

OVERCOMING DICTATORSHIPS



8 Oct - 9 Nov 2008
University of Birmingham
Aston Webb Building | Rotunda

Zbyněk Benýšek | Zbigniew Czop | Mirela Dauceanu | Ulf Göpfert
Harald Hauswald | Silvestro Lodi | Vlad Nancă
Sándor Pinczehelyi | Michele Zaggia | Aleksander Zyško



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Layout: www.augenpost.de

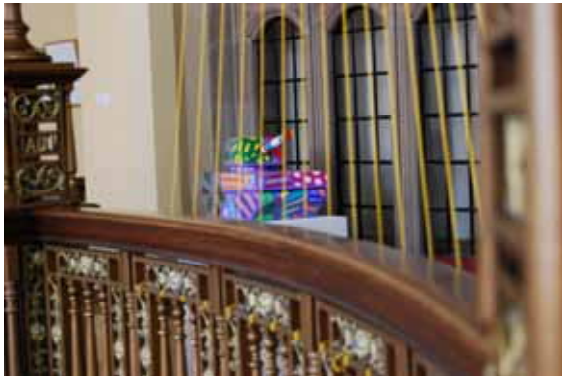
7th Project Report

(October 2008)

Birmingham - Art in Transition

Jutta Vinzent (Birmingham),
Gert Röhrborn (Dresden)

How do artists who experienced the challenging changes relate to the year 1989 and the then forced or enabled ideological migration caused by collective political-economic upheavals? How do they respond visually to their own specific 'locations'?



Ulf Göpfert's sculpture *Individuality vs. Dictatorship* (Photo by the artist).

By way of a conference and a celebratory opening of the exhibition sponsored by the Culture 2000 programme of the European Commission the concluding project workshop at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham on 8-9 October 2008 took a closer look at these questions which have accompanied the proceedings of the project from the very beginning two years ago. Being "one of the finest small galleries in Europe," as the Observer had it, the Barber with its magnificent collection of drawings which includes works by Rembrandt, Beardsley, Schiele and Picasso offered a worthy and hospitable meeting place.

Applying concepts which have been developed for and amply applied to physical migration, the works presented during the touring exhibition of *Overcoming Dictatorships* are understood by exhibition convener Dr. Dr. Jutta Vinzent (Birmingham) as signifiers of ideological dislocations and relocations experienced in terms of both the past through processes of mourning and remembering and attempts

at overcoming) and the present (critical approach to the ideology of the Western art market, the new political government and Europe), thus neglecting a mainly object-oriented formalist and aesthetic analysis as well as psychoanalytical methodologies and putting issues related to Post-colonialism to the fore. The interpretation also only touches on gender issues, because this valuable topic deserves treatment in its own right.

Jutta Vinzent stresses that the variety of the individual artist's responses on the one hand and the relatively small number of art works – 17 works by 10 artists – explored on the other hand defy any attempt to subsume their individualities into a 'grande narrative' or as the start of a new 'democratic' history of *longue durée*, as if they simply could be incorporated into old, existing Western categories as markers of the latter's superiority and longevity. On the contrary, the works by Zbyněk Benýšek (Prague), Zbigniew Czop (Cracow), Mirela Dauceanu (Bucha-



Birmingham - A city in love with sculpture and public art (Photos: Ulf Göpfert, Silvestro Lodi).

rest), Ulf Göpfert (Dresden), Harald Hauswald (Berlin), Silvestro Lodi (Venice), Vlad Nancă (Bucharest), Sándor Pinczehelyi (Pécs), Michele Zaggia (Venice), and Aleksander Marek Zyśko (Wrocław) revolt against new communal enclaves and rather represent attempts of individuals to overcome given collective identity formations and to question the political past, the EU and Western democracies. The respective artistic contributions and interpretations can be studied in detail in the exhibition catalogue *OVERcoming DICTatorships. Contemporary East and West European Visual Inquiries*, written by Jutta Vinzent and published by Kerber in Bielefeld. It is out now in selected bookstores and available during the exhibition.

