

Overcoming ó Remembering ó Mourning. Contemporary art from six
post-dictatorial European countries

Research Seminar, Department of German, **University of Birmingham**

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Introduction

While many scholars have applied theories of dis-locations to physical migration (including myself in *Identity and Image. Refugee Artists from Nazi Germany in Britain, 1933-1945*, Kromsdorf/Weimar: VDG Verlag, 400 pp), I will explore the question as to how artists who experienced mental migration caused by a collective political-economic upheaval respond visually to their own specific dislocations and how they address subjects of identity and nation.

A case in point will be selected works produced by 10 artists (**Fig.**) who have been commissioned by "Overcoming Dictatorships", a 500,000 EU-funded project (2 ½-years) which aims at creating a dialogue on experiences of the change from dictatorship to democracy between writers and artists (<http://www.hait.tu-dresden.de/eu2/>). In accordance with the guidelines of the Culture 2000 Scheme, institutions in seven countries have been involved (**Fig.**): project management and main applicant has been Prof. Dr. Dr. Gerhard Besier, chair for Research for Totalitarianism at the Technische Universität Dresden in **Germany**, Prof. Dr. hab. Wiesław Kozub-Ciembroniewicz from the Faculty of Philosophy, Jagiellonen-University Krakow in **Poland**, Dr. Marius Oprea, Director of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania in Bucharest, **Romania**, Doc. PhDr Vladimír Gonc, CSc., Jean-Monnet chair, Brunn, **Czech Republic**,

Katalin Gadaros for Prof. Dr. Istvan Rev from the Open Society Archives (OSA) at the University Budapest, **Hungary**, Prof. Dr. Gustavo Corni from the University of Trento, **Italy** and me from the Department of History of Art, University of Birmingham. While five post-communist countries reflected on the more current opening of the Iron Curtain, Italy and also Germany would be able to look at the topic from the perspective of a Second or even Third Generation. Britain has been involved because, as we argued in the application form, albeit not having faced dictatorships (and therefore none of the artists come from Britain), it established authoritarian systems as a colonial country. Therefore it also can contribute to supporting the understanding and reflection between east and west. The partners from these seven countries suggested artists and writers who were then invited to take part in the workshops. So far, workshops were held in all countries except Italy and Britain.

While the writers had readings at previous workshops and publish their poems and short stories in an anthology to come out in May 2008, to be launched at the workshop held in Trento, the visual art works will be shown in a touring exhibition (**Fig.**), starting in Birmingham, where they will be shown at the Rotunda of the Aston Webb Building from 9 October to 8 November 2008, encompassing also the opening of the exhibition. As co-investigator in the project, I have been responsible for organising the artists' discussions in the workshops, selecting works and co-curating the exhibition together with the University Collections, i.e. Clare Mullet and Dr. James Hamilton. In addition, I am supported by two of my PG students, Antonia Grosdanidou and Nellie Gilson. Both have been able to attend the workshops and meetings. They will not only contribute the biographies to the exhibition catalogue, but also organise the UG students who will be involved at a later stage in the exhibition, helping out with advertisement, display and security. These students have attended my second-year Gallery Course, in which they learn how to

organise an exhibition. As assessment, they have to produce a portfolio in which they outline display, educational programme, budget as well as the concept and the exhibits of their exhibition. This year the focus has been on -dictatorshipsø and four projects, each containing up to eight works, have emerged so far: 1) authority of curatorship: From Lady Barber to the current director of the Barber Institute; 2) Money in twentieth-century dictatorships; 3) Gender and authority in Pre-Raphaelite paintings of the City Art Gallery and 4) The power of -siteø and context ó site-specific sculptures on the campus of the University of Birmingham. Depending on their quality, the EU-exhibition can be expanded by having leaf-lets listing the chosen works and explaining the concept of their selections.

This paper has been written in preparation of my contribution to the exhibition catalogue *Overcoming Dictatorships? Art from six post-dictatorial countries*, published by Kerber in Leipzig (96 pp with 30 plates).

