articulated by E. Panofsky, E.H. Gombrich and J. Białostocki, that is: Art history regarded as a humanistic discipline, as a medium of culture, as a cultural memory, aiming at the revitalization of humanistic or – if you want – anthropological values, which makes art history a very important counterbalance to the naked pragmatism, utilitarianism and technocracy of the present mass and consumer society.

The colleagues from the Institutes of art history at Prague and Budapest managed – so to say at the last moment – to establish a synthetic history of art for their countries, before the concept of an art history regarded as history of nations or national states had become outdated by new cultural trends. Each of them was to develop cultural regards – such as an academic art history in many volumes – as a constituent and organic part of its cultural identity. In contrast to it art history in Slovakia has not managed to fulfill this task till now. Two reasons were responsible for this deficiency: 1) The concept of cultural identity of the Slovak nation has been based primarily on anthropological elements – language, literature and ethnography – due to the fact that the Slovaks did not have a state of their own for a thousand years. Art history as a discipline, which has to reconstruct the crossings of cultural influences of different origin on the territory of Slovakia, has not found the proper place in the concept mentioned above, being regarded as too cosmopolitan. 2) No clear and generally accepted concept of the philosophy of art history in Slovakia has been shaped till now. The polemic between the „étatisme“ characteristic for the Hungarian art history and the attempt of art historians in Slovakia to formulate a territorial concept, their search for a particular „Kunstlandschaft“ Slovakia does still continue. Meanwhile art historical research in the Central European countries is replacing its former

concentration on a specific „Central European“ culture by a concept of a „European culture“ and artistic exchange.

But still a query is coming up: What might be the task of such a small art historical institute like the Institute for Art History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava in a situation characterized on the one hand by a general trend to investigate global cultural communication and on the other by a neonationalistic trend in Eastern Europe, expecting art history to reconstruct the history of a so-called „national creativity“? I believe that the answer can be summarized in two points: 1) To specialize in the investigation of such general as well as particular phenomena as represented by the peripheries, provinces, regions or enclaves. They may stand for a most typical situation of the arts: There were some centres, but many peripheries in the history of art. Their relation to the centres was not characterized by imitation or controversy alone, but also by completion: Peripheries do represent a kind of storage of verified solutions. And then, there is no fixed boundary between centres and peripheries, no static hierarchy but, on the contrary, there is a dynamic continuity: Many former peripheries have become centres and vice versa. And after all the ways by which the peripheries tried to catch up with the centres – from imitation to reservedness – are really worth investigating in order to understand the forthcoming of a global cultural communication. 2) To concentrate on the sociology of art: The problem of interrelations between the arts, ideologies and economics has become very topical in the course of transition from totalitarian to democratic societies in Central and Eastern Europe. Nobody can say today what the future of culture – and even more of such a luxurious discipline like art history – will be alike in a postcommunist society, trying to base its new identity on market economy but still far from being prosperous. Nevertheless, the transition from ideology to the market as a proper framework for cultural and artistic activity does represent a unique experience. Their reflection may become an important source of inspiration as well as one of the main topics of art historical research in Central Europe.

Jàn Bakos

Sammlungen

ZUR PLANUNG DER BERLINER MUSEEN IM BEREICH DER ARCHÄOLOGISCHEN SAMMLUNGEN

Im Dezember 1991 stellten die Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz das umfassende Konzept für die archäologischen Sammlungen vor. Unter diesem Begriff sind das Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, das Vorderasiatische Museum, das Ägyptische Museum, die Antikensammlung, die Frühchrist-