When there is emptiness, where is hope?
From ideology to consumerism

The workshop started with a Round-Table discussion at the renowned Birmingham Ikon Gallery on 8 October. Chaired by curator Nigel Prince project artists Harald Hauswald, Vlad Nancă, Sándor Pinczehelyi and Silvestro Lodi presented their personal reflections on the topic to Ikon's lively audience. Nancă started with putting his two contributions to the exhibition – the installations “I do not know what union I belong to anymore” (2003) and “Ideal” (2007) – into context.



The Gallery for Contemporary Art in Birmingham (Photo: Silvestro Lodi).

His attention is taken by state symbols and how they relate to mentalities and the political practice of a given political entity. While his sardonic swapping (Erden Kosova) of colours and symbols of the flags of the Soviet Union and the European

Union provoked rather harsh moral criticism in the past, he managed to give his recent work combining the flags of communist Hungary, East Germany and Romania a much stronger personal and empathetic note. “For a few days” in 1989, the artist pointed out, “in each of these countries the national flag was not only without an emblem but with a hole in the middle. To me this is a symbol of pure freedom, something that could only happen in times of such strong spiritual engagement and idealistic vows.” In “Ideal” Nancă put the three flags together in a row in order to construct a spiritual union which encompasses time, history and borders. What combines them is the removal of the symbols used to distinguish, not to unite. The artistic intervention (re-)creates “a spiritual union of genuine revolutionary freedom, where no symbols are spoiling the essence of those days of liberty. It is an Ideal union I wish I could belong to.”



Vlad Nancă's double strike: *Ideal* (above) and *I do not know what union I belong to anymore* (left, with Sándor Pinczehelyi) (Photos: Ulf Göpfert, TU Dresden).

Symbols of political rule also played a pivotal role in Sándor Pinczehelyi's early 1970s works, in which he had tried to

create a genuine Eastern European style. Using hammer and sickle was a means to reveal the isolation from the world and the feeling of a crucifixion, of being forgotten and left behind. The artist wanted to “offload the ideological burden that these objects had collected and then to reinstate them in their fundamental role.” Confronting his former oeuvre throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Pinczehelyi did not simply intend to excavate a past in danger of oblivion but to inter-relate past and present. His works are not only a witness account of changing structures and values; he touches upon the empty space that is the present. Symbols have not been reinstated; they have lost their meaning. For Pinczehelyi who never saw himself as a “political artist” but touched upon the political that determined his social environment this situation has a far-reaching implication for artistic credibility and responsibility. He aims at “holding up a faithful mirror to the spectator.”



During the Round-Table Discussion (Photo: Silvestro Lodi).

The Brandenburg Gate in Berlin is a magic point in Harald Hauswald’s life and artistic endeavours. The central pair of his photographic contribution is formed by contrasting two snapshots from the early and late 1980s, one depicting the yearning of Easterners craving for entry to the West, the other the unforeseen day of their admittance in 1989: “People ran out into the world. The earth turned into the globe again.” For Hauswald, who was a great fan of rock music and enriched his photographic skills and archive while exploring Berlin as a telegram messenger, the historical opening of the Brandenburg Gate was an existential experience of

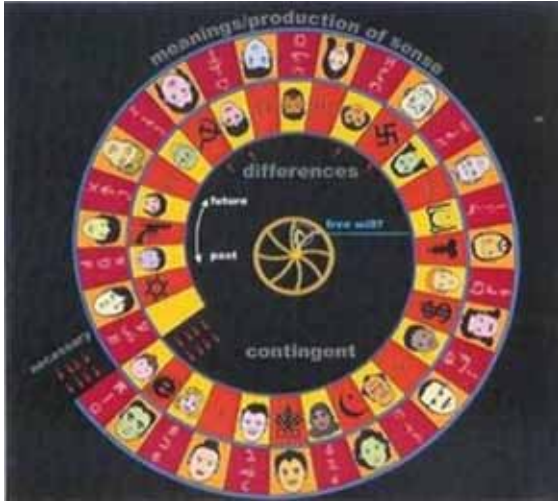
freedom. His doings and whereabouts were no longer classified as political and he was