Interest in the contemporary art produced in those countries involved, particularly the former Soviet satellite states, in the west is increasing. In 2005 the Modern Museum at Oxford organised an exhibition under the title *Arrivals ó Art from the New Europe*. It has grown out of a two-year collaboration between Modern Art Oxford and Turner Contemporary introducing the work of artists from the expanded European Union. The publication covers the ten *Arrivals* countries: Poland, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Slovakia, Estonia, Hungary and Malta and includes images of the artistsø works, installation shots from the exhibitions, behind the scenes photographs and specially commissioned essays by gallery directors, curators, critics and art historians from across the EU. The exhibition attempts to overcome its title -Arrivalsø (as if these countries have not been there before) and a treatment of art works which is in parts similar to what has become known in Art History as Primitivism (the new, the

exotic) in the prefaces and introductions by having valuable essays from art historians, writing from the perspective of each country.

While the selection of the countries for this exhibition is based on the relationship to Europe, those for the exhibition *After the Wall*, shown at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm in 1999 and at the Ludwig-Museum of Contemporary Art in Budapest in 2000, primarily focused on previously communist countries. It was dedicated to art and culture in post-communist Europe.

Both exhibition catalogues are organised by countries to recognise each individual history. Different from our project, however, *After the Wall* interpreted art in a broader sense, including music, film and photography from 20 countries, among them all those formerly Soviet satellite states involved in this project.

The major difference to both of these shows, however, is that the works for our exhibition has grown out of workshops organised as part of the EU-funded project on "Overcoming Dictatorship". These workshops offer the possibility for the artists to get in contact with each other, to exchange experiences which they have undergone in their countries. In addition, **(Fig.)** we have opened a blog as an electronic communication platform between the seven workshops (<http://overcomings.blogspot.com/>).

Because of the kind of set-up, the artists had a major say about the inclusion of works. Therefore, it is not only in some sense a communal work, but also methodologically informed by oral history. The meetings which are filmed constitute primary material for this project and also for this paper.

The c. 15 works, which will be shown at the exhibition (partly produced newly, partly taken from the already existing oeuvre of each artist), centre around the topic of the project "Overcoming Dictatorships". In the round table discussion at first workshop with the artists held in Poland in March 2007, the artists questioned the title of the project "overcoming dicta-

torships and described various forms of 'overcoming' as mourning for the past, remembering and overcoming the past. They also mentioned the generational gap: the project involves artists who lived under the communist regime, such as Sándor Pinczehelyi from Pécs and born in 1946 (HU), but also those who were only children or teenagers then, such as Vlad Nanc from Bucharest born in 1979. The artists also addressed the present and mentioned new dictatorships in terms of religions, economic dictatorships, art and dictatorships in terms of medium, networks, globalisation and the definition of 'artist' as reflected in the visual arts and art market and in the exhibits of the exhibition show.

On the basis of the results of the round table discussion, I would like to analyse their works as signifiers of dis-locations experienced both in terms of the past (through processes of mourning, remembering and attempts of overcoming) and the present (critical approach to the ideology of the western art market, the new political government and Europe). I will argue that the works represent what Homi K. Bhabha called the 'instability of cultural signification' attempts of individuals to overcome given collective identity formations which question both the political past (the Soviet bloc), but also 'our' present, i.e. European Union and Western democracy.

I Processes of Overcoming

Introduction

While the artists questioned the term 'overcoming', they seem to have been united in their acceptance of 'dictatorships'. Although dictatorship is usually applied to political governments - mainly to describe totalitarian systems in the first half of the twentieth century or also Caesarianism and Bonapartism as

well as the GDR and Russia, other uses in the art field can be found, such as the absolute authority related to patronage and curatorship.

Harald Hauswald's works, which were published in *Gewendet* (**Fig.**) but also exhibited in a number of galleries (and recently had a reportage in the *Zeit Magazin* published on the occasion of 18 years after the fall of the wall on 8 Nov. 2007), consists of black-and-white photographs of East Germany comparing them before and after the fall of the wall, such as in *Time Travels I*, 2007 (**Fig.**): while the top photograph shows Berlin's landmark, the Brandenburg Gate, from East Berlin in 1980, the one on the bottom is taken on 22 December 1989, the day of its reopening after almost three decades. (**Fig.**) It was actually watched by thousands of people, who spilled on to the city's streets cheering in the pouring rain to watch the historic ceremony which effectively ended the division of East and West Germany.

