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**'Détente' (1991-1994): renegotiation of Cold War era East-West
artistic divisions through the works of Czechoslovak artists
in the early 1990s**

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Declaration

I declare that I have created the thesis by myself. All sources and literature used have been duly cited. The work was not used to obtain another or the same title. This declaration and consent will be signed by handwritten signature.

Prague, 01 May 2024

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Abstract

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, art institutions faced questions about the survey and integration of Eastern artistic production into the Western artistic paradigm. Curated by two Austrian gallerists, 'Détente' – a series of Central East European exhibitions between 1991 and 1994 – tried to negotiate these questions through pairing, and thus allowing a dialogue between Czechoslovak and Western artists. By selecting artists working in various genres and artistic-aesthetic traditions, the curators presented an alternative strategy for seeing and conceiving Eastern European art. This Thesis looks at their strategies and compares them with institutional curatorial practices in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These exhibitions are representative of the Austrian, West German, and French contexts. It is also argued here that 'Détente' should be understood as one, avant-lettre representation of a radical liberational art historical approach developed by the Polish art historian, Piotr Piotrowski in his framework of 'horizontal art history'.

Introduction

This Thesis project sets itself the subject of a series of exhibitions between the period of 1991 and 1994 under the title ‘Détente’. Curated by two Austrian gallerists, Christine König and Hans Knoll, and featured in various Central-East European ‘local’ centres of artistic production (Brno, Warsaw, Ljubljana, Milan, Budapest, and Vienna) the exhibition wanted to open a new chapter in East-West cultural relationships following the end of the Cold War in 1989 through exhibiting Czechoslovak and Western modernist artists together, in dialogues. The end of the Second World War was a significant political, economic, and cultural turning point in European history. The nascent Cold War saw the division of the continent between the United States and its Western allies and the Soviet Union in the East where most Central East Europe states came under Soviet Socialist influence and military occupation. This period, often referred to as the ‘post-Yalta’ world order, after the 1944 Yalta Conference, is most prominently symbolised by the Iron Curtain – the physical and metaphorical barrier politically, economically, and culturally separating Eastern and Western Europe. The tensions between these two Blocs dominated European politics for the next four decades. Yet, following the heightened hostilities of the 1950s and early 1960s, a ‘relaxation’ came with the United States and the Soviet Union taking steps towards each other in an attempt to ease military tensions. This brief period of *détente*, arguably, laid the foundation for future exchanges between the Blocs, and change in the East.¹ This relaxation of tensile relationships gave the inspiration for the curators to title their exhibition ‘Détente’ to showcase how these historical differences between the two post-Yalta Blocks needed to be reevaluated when the Iron Curtain had already fallen. Contemporary exhibitions in the 1980s and early 1990s interested in the artistic production of Central-East Europe usually followed similar lines in their approaches. Many of them tried to survey and present works done behind the Iron Curtain, in the respective undergrounds or non-official spheres of Socialist countries and liken them or integrate them into the Western art historical canon. These efforts are now often seen working in a (neo)colonialist *Zeitgeist*, but at the time more often than not they were genuine efforts at gaining knowledge of these long-closed and inaccessible regions of Europe.

¹ Throughout the text, *détente* (with a lowercase d, without quotation marks) will refer to the historical-political phenomenon, while ‘Détente’ (with a capital D, in quotation marks) will refer to the exhibition series organised between 1991 and 1994.

This work aims to engage with ‘Détente’ on multiple levels. First, it wants to reconstruct it as an exhibition through the case study of the Budapest exhibition of 1993 and 1994 relying on archival materials stored in the Archaeological Archive of the Budapest History Museum and Knoll Gallery Budapest, and an interview conducted with one of the curators, Hans Knoll.² It will be argued that ‘Détente’ had not only one but two different curatorial concepts as the last instalment in Vienna was an ‘updated’, more institutionalised version of the two curators’ original project. This original project in the text will be called ‘Détente 1’ and was based on five pairs of Czechoslovak and Western Modernist artists. These were Rudolf Fila with Arnulf Rainer, Milan Knížák with Tony Cragg, Stanislav Kolíbal with David Rabinowitch, Adriena Šimotová with Nancy Spero, and Jiří Valoch with Joseph Kosuth. ‘Détente 1’ was exhibited in Brno House of Art (1991-1992), Mudíma Foundation Milan (1992), Zacheta National Gallery of Art Warsaw (1993), Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana (1993), and Budapest History Museum – Municipal Gallery (1993-1994) without any noticeable change in the composition and execution of the exhibitions.³ Thus, the Budapest exhibition – the last of this series – could serve as a case study for the rest of these exhibitions under the ‘Détente 1’ concept. However, curators in the Museum of Modern Art Ludwig Foundation Vienna changed the original project by adding two more pairs, those of Karel Malich and Yves Klein, and Zdeněk Sýkora and Matt Mullican. This new, arguably, broader concept will be referred to as ‘Détente 2’ in the text. An original concept of this Thesis project included a reconstruction of this exhibition, however, the lack of archival documentation and access to information made this reconstruction impossible.⁴ Following the possible reconstruction efforts, the Thesis also presents and later compares ‘Détente’ to other exhibitions featuring Central-East European and specifically Czechoslovak Modernist art in the 1980s and early 1990s. All selected exhibitions presented below were presented in Western contexts, namely, Austria, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), and France. Additionally, one Swedish exhibition was included for its apparent parallels to ‘Détente’. The selected exhibitions were either designated comparable by co-curator of ‘Détente 2’, Loránd Hegyi in his preface to the exhibition catalogue, or were chosen due to their significance or similarity to the aims of ‘Détente’. Central-East European

² An interview request was sent to Christine König who after an initial positive response did not answer to the interview questions. However, a small discussion was recorded which is not attached to the appendix of this work, but it will be referenced when relevant.