Hanging History – Stock of History by Silvestro Lodi (Photo by the artist).

finally able to follow his own initiatives. Political topics slowly vanished from his work and his approach to photography changed a lot: “it moved from my mind to my guts.” Where the state as the eternal opponent disappeared, people became visible. Hauswald depicts human beings as artworks and studies their encounters in public space. Yet his personal appreciation of the transition process reiterates a feeling of emptiness, although in colours different from Nancă’s or Pinczehelyi’s: “What were emotions then are sentiments today.”

Silvestro Lodi, the only Western-born participant at the Round Table, provided the capstone of the East-Western artistic bridge erected during this evening. Fascinated by the procedures, metrics and taxonomies of different professions Lodi dedicates his work to regenerating human actions in the negatives of an ideal-model template. He has been convening them in an encyclopaedic inventory for several years already. Although this practice alone would have offered intriguing material for discussion, the artist preferred not to pre-



Diversity of artistic media and interpretations (from top to bottom): the video *Unpredicted result* by Michele Zaggia, installation *Daily Invalid Corruption* by Mirela Dauceanu, and copperplate print *Stražna Pedagogika* by Zbigniew Czop (Photos: TU Dresden).



sent his contribution but his workplace, the city of Venice, to the audience. Following Lodi, who teaches at the Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia and the Studio Tredici Scuola di Pittura, in Venice there is no hope and no art system at all. Venice is a secluded and touristy “showcase” city devoid of refreshing interfaces with its industrially productive periphery Mestre, which is a cultural wasteland. Art is neither created nor produced in a process of social exchange any more, but sold on a market. Figuring as market participants and entrepreneurs artists are subject to an economy of rapid interest which defies any standards of intellectual development. “We artists looked at ourselves after years of solipsism. We are now trying to talk to each other, in the hope that the sounds of our voices will reach the ears and brains of our street companions – critics and art historians.” When Lodi emphatically called for the establishment of new “crossroads” between structures and individuals, he reintroduced a historic concept to our present that in his eyes carries much stronger weight than the memory of all recent dictatorships: “We are in need of a new Renaissance.”

Reflecting visual inquiries

The Round Table discussion was followed by the conference “Roles of the visual in overcoming dictatorships” on 9 October. It was kindly supported by the Heritage, Cultural Production and Interpretation Collaborative Research Network of the University of Birmingham. The speakers explored the intersections of the visual arts in mediating the political, socio-economic and cultural changes in post-dictatorial societies and the impact of such changes on cultural production. Dr. Rose Whyman (Birmingham) presented a paper on counter-cultural art and performance in Russia since Perestroika. Whyman identified a Janus-faced approach to a pre-Soviet past which is both driven by admiration and an expression of irreverent attitudes to the Russian classics. Some

artists display to be considered as part of international art movements rather than specifically Russian ones. Using, among others, the works of the Siberian art collective Blue Noses which present contemporary Russia in an artistic language full of disrespectful historical quotations the paper worked out various forms of censorship still in place today.

Maja Fowkes (London) and Dr. Reuben Fowkes (Manchester) made a case for the lasting exemplariness of Hungary for studying the relation between art and politics in Europe. They examined the readiness of contemporary art to address controversial issues around the memory of past political upheavals. The central question of the presentation was whether the overall reluctance to deal with live political questions reflects more the legacy of local (art) histories or the newly-adopted rules of a politically-acquiescent international art system. Fowkes and Fowkes discussed the social and political implications of the



Reuben and Maja Fowkes in the Barber Institute Photograph Room (Photo: TU Dresden).

2007 REMAKE project of Hungarian artist Csaba Nemes, in which both speakers had been closely involved. In ten animated short films Nemes offered an unsettling perspective on the riots which broke out in Budapest during the 50th anniversary of the 1956 uprising. Eclipsing questions of artistic quality and integrity, the public discussion was dominated by Nemes' (deliberate) failure to transport the political

motivations of the rioters in order to expose the manipulative use of symbols of 1956 by contemporary media and politicians.