Another pair (**Fig.**) shows the same background, i.e. the Art Gallery in Dresden; taken from the same angle, the top photograph shows marching East-German police in 1984, while the lower one depicts a group of photographing tourists in 2005. A further pair contrasts the erection of a Lenin sculpture on the public space opposite of the Berliner Dom in 1986 (**Fig.**) with a close-up of Graffiti, sprayed on the back of the sculpture exactly at the place where the appropriate body part is, but thus ridiculing the figure. A photographer taking a picture from its front signifies the sculpture's function as a tourist attraction – in 2005, the date of the photograph, the sculpture is not a symbol of respect and lived reality anymore, but rather a symbol reminding of the past.

The gap between each of these photographs, which can be interpreted with what Derrida called the void, the unsayable, represents the space, where the spectator can experience mourning, remembering and overcoming, but where the photographer remains silent.

It is probably characteristic of the younger generation, that Vlad Nanc emphasized the positive sides in Romania under Ceau escu: in the workshop in Poland, he mourned about the better neighbourly and personal relationship, the care taken for the environment and the voluntary engagement in positive activities, having experienced the regime only as a child and in terms of financial hardship and rationed food. In his art, he often uses signifiers to remember the time before: In *Original Adidas* of 2003 (**Fig.**), he takes two pork feet, which could be bought then, and entitles his work with the Romanian slang name for pork feet. Adidas, however, is also the name of a German trainers factory; therefore he adds six velcro stripes to indicate the change from a poorer country, eating pork feet, to the influences of the western consumerism. He also regards the 2007 governmental developments in Romania as essentially dictatorial, disguising them as a transitional period. What he says hints at the PSD, Romania's Social Democratic Party, who committed large-scale electoral fraud in the 2004 elections, winning with 51% of the votes and thus became the third post-revolutionary government with Traian B sescu as president.

Zbyněk Bený-ek interprets what dictatorship meant for him in *Saint Sebastian* of 1997 (**Fig.**). Here he shows in a surrealist style three people sitting on a large machine seemingly to operate on the figure lying on his back in the front. Using loosely Christian iconography, which usually depicts Saint Sebastian as tied to a post and shot with arrows, the martyr becomes a signifier of those who have been controlled under dictatorships. The same artist will also contribute a panel in which he depicts the disinterest of Czech people in the 1990s in the past. In *Midnight Watch* of 2007 (**Fig.**), an iconographic reference to Rembrandt's painting *Night Watch* of 1642 (**Fig.**), (**Fig.**) he shows a restaurant scene. People talk to each other, disregarding the crucifixion of Christ as shown on the TV and also the hunt of a large bird, trying to

catch a little one in front of it. Like the hunting of large birds which is depicted as if it were real and Christ's crucifixion, which is only shown on TV, according to the artist, people in the Czech Republic do not care about the past.

Aleksander Zyko's installation *Obelisk* of 2007 (**Fig.**) alludes to the Romans who invaded countries, creating a vast Roman Empire. According to Plutarch (Cicero 22.2), *Vixerunt*, the text on the obelisk, is an expression used by Cicero to summarise his report of the execution of several of Cataline's followers to the Senate, meaning that they have lived, i.e. they are dead. The language supports the pointer to the Roman Empire, but also hints at the artist's home country, Poland, in which the Catholic Church played an important role under the communist era. Literally translated it means that the dictatorships 'have lived'. However, the obelisk made of wood (battens) and canvas and surrounded by saw dust shows the fragility of such a monument and the fragility of overcoming dictatorships.

Zbigniew Czop, also from Poland has a different approach. He agrees that one cannot forget the past; people bear scars from that time, both physical and mental. The reason for taking part in the project was that his aim is to inform people about these scars. Similarly, Aleksander Zyko, who also created the *Obelisk* just mentioned, will contribute *Sickle and Hammer* (**Fig.**), a sculpture he produced shortly after the end of the communist era in Poland in 1991. As wide-spread communist icons of the industrial proletariat and the peasantry, placing them together symbolises the unity between industrial and agricultural workers. Here, however they are broken into two pieces indicating the end of its power. His *Cross in Cross* of 1990 (**Fig.**) hints at the influence of the Catholic Church both in communist time, but also after 1989: The church's influential role in promoting opposition views, its close relationship with the influential trade union Solidarity, and its mediation between

factions in the 1980s brought the Catholic Church enhanced political power in the postcommunist system. It has been claimed that since 1989 virtually every significant public organization in Poland saw the church as a partner in its activities and decisions.