³ Based on the available materials and the possible scopes of the current work.

⁴ An interview request was sent to Loránd Hegyi, then director of the Museum of Modern Art Ludwig Foundation Vienna who oversaw the project and acted as co-curator at the time, however, he did not respond to this inquiry. The lack of relevant evidence was communicated by the museum curator of the Digital Collection, Claudia Freiberger, in November 2023.

exhibitions were not considered as the curators' background made a solely Western focus more logical.⁵ A comparative study of these different Eastern and Western curatorial strategies could be the subject of future works.

Lastly, this Thesis will argue that this 'dialogue' shaping approach of 'Détente' can be understood in a unique postcolonial discourse applied to art historical writing, developed by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski. Piotrowski's early 2000s text on 'horizontal art histories' tried to shift art historical canon-creation from its West-centredness and propagated for a non-hierarchical, non-vertical approach in which artistic tendencies of different regions and loci are not placed next to one another based on a Western reference system (the similarities and differences to and compared to artworks made in the West), rather they are 'paired' on equal terms based on the similarities of their underlying ideas, approaches, and outlooks on what art is, could be, or should do.⁶ Piotrowski's arguments for a horizontal art history and its liberational potential, in 'Détente', can be seen played out in an avant-lettre form. In line with these three major aims, the Thesis is structured in three main chapters. The first one presents the historical background and reconstruction of the exhibition based on archival and oral historical sources, and the case study of the Budapest exhibition. The second one presents a theoretical framework of curatorial approaches and strategies to East European art as well as an exhaustive review of contemporary exhibitions of Eastern European art between 1980 and 1991, the beginning of the first 'Détente' exhibition. Finally, the third chapter overviews Piotrowski's main theoretical arguments for 'horizontal art history' as the potential framework of interpreting the curatorial strategies behind 'Détente'. By doing so, this Thesis work wants to serve as an attempt at (re)establishing 'Détente' as an important, though overlooked, exhibition in the post-Cold-War era in overstepping historical boundaries and limitations in artistic collaboration. Many attempts were made in the nascent Curatorial Studies to document and evaluate exhibitions and their historical significance in the (post)East-Western division as well as to account for post-Socialist artistic and curatorial practices. However, these studies overlooked 'Détente', and mainly focused on larger-scale comparative projects such as the 'After the Wall' (1999-2000) exhibition deserving its fame for a reason, however, exhibited a

⁵ Both Christine König and Hans Knoll were based and established in an Austrian context that had been part of the West since 1955.

⁶ Piotr Piotrowski, 'Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde', in *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent [Reworked Versions of Contributions to the Founding Conference of the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies, Held at Ghent University in May 2008]*, by Sascha Bru, European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies, volume 1 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2009).

decade after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The peculiarity of, and maybe the reason why ‘Détente’ remained overlooked in the field, as had many of its contemporary exhibitions, is its unique anchored-ness in its own time and space, its locality, the individual relationships and connections that brought it into life, and its reactivity to a problem that was just about to start with a methodology that took roughly 15 years to be described and theoretically worked out. This Thesis may lay the foundation for further art historical and curatorial studies projects for the research, analysis, and evaluation of early curatorial efforts trying to make sense of the post-Yalta divisions of Europe, the resulting cultural policies, the lack of movement along the East-West border, and – what has been called and searched for by many at the time– the unique Central European condition.

Chapter 1

Historical background and the reconstruction of ‘Détente’

This chapter delves into the historical background and curatorial concepts of ‘Détente’, distinguishes two different versions of them based on the number of included artists, and presents the historical reconstruction of the Budapest exhibition (1993-1994) as a case study of its material and institutional reality through archival and oral historical sources. These archival sources are part of the Archaeological Collection of the Budapest History Museum where the Municipal Gallery, the exhibition venue, institutionally belongs. The choice of Budapest as the case study for ‘Détente’ was motivated by two factors. First, the time scope of the current project and the availability of sources from the author’s locus (Prague) and linguistic background. Second, the Budapest exhibition was the last instalment of the original ‘Détente’ concept, and no indication was given neither in the catalogues nor in the archival sources nor by the curators themselves that the curatorial concept had been changed before the Vienna exhibition in 1994. So, it is assumed that these exhibitions were identical in their composition and concept, thus the last instalment, the Budapest exhibition can stand in place for all of them. The lack of archival and oral historical sources for the changed Vienna exhibition concept made a substantial reconstruction impossible. The oral historical sources referenced below in this chapter mainly are one interview conducted by the author with one of the exhibition curators, Hans Knoll in February 2024. This interview is attached to this current work as a supplement. While another interview was planned and conducted with co-curator, Christine König, due to the shortness of the recording and the lack of substantial information given, this interview was not transcribed and attached but will be referenced when it supports or contradicts other sources.