Corresponding artworks: Pictures and paintings by Harald Hauswald (top left), Sándor Pinczehelyi (top right) and Zbyněk Benýšek (Photos: TU Dresden).



Dr. Sue Malvern (Reading) examined works by women artists from Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia which shed light on the legacies of feminism and dissidence in post-Communist Europe. Malvern discussed the cases of Croatian and Belgrade-based artists Sanja Iveković and Milica Tomić. Both persons created disturbing images which are meant to remember women active in anti-fascism and once known as national heroes in socialist former Yugoslavia, and which were then displayed in several life-style magazines. By using the means of modern advertisement and design Iveković and Tomić infused the memory of historical figures forgotten by consumerist society directly into its brain (if one does not consider this term an obscenity in this respect). Offering manifold points of reference for the discussion of the

contributions by Pinczehelyi and Hauswald the paper also explored contemporary works by Iveković and Tomić which relate to earlier periods of their respective oeuvre.

Prof. Brandon Taylor (Southampton) brought a Western European comparative case to the attention of the conference audience. He elaborated upon the oppressive tastes of the modern European bourgeoisie which in his opinion are characterised by secrecy, convention, a desire for tradition, and a slavish adherence to various signifiers of reassurance: landscape, the bourgeois family, animals, and accumulated wealth. Taylor pointed out that the epitome of bourgeois taste in contemporary Europe was to be located in the remaining monarchies and their households. Following his approach it is not by accident that the latter in many cases have resonated with the trappings of authoritarian dictators.

“The arts of freedom, of diversity and pluralism prove to be stronger”

Following a warm welcome by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Birmingham, Prof. Michael Stirling, Rt. Hon. Neil Kinnock, Leader of the Opposition, 1983-92 and UK Commissioner of the EU, 1995-2004, honoured the exhibition of *Overcoming Dictatorships* by giving a brilliant speech during the exhibition opening at noon. In the face of absolutely ruthless oppression, Lord Kinnock told his audience, “people have to resort to other means of trying to resist the dictatorship of the intellect, the occupation of the mind, the colonization of the conscience; and that is why arts are vital components, vital means and vital vehicles of freedom.”

Compared to the arts poetry or prose are rather risky endeavours, because writers need to be rather outspoken in what they mean. On the other hand, music has the protest most of the time through metaphor and through allegory. That may impede its accessibility. The great thing

about art as Lord Kinnock sees it is that throughout the centuries there have been innumerable artists who have used their creativity to attack absolutism and tyranny. “When challenged by the censor they can say: ‘Oh, you overinterpret that. I didn’t mean that at all! Oh no, that’s not an expressive blackness, that’s a shadow.’ And that means that quite a lot of them managed to stay out of jail. That’s why visual arts are such a glorious declaration of a liberty of conscience and thought. They don’t just speak for the artist, but they allow others to congregate around them.”



Vice Chancellor of the University of Birmingham Prof. Michael Stirling, University Curator Dr. James Hamilton, Dr. Dr. Jutta Vinzent, project leader Prof. Gerhard Besier and Vlad Nancă (from left) listen to Rt. Hon. Neil Kinnock (front) (Photo: TU Dresden).

After expressing his gratitude to everybody involved in realizing the exhibition lead partner Prof. Dr. Dr. Gerhard Besier (Dresden) underlined the innovative approach of the project. By combining literary, visual and scientific explorations it opens up various levels of reflection. Scientists may learn from artists to understand dictatorship more as a contingent social phenomenon than an undesirable

form of rule. Dictatorships directly address the individual, and their legacies stay with us for a much longer time than people might think. Art mediates changing social realities with troubling individual experiences. It also fosters intergenerational exchange and communication. Although personal horizons have been opened up for many throughout the project it has also shown the persistence of conflicting collective identities. Besier appealed to the



Sculptures by Aleksander Marek Zysko: *Cross in Cross* (top left), *Sickle and Hammer* (top right), and *Obelisk* (below) (Photos: TU Dresden).

audience as fellow Europeans to integrate the Central Eastern European community of experience into their view of the world. He advocated a recalibration of European identity and politics by culture: “Everybody knows that there is more to Europe than the European Union. But there are still too few people who use the Union’s financial and administrative support to explore and extend the social and cultural realities beyond the institutions. Let us continue to collaborate in order to shape a Europe worth living in together.”