Sándor Pinczehelyi's contribution spans from 1973 to 2002 and is appropriately entitled *Almost 30 Years 1973-2002* (Fig.). The first panel was produced in 1973 during a time when the artist was particularly interested in Hungarian symbols, such as the Communist sickle and hammer as used here, but also the star and cobblestone as depicted in other works. Different from Zysko's sculpture (Fig.), however, (Fig.) he represented them with an ironic undertone; the pose (crossed arms) in which he holds hammer and sickle means in Hungarian "sh..ø" (Fig.) The painting, originally produced in 1973, found a counterpart in 2002, when the artist depicted himself in black-and-white and without the communist symbols, but still holding his hands in the same position as in 1973, indicating his disinterest in or even aversion to the presence. As he said at the workshop in Poland in March 2007, he dislikes his own works and would like to let himself in for new situations and new answers. The work is interesting from several perspectives; because of being a self-portrait, both paintings index the real person behind, showing the viewer that the people living under the system may have grown older and wiser, but are still the same, even if the context may change. This asks for confrontation, it let you wonder about the person's personal story before and after.

Silvestro Lodi's installation *Hanging History* (Fig.) addresses the various ways in which history can be dealt with, playing with the word "hanging" For Lodi, one can either hang history, explaining the past dead or one can hang it so one can look at it and remember it. Since he uses a hanger from which nine cardboard designs dangle, one can also, with an outside force, mix the templates. Each template represents a country, while the number nine

stands for endlessness. **(Fig.)** The back of the hanger says “Stock of History” reminding us of supply and having history in stock; accordingly, the artist understands the hanger as a present to the project partners.

(Fig.) The far right one represents Germany; one the one side is the former GDR flag, the other shows the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany), because for the artist, the country is still divided. Germany is followed by the flags for the UK: one side bears the Union flag representing the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, in red and blue with a red circle in the middle, the other shows a detail of the flag in black-and-white with a woman’s eyes opened and closed. The **Czech** Republic is represented by referring to its present time (blue, white and red of the national flag) and its Nazi past. It bears a portrait of the National Socialist Reinhard Heydrich, protector of Bohemia and Moravia from 1941 until his death in 1942. As chair of the Wannsee conference and considered as possible successor by Adolf Hitler, he represents for the artist a criminal. The next cardboard (**next Fig.**) is dedicated to Fascist **Italy**, showing a waving Mussolini giving a speech on the top of the colours of the Italian flag. The other side represents a three-quarter waving Mussolini in black-and-white. It is followed by the tricolour of red, white and green of the **Hungarian** flag on both sides of the cardboard ó only with the different order of colours and again a waving hand on the front side. Since the work is about representing dictatorships, the artist also depicts the other half of former Czechoslovakia, **Slovakia** with its national flag and a full portrait of Karl Rahm, commandant of the Theresienstadt concentration camp, in traditional clothes. Romania is represented by the colour of its flag and a head with “vin in 5 minutes” on the upper half and Romanian writing on the bottom of the front side. The back is mainly white with another hand, this time it is that of Ceau escu. The last but one is dedicated to the **European Union** with the golden stars on blue background and, in reference to Communism, with blue

stars on red background. The last one represents **Poland** with the colours of the flag and 'Polø on the one side and a full portrait of Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp from 1940 to 1942, on the other, remembering the Nazi period. (**Fig.**) With a mixture of national flags and their colours as well as portraits of those which the artist considers contributors to the Holocaust, dictators or representative of a system, the work offers *possibilities* as to how to deal with history. For the artist, it is an individual decision as to how to deal with the past.