Historical background: cultural policies in the Eastern Bloc and ‘Normalised’ Czechoslovakia

The original concept of ‘Détente’ features five older generation Czechoslovak artists engaged in Modernist artistic production representing different approaches of the country’s ‘non-official’ or underground scene. This ‘non-official’ or underground scene refers to a specific aspect of cultural policies of socialist Eastern Bloc countries showing a variation in time and space across the region. This subsection, therefore, looks at the grand currents of socialist

cultural policies following 1945, and more closely on Czechoslovakia during the so-called ‘Normalisation’ period and the 1960s culminating in the Prague Spring of 1968 against which it reacted. Even though the Yalta Conference of 1944 yielded most of Central and Eastern Europe to Soviet dependency (even Austria had a partial Soviet occupation until 1955) which dependency was felt from 1945 onwards, the introduction of hard-line Stalinist policies was delayed in some countries until 1948. In these countries such as Czechoslovakia or Hungary a Communist Party coup d’états needed to secure full control over the state apparatus.⁷ The cultural policies of this period in the visual arts followed the strict lines of party, and Soviet-dictated, ideologically driven and formally realistic approach known as Socialist Realism present in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.⁸ This form became the only acceptable, and ‘official’ art of pre-1953/1956 socialist Central and East Europe. Yugoslavia remained the only socialist country where the open divergence from these Stalinist cultural policies, and general cooperation with the Soviet Union was possible due to the relative openness of the party and party leader Josif Broz Tito.⁹ First, this openness allowed post-war modernism and avant-garde tendencies to flourish freely but later were transformed into established norms and the expected form of ‘official’, state-sponsored art.¹⁰

The next step in the development of Eastern Bloc cultural policies was in 1956 marking the end of the Stalinist era with the so-called ‘thaw’ in Poland or the Soviet Union. Even though Stalin died in 1953, the reform of Stalinist policies was only possible after the disturbance created in the Soviet leadership by his death became settled in 1956 with Khrushchev’s ascension to First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and following his speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in February 1956. In his speech ‘On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences’, he denounced former hard-line policies and created space for minor reforms. This ‘thaw’ of previous ideological restrictions allowed some of the most radical exhibitions of the 1950s such as the ‘Second’ exhibition of modern art in the ‘Zacheta’ National Gallery in Warsaw (1957) featuring almost exclusively abstract art – an almost complete

⁷ Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, trans. Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion books, 2012), 68.

⁸ Henry Meyric Hughes, ‘Were We Looking Away?’, in *Passage Europe: Musée(s) Art Moderne Saint-Etienne; [Realities, References, a Certain Look at Central and Eastern European Art]*, ed. Lóránd Hegyi and Musée d’art moderne de Saint-Etienne (Saint-Etienne: Musée d’Art Moderne, 2004), 104.

⁹ Meyric Hughes, 104; Igor Zabel, ‘Intimacy and Society: Post-Communist or Eastern Art?’, in *Contemporary Art Theory*, by Igor Zabel and Igor Španjol, Documents 8 (Zurich JRP-Ringier Dijon: les Presses du réel, 2012), 84–85.

¹⁰ Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, 68.

opposite of formally realistic Socialist Realism – in a large state institution.¹¹ In Czechoslovakia, similar attempts of returning to modernist tendencies were slower and took place only in the early 1960s with the ‘Confrontation’ exhibitions in Prague (1960) and Bratislava (1961), and in the ‘unofficial’ venues of artists’ studios and private apartments.¹² These new post-Stalinist cultural policies of the ‘thaw’ showed relative inconsistencies. While the Czechoslovak policymakers in the 1960s called for formal and aesthetic diversity as opposed to the formal unity of the pre-1956 era and allowed some degree of transgression and divergence from former Socialist Realism, they demanded that art be actively engaged in the construction of the socialist state in which the party still retained its leading role.¹³ During the Prague Spring of 1968, even these restrictions on artistic and cultural production had fallen with the party’s new ‘Action Program’ that appeared in April 1968 and advocated a humanistic Marxist conception of culture, that is, of a culture promoting the advancement of a democratic political order as well as individual and social freedoms.¹⁴ With the invasion of the Warsaw-pact countries in August 1968, a gradual political and cultural restoration was started under the spirit of returning to ‘normality’ or ‘normalisation’. In December 1969, the Artists’ Union started a campaign to end the public transgressions of official (previous) artistic norms. This was one of the first efforts to counteract a culture deemed politically subversive. In May 1970 to restore the ‘order’ and fight against cultural as well as political deviations and reform efforts, the new party secretary, Gustáv Husák in his speech at the Central Committee plenum proposed the recruitment of collaborative artists and other intellectuals to the socialist cause.¹⁵ From November 1970, the party systematically started to ‘purge’ certain elements of the cultural sectors seen as ‘reformists’. This resulted in serious personnel changes in theatres, publishing houses, film and music studios, as well as in schools and universities. In December 1970, the party ratified the ‘Lessons from the Crisis Development in the Party and Society’ which became the central interpretative framework of 1968, and the core of ‘Normalisation’ cultural policy.¹⁶ Following the continued ‘purges’ of the early 1970s, many artists and intellectuals were forced into either exile (for example, the philosopher Karel Kosík was forced to an internal exile, while others such as Milan Kunder were forced to leave the country), or dissidence in the

¹¹ Piotrowski, 68.

