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Introduction

Socialist Culture and Modernity

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From October 6th to 11th, 2013, the MS Gretha van Holland brought twenty-four conference participants from Berlin to Beeskow, Eisenhüttenstadt, Frankfurt/Oder and back to Berlin. The aim of this on-board boat conference, organised by Art Archive Beeskow and Utrecht University in collaboration with Marlene Heidel, Claudia Jansen and Ursula Lücke, was to cross borders – national and disciplinary – by connecting parallel and divergent European histories of the Cold War period, both on a conceptual and on a practical level. A selected group of historians, art historians, architectural historians, cultural anthropologists and visual artists discussed the various ways in which socialist cultural history has been presented over the past decades and put new perspectives to the test. This conference has resulted in the present issue of *HCM*.

Public debates on the Cold War and its present-day heritage since the 1990s tend to address the pre-1989 European culture in terms of a clash between Western modernism and Soviet-style socialist realism. However, behind these general concepts one encounters a wide variety of artistic forms and ideas, which more often than not transcend oversimplified politicised distinctions. Especially since the late 1960s, Western European artists explored the borders between "art" and "life", opening themselves to various forms of social and political engagement, whereas socialist realism became a highly contested concept in large parts of Eastern Europe, leading many artists away from both realist and socialist assumptions. In architecture and urban planning, both utopian concepts and everyday appropriations showed many surprising parallels between East and West.

The rather one-dimensional representation of Cold-War cultural history after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of state socialism provokes a series of fundamental questions. What exactly do we mean by modern-

ism and socialist realism? How do both concepts relate to modernity? What does it mean to speak about socialist modernity? Which aspects of Cold War cultural history do we neglect when exclusively focusing on its bipolar character? What concepts do we need to interpret Cold War culture in non-exclusive, non-teleological ways? These were some of the issues at stake during our roundtrip.

For this issue, four papers from the ship conference were selected which not only addressed these questions but also further complicated them, forcing us to be more precise and vigorous in our quest. Susan Reid, in her essay "Makeshift Modernity: DIY, Craft and the Virtuous Homemaker in New Soviet Housing of the 1960s", points to different levels of ambiguity when applying the concept of modernity to Soviet housing projects and the multifarious ways people living in these apartments remodeled them according to their own needs, wishes, tastes and convictions. She shows that in everyday practice socialist modernity is always mediated: instead of a top-down model of universal progress forced upon a passive and repressed population, as the bipolar model of Cold War culture would have it, the inhabitants were actively shaping their environments in accordance with their own views, translating the ideological rhetoric of socialist modernity under Khrushchev (and later under Brezhnev) into personal vernacular. Reid argues that these appropriations cannot be understood in terms of modernity or anti-modernity, they were fundamental signs of agency.

That Cold War culture was not restricted to both superpowers and their European allies becomes clear from Christina Schwenkel's essay on "Traveling Architecture: East German Urban Designs in Vietnam". She discusses an architectural project in Vinh City, Vietnam, where East German architects and urban planners took up the reconstruction process after the more than 5,000 American air strikes on this strategic port city between 1964 and 1973. Schwenkel shows that this is not a simple case of socialist modern architecture imposed on a socialist Third World Country (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or "North Vietnam"). Not only because the designs for Vinh City did not consist of typically standardised blocks but also, more importantly, because these buildings were first redrawn by local experts to fit local conditions and subsequently modified by the residents according to their practical needs and cultural traditions, including altering the ground-plan to respectfully display the family altar or adding balconies to create more living space for family and livestock. As was the case with the modern Soviet apartment buildings discussed by Susan Reid, it becomes clear that also on a transnational scale socialist modernity cannot be usefully discussed without taking the agency of its users into account.

In "New Belgrade and Socialist Yugoslavia's Three Globalisation", Vladimir Kulić further deconstructs the model of bipolarity by analysing New Belgrade, the modernist part of the city of Belgrade, west from the Sava river, in terms of its subsequent orientation towards three forms of globalisation: Stalinist, Western and Non-Aligned. These orientations not only informed New Belgrade's built environment but also the city's global self-awareness, its imaginary place in the world. New Belgrade's Friendship Park, according to Kulić the Berlin Wall's antipode of sorts, symbolically thwarted the bipolar model as a place where state leaders from all over the world, including Eastern Bloc states, Western liberal democracies and non-aligned countries from all continents planted one or more trees in the name of human concord. New Belgrade's modernity therefore does not neatly correspond to either specifically Western or socialist notions of modernity, it claims to represent global modernity by transcending these distinctions. Following a paradoxical reversal of fortunes, Belgrade is now in the process of recovering from international isolation following war and NATO bombings.

Finally, in "From Economic Equality to 'Mommy Politics': Women Artists and the Challenges of Gender in East German Painting", April Eisman challenges the dominant post-Cold War focus on the alleged failure of East German gender politics by analysing the role of women painters in the GDR. She comes to the conclusion that this view is seriously misleading, not only because women artists were significantly better represented at exhibitions and in art academies than in the Federal Republic of Germany around the same time, but also because in due course women painters emancipated themselves from "traditional" topics like portraits, landscapes and still-life to start representing the social life of women and gender issues as well, actively pushing for a closure of the gap between theory (socialist gender equality) and practice. While by no means arguing that the GDR was a paradise of gender equality, Eisman states that the current disregard for this very aspect of socialist modernity reflects a conservative tendency in the guise of an essential reckoning with an obsolete ideology. Seen this way, the undifferentiated bipolar model of Cold War culture does not so much reflect historical reality as very specific cultural and political interests of the present.

What connects all four contributions to this issue is the insight that modernity as a cultural concept cannot be properly understood in terms of abstract principles and ideologies, but has to be analysed in terms of lived reality, including its many paradoxes and ambiguities. People do not passively live under the conditions of socialism or modernity, they use

their environment to the best of their abilities to reshape reality according to their own views and desires. Understanding socialist modernity implies understanding the multifarious appropriations of its basic principles.

About the Author

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