For Ulf Göpfert (**Fig.**), the purpose of remembering is to learn from it to avoid other dictatorships. His contribution, entitled *Individuality versus Dictatorship* is a tank which functions as an icon for all historical events, in which Soviets used tanks, such as in the 1953 unarmed workers' demonstration in East Berlin, in the 1956 Hungarian revolution against the communist government and in the 1968 Prague Spring to halt the reforms. Painted in a variety of patterns with the use of four acrylic colours, the work is rather playful, which suggests a kind of being at ease and an influence of western Postmodernism. For the artist, the colours and patterns are an expression of individuality, counteracting uniformity and thus dictatorship, because dictatorship is the oppression of individuals. He believes that dictatorship can only be avoided on an individual level; therefore he decided to use a symbol of dictatorship, military power camouflaged by individual patterns. With these patterns, the tank is useless.

In the same lines, Michele Zaggia has prepared a video entitled *Unpredicted Result of 2007* (**Fig.**). For him, every dictatorship and every totalitarian regime means the vanishing of differences. He sees such danger happening in Europe now, caused by the togetherness of acting between market and technology. At the beginning of the film, one will see an eye, which represents knowledge to the artist, but also refers to communication. Again

according to the artist, the increase in the role of media, particularly TV and Internet, contributes to a globalised self-referentiality of signs ó cultures do not interact on the basis of real processes, but virtual realities, which self-reproductions and predetermined by the media.

The spiral on the cover of the DVD (and shown here) represents Europe. Europe is ó like in a typical Italian spiral game ó separated in fields, and exactly like in a game, luck and the unforeseeable of events play an important role in the development of history. And this is the fundamental reason why, for the artist, neither technology, political strategies, religion nor *any* form will ever be able to have absolute control over human beings. Compared with Göpfert, who puts his *hope* in individuality as the way of overcoming dictatorships, Zaggia fundamentally believes in the individual as not being able to be entirely dictated, a difference which may have its reason in the artist's individual personality, but may also indicate a generational discrepancy: while Göpfert, living in East Berlin, has experienced Communism for most of his life so far, Zaggia, born in 1946 and living and working in Venice, has not experienced Fascism himself. Furthermore, it is interesting that the artist, from Italy, is less concerned with Fascism but with a new danger happening at the moment.

None of the artists has referred explicitly to the physical dangers of dictatorships, focusing rather on social and economic pressures in their works and the discussions in the workshops, although some of them suffered tremendously under Communism: Born in Prostějov (Moravia) in 1949 and moving to Prague after his training as an artist at Brno School of Applied Arts, Bený-ek was persecuted after signing *Charter 77* in January 1977, a document which gave the name to the most prominent opposition group to the Czechoslovak Communist government, having Václav Havel as one of its founding members. As a result, Bený-ek emigrated to Vienna in 1982, from

where he returned to Prague in 1992. Although not persecuted, the photographer Harald Hauswald, born in Radebeul, near Dresden, in 1954, had to be very careful when taking photographs in the GDR. Obviously, considering his political attitudes, he was also not able to work full time, having to earn his living by being telegram messenger, restorer and photo-lab assistant. Only since 1989, his work has become internationally recognized. Different from Hauswald, Sándor Pinczehelyi, born in 1946 in Szigetvár (Hungary), was recognized as an artist in Communist Hungary. He was not only director of the Pécs Art City Gallery from 1977 to 1999, but was also commissioned to represent Hungary at the Venice Biennale in 1988. However, even he had to suffer repressive measures: after participating in an exhibition which had been forbidden because of being too much influenced by the west - Pinczehelyi showed a surrealist (**Fig.**) montage in which the hand goes in and out of his chest, referencing Christ's crucifixion wounds, which he showed to the apostles in order to make them believe that it is him. The reason for not referring to the past may well be because it is rather personal, sensitive and probably not always as clear cut as one would like to have it. The latter may also well explain, why questions as how to treat players of the former communist government, such as, for example, in Jens Rudolph's film *Staats_Sicherheit* of 2004 (**Fig.**), shot in the Stasi-Unterlagen-Behörde in Berlin and problematising the treatment of members of the East German secret service after German reunification, have also not been an issue.

II The Present: New Dictatorships

Apart from the question as to how to overcome dictatorships, the artists have also been concerned with the forming of new ones in terms of economy, society, ideology and technology.