¹² Piotrowski, 69.

¹³ Jan Mervart, ‘Shaping “Real Socialism”: The Normalised Conception of Culture’, in *Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in the Era of Normalisation, 1969-1989*, by Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe (Cham (Suisse): Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 197.

¹⁴ Mervart, 198.

¹⁵ Mervart, 199.

¹⁶ Mervart, 198–99.

‘unofficial’, underground scene.¹⁷ With the establishment and continued reinforcement of ‘normalised’ institutions and ‘Normalisation’ as such, this ‘exodus’ of the intelligentsia can be seen in the membership changes of artistic organisations of post-1968 Czechoslovakia. For example, the Union of Fine Arts had only 293 members in 1972 compared to 3897 members in the previous years.¹⁸ This, as it had been argued, turned these social organizations from important and culturally relevant institutions to ‘hobby clubs of political loyalty’.¹⁹ The new cultural policy of the Normalisation period aimed at the ‘development’ of the ‘consolidated’, ‘real’ socialist society as well as the ‘socialist person’ through the strict adherence to the aesthetic and artistic forms, norms, and values dictated by the party as the unquestionable authority, or, as Normalisation Minister of Culture Miroslav Brůžek has called it, the ‘cognitive centre of society’.²⁰ This return to not simply before-1968 conception of culture, but also to the general framework of cultural policy in the Brezhnev era, brought back realism as the main aesthetic requirement of visual arts with the only palpable difference of the lack of revolutionary fervour.²¹

As the implementation of ‘real’ socialism differed across the Eastern Bloc with some socialist countries having more ‘liberal’ cultural policies than others, the regimes did not favour transnational exchanges in the Bloc, and ‘unofficial’ artists rarely had the possibility to exhibit internationally, so remaining unknown in the West. Some notable exceptions to this lack of exchange and cultural transfers happened in Poland and Hungary in the 1960s and 1970s.²² One of the first exhibitions featuring ‘unofficial’ Czechoslovak artists in Poland was the 1962 ‘Arguments’ exhibition in the Crooked Wheel Gallery in Warsaw. The ‘Arguments’ did not only present ‘unofficial’ works to the Polish audience, but it also allowed the exhibiting Czech and Slovak artists to meet each other who despite the previous ‘Confrontation’ exhibitions in Prague and Bratislava mentioned above had limited contacts.²³ Parallel to the Czechoslovak Normalisation period a Polish art historian, Andrzej Kostolowski, and a Polish artist, Jaroslaw Kozlowski, developed the NET project in 1971 exhibiting Western and Eastern artists together such as Carlfriedrich Claus (German Democratic Republic), László Lakner (Hungary) and Jiří

¹⁷ Mervart, 200.

¹⁸ Mervart, 201.

¹⁹ Mervart, 201.

²⁰ Mervart, 203.

²¹ Mervart, 203–4.

²² Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, 70.

²³ Piotrowski, 70.

Valoch (Czechoslovakia).²⁴ In Poland, smaller, independent venues such as the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw or the Akumulatory 2 in Poznan were able to use public money to invite and exhibit Western artists in what was known as ‘suitcase-exhibitions’ referring to the fact that most artworks had to be smuggled in in a travel suitcase.²⁵ Poland was also home to some international exhibitions such as the Krakow Graphic Biennale as well as many jazz and film festivals.²⁶ These examples demonstrate that Polish venues and institutions could function as a centre of artistic exchange between the two Blocs and provide access not just to Western culture and cultural productions (books, records, films), but also to the ‘unofficial’ art of other socialist countries.²⁷ In Hungary where the cultural policy of the ‘three T-s’ (‘Tűr, Tilt, Támogat’ or ‘Promote, Tolerate, Ban’) of the post-1956 regime of János Kádár provided some leeway to artistic expression, a similarly important, transgressive exhibition was organised by László Beke titled ‘Tükör/Mirror’ (1973) in the alternative gallery space of György Galántai in Balatonboglár created in a Catholic church chapel.²⁸ The exhibition featured works from artists working on both sides of the Iron Curtain, including artists from France (Francis Picabia, Ben Vautier, Anette Messager), Canada (Canada Art Writers), Latin America (Angelo de Aquino), or even Japan (Chieko Shiomi).²⁹ But, unlike in Poland, it was closed by the authorities after a few 6 days with the gallery itself.³⁰ A year earlier, in 1972, Balatonboglár was the venue of a ‘meeting’ between Czechoslovak and Hungarian artists organised by László Beke as a solidary response to the participation of the Hungarian army in the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The limited collaboration between Western or non-allied and Czechoslovak ‘unofficial’ artists was usually reserved to those who worked with more mobile mediums, usually related to conceptual art such as concrete poetry or mail art.³¹

The examples listed above show the transnational artistic and cultural exchanges in the Eastern Bloc, and the place of Czechoslovakia within this network. However, these examples are the

²⁴ Piotrowski, 71.