Dr. Dr. Jutta Vinzent concluded the opening by thanking the Birmingham team that took care of mounting and presenting the exhibition. Among them were Dr. James Hamilton and Clare Mullett from the University Collections Birmingham and Vinzent’s assistants Nellie Gilson and Antonia Grousdanidou who instructed a group of students, who helped setting up the exhibition and initiated and planned some of the events accompanying the exhibition. Thereby *Overcoming Dictatorships* was transformed into a learning experience beyond the classroom. Although the project enters its final stage now, Vinzent pointed out that the reception of a touring exhibition in each country is a project of its own. It will bring together viewpoints from a larger variety of people and, what has been discussed with a select group so far, will be opened up and evaluated from many more perspectives: “A good project is recognizable when further ideas get stimulated and projects realized, and *Overcoming Dictatorships* has been such a project.”



Scenes from the film documentary by Barbara Lubich.

Inside OVERcoming DICTatorships

The exhibition which is presented in the extraordinary Rotunda of the Aston Webb Building of the University of Birmingham is accompanied by a series of inspiring lunchtime lectures and film screenings, which among others include a presentation on “Memories of Nazism in the GDR” by Dr. Joanne Sayner and Academy Award Winner “La Vita è bella” by Roberto Benigni. Subsequently the exhibition will tour several European countries. Next station is the U Frycza Gallery at the Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Cracow University College. The exhibition also



Above: Harald Hauswald (2nd right) explains the concept of his photographic series to the guests of the exhibition opening.

Below: A moving experience - Ulf Göpfert (left) and Alexander Marek Zyško on their way to the Roundtable Discussion (Photos: Silvestro Lodi).



comes with a film documentary by Barbara Lubich (Dresden). It is not only a mirror of project events, but rather a treasure chest filled with magic insights into discussions and intimate personal stories. You can see Hungarian artist Sándor Pinczehelyi confront his works from the 1970s, which

he had increasingly rejected over the years because – as he himself put it – “they have been quoted so many times.” Zsófia Balla describes the dire personal consequences of political decisions and explains how poetry helped her to cope with her experiences in Ceaușescu’s Romania. And Venetian painter Silvestro Lodi reappropriates the tailoring patterns of his granddad in order to form his own artistic style. The latest information on exhibition, programme and films is available on <http://overcomings.blogspot.com>.

Film screenings at the Rainbow (160 High Street, Digbeth; films start 7 pm)

15 Oct 2008, *Das Leben der Anderen* (The lives of others), Germany 2006.

22 Oct 2008: *Nyócker* (The District), Hungary 2005.

29 Oct 2008: *La Vita è bella* (Life is Beautiful), Italy 1999.

5 Nov 2008: *Korowód* (Twists of Fate), Poland 2007

Lunchtime lectures at Barber Institute (Photograph Room, 1-2 pm)

16 Oct 2008: *Overcoming Dictatorships: An Introduction to the exhibition* (Dr Jutta Vinzent, Birmingham).

21 Oct 2008: *Authoritarianism in Ukraine* (Dr Nathaniel Copsey, Birmingham).

28 Oct 2008: *Hannah Arendt: Politics and ‘Dark Times’* (Dr Steve Buckler, Birmingham).

4 Nov 2008: *The Death of the Journalist: the image of Albania and the Balkans in the British media 2000-2007* (Dr Gëzim Alpion, Birmingham) (12-1 pm!).

6 Nov 2008: *Overcoming Resistance: Memories of Nazism in the GDR* (Dr Joanne Sayner).