Vlad Nanc , in particular, mentioned that the project may have come a little late in the sense that people have already overcome the communist dictatorships. The new problems now are how people should deal with, what he called, "turbo-capitalism." He believes that economic restrictions can be seen parallel to dictatorial restrictions. Similar to the German artist Peggy Meinfelder in 2004, when she exhibited *My first 100,- Westmark* (Fig.), referring critically to consumerism ó she assembled various items which the East Germans bought from their first 100 Deutschmarks, received as a welcome present from West Germany after crossing the East-West borders (Fig.), Mirela Dauceanu (Fig.) will contribute *Daily Invalid Corruption*, an installation originally exhibited in 1995, consisting of a recycled fridge, a TV and (Fig.) various bottles and boxes of pills. This work acknowledges the 1994 stabilisation and economic growth in Romania as described by Gábor Hunya in his article published in *Post-Communist Economies*, but criticises it at the same time as being the result of corruption.

Zbyněk Benýšek from the Czech Republic also refers to consumerism in the 1990s. In *Prague Buffet 1995* painted in 1996 (Fig.) people are depicted in a waiting room. Except for the couple on the left, which is painted as if blurred, they are depicted in isolation and demonstrate the results of consumerism for the artist: the far right man holds a bottle in his hands; the grey-haired man next to him is depicted smoking and probably watching the one who lies on the floor, seemingly drunk or in desperation, probably because of the woman in the doorway having rejected him, although this is not made clear, but rather left open. The same goes for the window, in which a fair-haired woman with dark sunglasses seems to sell photographs of men in dark sunglasses. Being unconnected and having an open story line attributes to the loneliness and gloominess, with which this picture is associated. In addition, the scene is made surreal with by adding a large fantasy bird breathing fire

towards an invisible songbird which tries to escape in vain. For the artist, consumerism is the cause of addictions and social isolation.

Some works are also concerned with the EU and the relationship, which each country will play in it. Zbigniew Czop has produced an etching entitled *Together ó Separately* (**Fig.**) consisting of two plates which are held together by a ring or lock (as the artist interprets it). Both etchings represent fantasy landscapes of important architectural buildings ó on the left are those in the EU countries, on the right are significant Polish buildings. Similar to Lodi's interpretation of the EU in *Hanging History ó Stock of History* (**Fig.**) shown earlier, Czop's Poland (**Fig.**) is not part of the EU; Poland remains its own identity and is only connected with a lock, which has no key or possibility to open it again without breaking it.

Vlad Nanc does also not see the EU and Romania as one; but different from Czop's etching, which represents hope or acceptance, the 28-year-old Romanian rather shows the confusion which many of the younger generation seem to face in *I do not know what union I want to belong to anymore* of 2003 (**Fig.**). The idea to this work originates from a visit to a registry office in Bucharest in 2003. In the wedding room, he saw the EU flag next to the Romanian one. Before 1989, next to the Romanian flag was always the Soviet one. Although for him, it is a necessity for small countries to become member of the EU, this work is a vivid symbol of the insecurity towards national and European ideals, since the artist has exchanged the back colour of each flag and thus mixed both with each other.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have shown that the artists and works deal with overcoming dictatorships through processes of mourning and remembering. Some artists also give suggestions as to how to avoid dictatorships: through remembering,

but also by emphasizing individuality as demonstrated by Ulf Göpfert's *Individuality versus Dictatorship*, 2007 (model) (**Fig.**) and Zaggia's video *Unpredicted Results* of 2007 (**Fig.**). Some artists also look to the present, approaching critically the western art market, their own governments and particularly attempt to identify the relationship of their own country with that of the EU.

In other words, they attempt to overcome collective identity formations of the past (i.e. the Soviet bloc, National Socialism and Fascism), but also critically engage with current new ones, such as their national government, the EU and the global market. Thus, despite not being physically emigrated, they have been ideologically displaced. Their works function therefore as signifiers of dis-locations and attempts of relocations.

Many questions remain open. Apart from other areas, I would like to do more research on the country-specific forms of overcoming political systems and also on the generational influences, how the first and the second generation differ after a dictatorial system. The case of Zaggia (**Fig.**) and Lodi (**Fig.**) suggest that it might be a more playful remembering with distrust into current systems that may have characteristics of dictatorship. The same goes for Dauceanu and Nanc (**Figs.**), who also show a critical engagement with current identity formations.