²⁵ Meyric Hughes, ‘Were We Looking Away?’, 107.

²⁶ Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, 72.

²⁷ Piotrowski, 71.

²⁸ Piotrowski, 73.

²⁹ ‘Mirror-Works by 35 Artists (Organised by László Beke) Balatonboglár, Chapel Studio, 5-11 August 1973 Again Presented at the Opening of Artpool Art Research Center, Budapest, 23 March-15 May 1992, (Space–Glass/Pane Installation by György Galántai)’, <https://artpool.hu/boglar/1973/tukor/mirror.html>, accessed: 23 April 2024.

³⁰ Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, 73.

³¹ Christina Freire, ‘Southern-Eastern Contact Zones’, in *L’Internationale: Post-War Avant-Gardes between 1957 and 1986*, ed. Christian Höller and Moderna Galerija, 1. Aufl (Zürich: JRP Ringier Kunstverlag, 2012), 333; Meyric Hughes, ‘Were We Looking Away?’, 106.

results of extended research efforts done in the last 20 years and might not have been relevant knowledge at the time of 'Détente'. As it is described below, the knowledge of the curators reflected their personal experience of the Czechoslovak 'unofficial' scene in the late 1980s when these artists' memory of these events might have faded or became less relevant in under contemporary political, social, and cultural circumstances of the failing socialist regimes. For this reason, the following subsection discussing the concept of 'Détente' presupposes that the contact between the two Blocs as well as within the Eastern Bloc was limited, marginal, and reserved to the more 'liberal' regimes of Poland and Hungary. By doing so, it preserves and works with the original framework of the curators.

The concept of 'Détente' and its possible historical reconstruction

Despite the difficulties faced by 'unofficial' artists in terms of state sanctions, jail, and exile, as well as the limited access not just to Western but also to Eastern, 'fellow' socialist cultural productions, the works made by 'unofficial' artists showed many similarities in artistic approaches, ideals, and frameworks with those made in the West. The curators of 'Détente' wanted to showcase these similarities between the Eastern, and more specifically, Czechoslovak underground and the Western artistic current highlighting the similarities between the two Blocs despite the historical separating circumstances of the Iron Curtain through pairing five Czechoslovak artists with their Western 'counterparts'. Precisely these historical considerations of the closure and limited access as well as the political and cultural nature of Czechoslovakia following the military occupation of the country by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw-pact allies led the curators to choose the older generation of Czechoslovak Modernist artists who despite a short period of openness in the 1960s, had limited possibility accessing and participating in the Western art world. These limitations were also reinforced by the border friction of Czechoslovakia with the German Democratic Republic which was, arguably, one of the most firmly shut during the Normalization period, and which country, as a frontier between the two Blocs, was still subjected to special internal and external, Soviet control.³² Neighbouring countries had either easier infrastructural access to the West as was the case of Hungary where the party could secure investments, cordial relationships, and the lift of visa-requirements by the mid-1980s with Austria, or had more liberal cultural policies allowing

³² Lonnie Johnson, *Central Europe: Enemies, Neighbors, Friends* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 264; Meyric Hughes, 'Were We Looking Away?', 104–5.

East-West exhibitions in the country's periphery as was the case in Poland in the 1960s, 70s, and to a degree 80s mentioned earlier in this chapter.³³

As the knowledge of Western curators of Eastern artistic practices beyond the scope of state-sponsored and approved art was scarce and limited, the question arises how the two curators of 'Détente' knew about Czechoslovak Modernism produced in the different local centres of Prague, Brno, and Bratislava, throughout the roughly 30-year period between 1960 and 1990.³⁴ The substantial knowledge of this region needed for the exhibition came from Hans Knoll who as a young Austrian gallerist based in Vienna started to orient himself towards the then still quite firmly closed East.³⁵ He frequently visited different artistic centres in the Bloc from the mid-1980s onward covering not just neighbouring Hungary and Czechoslovakia, but also Poland and Romania. These travels culminated in the opening of his gallery in Budapest in 1989, the first Western contemporary art gallery in the Eastern Bloc, and the planning of a subsequent gallery in Prague. His attempt failed due to the difficulties of managing three galleries in three different countries, two of which were just about to shift into a post-socialist political, social, and cultural condition. His visits to artist studios had started in Vienna, but quickly moved to Bratislava, Brno, and Prague due to the close-knit nature of the 'unofficial' scene where artists did not just know each other personally, but often worked together, formed semi-cohesive circles, or affiliated with each other. Their interest in Western actors in the art world and the potential possibility of working with them also greatly facilitated his access to the underground as well as his chances of making new contacts there.³⁶ Christine König's travels due to the lack of sources are less documented, however, it can be assumed that she had also visited these loci prior to the first exhibition in 1991. Her preface to the first catalogue describes her subjective impressions of visiting Czechoslovakia, presumably after 1989, however, during her planned interview she did not mention these visits.³⁷

Through these travels and visits to artist studios in Czechoslovakia from the mid-1980s onwards, and likely at an accelerated rate following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the curators selected five Czechoslovak artists – Rudolf Fila, Milan Knížák, Stanislav Kolíbal, Adriana

³³ Johnson, *Central Europe*, 266; Interview with Hans Knoll.

³⁴ Compare with Milena Kalinovská, 'Exhibition as a Dialogue: The "Other" Europe', in *Carnegie International: November 5, 1988 - January 22, 1989*, ed. Sarah MacFadden and Carnegie Museum of Art (Carnegie International, Munic: Prestel, 1988), 32.

³⁵ Interview with Hans Knoll and discussion with Christine König.

³⁶ Interview with Hans Knoll.

³⁷ Brigitte Ehling, ed., *Détente* (Vienna, 1991), 11.

Šimotová, and Jiří Valoch – believed to represent the diverse (‘unofficial’) artistic scene of the country during the second part of the Cold War as these artists were already active during the more liberal period of the 1960s and the Normalisation of the 1970s and 1980s.³⁸ A difference between this older generation and the younger ones active only after 1968 is the fact that many younger generation artists saw an opportunity in the new cultural atmosphere of Normalisation.³⁹ Furthermore, when the sensibilities of the period (or the lack of them) are taken into consideration, and the non-research-based nature of the exhibition, Adriana Šimotová as the only woman artist selected into an assumed all-encompassing representation ought not to seem controversial. Women were generally left in the background of art historical narratives as the accepted framework of Modern art favoured masculine ingenuity and neglected its feminine counterpart. Knowledge of these Eastern European women artists whose contribution had been more and more appreciated came from well-rounded academic research and growing market interests of the past decades. These academic and financial interests were less visible and powerful at the time of ‘Détente’. Nonetheless, this lack of variety in gendered experiences and expressions might be noted here. Following the selection of the Czechoslovak artists, they were paired with artists of a similar generation coming from Western artistic contexts, although not from the same Western country. The curators’ approach to this pairing process was different. Knoll allowed a freer choice for the Czechoslovak artists to choose a Western partner based on their own knowledge and interests while König followed a more traditional, institutional approach where she pre-selected certain artists she thought appropriate and artistically compatible in style and thinking to certain Eastern artists.⁴⁰ This way the original five pairs were created when Rudolf Fila was paired with the Austrian Arnulf Rainer, Milan Knížák with the British Tony Cragg, Stanislav Kolíbal with the Canadian David Rabinowitch, Adriana Šimotová with the American Nancy Spero, and Jiří Valoch with the American Joseph Kosuth. These original five pairs constituted the first concept of ‘Détente’ that for ease of use could be referred to as ‘Détente 1’. ‘Détente 1’ was exhibited across the former East, in the Brno House of Art (1991-1992), the Mudima Foundation Milan (1992), the ‘Zacheta’ National Gallery of Art Warsaw (1993), the Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana (1993), and the Budapest History Museum – Municipal Gallery (1993-1994) while this original concept was later developed by the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna in 1994, and probably

³⁸ Compare with Lóránd Hegyi, ‘Détente - Chances of Integration’, in *Détente*, ed. Fuchs Rainer et al. (Vienna: Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien und Verein Austellungsorganisation, 1993).

³⁹ Mervart, ‘Shaping “Real Socialism”’: The Normalised Conception of Culture’, 201.

⁴⁰ Discussion with Christine König.

during the 1993 preparations, which newer concept might be called ‘Détente 2’.⁴¹ Due to an extensive list of artworks and documentary evidence at the archives of the Budapest History Museum, a complete reconstruction of exhibited works is possible in the cases of ‘Détente 1’. The transcript of this list is attached to this work as a supplement. A similar reconstruction is not possible in the case of ‘Détente 2’ as the Museum of Modern Arts Vienna lacked any such documentation, and the author had no access to supplementary oral historical sources to fill these gaps in the research. This lack of evidence in the Museum of Modern Arts Vienna archival collection was confirmed by the curator of the Digital Collection, Claudia Freiberger in November 2023. An interview request was also sent to Loránd Hegyi, former director of the museum and co-curator of ‘Détente 2’, however, he did not respond to this request. Nevertheless, some information can be supposed based on the textual evidence present in the exhibition catalogue and the conducted interview with Hans Knoll. The reasons for the modifications of the original ‘Détente 1’ concept are not entirely known, however, it might be assumed that they reflected a wish for a larger pool of artist base through the addition of Karel Malich and Zdeněk Sýkora who were paired with Yves Klein and Matt Mullican. These choices made by most likely then institution director Loránd Hegyi, or the curatorial team at the museum fundamentally changed the nature of the exhibition. In his catalogue essay, Hegyi argues that these additions enrich ‘the overall picture of Czechoslovak and Czech art’.⁴² With the introduction of Klein to the selected artists, however, ‘Détente’ shifted from a solely contemporary exhibition to a more historical one as Klein died in the early 1960s.⁴³ But, with the benefit of the doubt, Klein’s addition could also reflect on the genuine lack of knowledge and difficult access to contemporary Western art in the East, meanwhile, as it was observed by Christine König, the East preserved the freshness and contemporary spirit of artistic styles and approaches already deemed outdated and somewhat antiquated in the West.⁴⁴

An important feature of ‘Détente’ is that it was exhibited in a series, ‘toured’ across the post-Soviet space between 1991 and 1994.⁴⁵ The cities and institutions in which it was presented are important local cultural and artistic centres in Central East Europe, and meanwhile ‘Détente’ was conceived as a series of exhibitions from the beginning based on an archived

⁴¹ For the preparation, see the printing date of the exhibition catalogue: 1993 in Fuchs Rainer et al., eds., *Détente* (Vienna: Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien und Verein Austellungsorganisation, 1993).

⁴² Hegyi, ‘Détente - Chances of Integration’, 23.

⁴³ Interview with Hans Knoll.

⁴⁴ Ehling, *Détente*, 11.

⁴⁵ Hegyi, ‘Détente - Chances of Integration’, 24.

pressed release at the Budapest History Museum as well as the interview testimony of Hans Knoll, the choices of the institutions and cities show reliance on personal connections between the curators and institutional actors.⁴⁶ Moreover, in the case of the Budapest exhibition, it seems certain that the financial burdens of the exhibition organisation were placed on Hans Knoll's galleries that acted as the formalised, administrative background for things such as the transportation of works or insurance as it is evidenced by a report written by Emilia Földes, then director of the Municipal Gallery of Budapest.⁴⁷ However, the Gallery had difficulties even with providing the pre-agreed funds (200.000 Hungarian Forints) as a letter also written by Földes to the curatorium of the Gallery testifies to this.⁴⁸ Her letter also starts by mentioning that the curatorium had already been contacted in this matter by the chief director of the Budapest History Museum, Géza Buzinkay. Given the expected opening of the Budapest exhibition on 13.12.1992 in the press release and the actual opening of the exhibition in late 1993, it might be rightfully assumed that these financial difficulties contributed to the delay of the exhibition by a year. Although this incident might not be generalised, it could be supposed that other institutions in the economically transforming post-Soviet space had similar financial difficulties. In the case of the Budapest exhibition, the curatorium's decision is not documented in the archival materials, however, a list of contributors and sponsors is given in the catalogues and the press release mentioned above. One major contributor to 'Détente' was the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education and the Arts through the 'Kultur-Kontakt' initiative. These state supports show the tendencies of Austrian foreign policy that following the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 wanted to reimagine the country as the mediator between its Eastern neighbours and the West.⁴⁹ This new relationship building of the Central Europe 'project' was well cultivated by many Conservative politicians, such as Erhard Busek, in the 1980s, and seemingly under the Federal Ministry of the Social Democratic Rudolf Scholten who wanted to continue this tradition of collaborative partnership between Austria and its former Eastern neighbours.⁵⁰ One example of his openness towards the former Eastern Bloc was the nomination of a Hungarian art historian and later co-curator of 'Détente 2', Loránd Hegyi, director of the Museum of

⁴⁶ Interview with Hans Knoll; press release in Budapesti Történeti Múzeum Régészeti Adattár Intézménytörténeti dokumentációs gyűjtemény (BTM RA M.) 733-93

⁴⁷ BTM RA M-733-93

⁴⁸ BTM RA M-733-93

⁴⁹ Johnson, *Central Europe*, 265.

⁵⁰ Johnson, 266–67.

Modern Art Ludwig Stiftung in Vienna.⁵¹ Scholten's interest in the project of 'Détente' can be seen in the catalogues through his preface.⁵² These prefaces by a Federal Minister of Education and the Arts were not and are not common occurrences, so importance can be attributed to it. In his preface, Scholten sees this cultural exchange between the former East and West as a 'partnership, a gradual elimination of the idea that others are adversaries... understanding and respecting one other.'⁵³ His understanding of partnership and 'reduction of enemy-images' ('Abbau von Feinbildern') strikes a close cord with the historical aims of *détente* during the heightened tensions of the Cold War between the Soviet Union, the United States, and their respective allied Blocs.⁵⁴ This 'openness' of the Scholten ministry, and the financial possibilities of Westernised Austria were important prerequisites for a curatorial project such as the 'Détente' exhibitions as the Eastern cultural space had limited financial resources.⁵⁵ The involvement of Austria in exhibiting, surveying, and interpreting art from its neighbouring Eastern Bloc countries had been previously problematised in the literature as a cultural practice recreating the domination of the Habsburg, Austrian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires under the nostalgic aegis of shared history and common culture. These considerations are discussed in the following chapter.

In conclusion, this chapter presented the historical background of 'Détente' in the overview of cultural policy developments across the Eastern Bloc and more specifically in Czechoslovakia following 1945, as well as the historically possible reconstruction of the exhibition. It differentiated between two different concepts that were labelled as 'Détente 1' and 'Détente 2'. 'Détente 1', the original concept of Christine König and Hans Knoll, was the standard which was exhibited across the various institutions where 'Détente' was presented. 'Détente 2', on the other hand, was a more institutionally conscious concept further developed by curators of the Museum of Modern Arts Vienna, and presumably the director of the museum, Loránd Hegyi. With the case study of the Budapest exhibition reconstructed through archival materials at the Budapest History Museum and oral historical sources, the chapter also showed how 'Détente 1' was conceptualised, the historical circumstances in which it took place and reflected on, and in what material contexts was it fitted. One of these material contexts was the lack of

⁵¹ Interview with Hans Knoll; József Mélyi, 'Később úgyis minden unalmasabb lett minden... Videointerjú Hans Knoll-l (in German with Hungarian subtitle)', *Artmagazin Online*, 2020, (accessed: 23.04.2024) https://www.artmagazin.hu/articles/video/kesobb_ugyis_unalmasabb lett_minden.

⁵² Ehling, *Détente*, page unnumbered; Rainer et al., *Détente*, 11.

⁵³ Rainer et al., *Détente*, 11.

⁵⁴ Rainer et al., 11.

⁵⁵ Interview with Hans Knoll.

funding available in the post-Soviet institutional landscape and the tendencies of Austrian foreign policy reimagining the country as a mediator in the region as well as the ‘openness’ of the Scholte ministry that sought partnership with the country’s post-socialist neighbours. Furthermore, the chapter pointed out that a similar reconstruction cannot be made for ‘Détente 2’ due to the lack of available resources. The following chapter is dedicated to the contemporary exhibitions forming the curatorial background not just for ‘Détente’ but also for the art historical possibilities of dealing with the post-Yalta divisions of Europe and the late Cold War East-West relationships after the regime changes of 1989.

Chapter 2

‘Détente’ and Curating East and West

The previous chapter presented the general tendencies of post-war cultural policies of the Eastern Bloc as well as the cultural exchanges between the two Blocs as the historical background for the ‘Détente’ exhibitions and discussed their concepts and material conditions. This chapter aims to continue these contextualisation efforts by surveying curatorial strategies and their interpretative frameworks contemporary to the ‘Détente’, that is, before 1991. The selection of the exhibitions followed the criteria of availability such as whether the existing catalogues provide sufficient documentation on curatorial intent (curatorial statements), the accessibility of sources in terms of location and languages, and their relevance to the topic of this work, the thematization of the East-West divide in political, economic, or cultural sense, the references or featuring of artistic productions made in the late Cold-War era, and the exhibition of Czechoslovak Modernism. The majority of exhibitions discussed below suffice to these criteria or provide clear parallels to ‘Détente’. For this reason, for example, the ‘Dialog’ exhibition curated by Olle Granath at the Moderna Museet Stockholm in 1986 is also discussed here, even though none of the artists presented were of Czechoslovak origin. Other exhibitions were already selected and designated as precursors by the director of the Modern Museum of Art Ludwig Stiftung in Vienna and ‘Détente 2’ co-curator Loránd Hegyi in his essay published in the second exhibition catalogue.⁵⁶ Some other exhibitions are also mentioned in less detail for their importance in the literature on curatorial strategies dealing with the post-socialist transformation of Central-East Europe. This way two major contexts are treated here in detail: the German through the discussion of Austrian and (West) German exhibitions that were some of the earliest as these two countries were the closest Western neighbours of the Eastern Bloc and were more receptive to their art, and the French due to the author’s knowledge of the language, however, this context is limited to France as sources of other francophone context such as Belgium, Switzerland, or French Canada were scarce or inexistent.⁵⁷ The end of this chapter places ‘Détente’ into these curatorial frameworks, and compares the curatorial strategies of Christine König and Hans Knoll, the curators of ‘Détente’ to those of the mid-1980s and early 1990s.

⁵⁶ Hegyi, ‘Détente - Chances of Integration’.

⁵⁷ On the receptiveness of West Germany toward the Eastern Bloc see Meyric Hughes, ‘Were We Looking Away?’, 109.

Curatorial frameworks of East European art in the late 1980s and early 1990s

The earliest exhibitions featuring Eastern European art in the West tried to combat the hiatus of Western knowledge of artistic production made behind the Iron Curtain by constantly surveying and presenting ‘new finds’ on these works. According to the Romanian curator, Raluca Voinea many of these ‘historical survey’ exhibitions presented Eastern Europe as a historical concept emerging from the 1944 Yalta conference while essentialised the countries understood under and included in the ‘East’ and trying to integrate them into the ‘universal’, that is, Western canon.⁵⁸ While she lists some exhibitions dating from 1994 to the early 2000s and thus showing how prolonged the presence of these exhibitions was, she also points out that, unlike the former East, some parts of Europe, like the Balkans, could never escape Western Orientalisation present in the ‘historical surveys’, and permanently remained part of the ‘Orient’.⁵⁹ This shift in attitudes toward the Balkans and, thus, Yugoslavia as a European periphery can be explained through the generalisation of the destruction of the Yugoslav wars as the ‘Balkan wars’.⁶⁰ A similar observation was made by the British art historian, Claire Bishop who assigned these early survey exhibitions to the ‘register of curatorial safari’.⁶¹ This ‘register’, the word itself taken from 20th-century literary criticism, refers to the attitude and habit of Western curators and people with an interest in visual arts searching and collecting new, interesting, ‘mysterious’ artworks in the former, newly opened Eastern Bloc. She also cites two American exhibitions, the ‘Artists of Central and Eastern Europe’ at the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh and the ‘Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe’ at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, both taking place in 1995, and featuring a great variety of artists from Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the former Czechoslovakia, as representative of this Western curatorial attitude.⁶² Bishop also argues that Yugoslavia was left out of these exhibitions as a deliberate choice in the face of the country’s slow disintegration.⁶³ These considerations of Western curatorial approaches in the second half of

⁵⁸ Raluca Voinea, ‘Geographically Defined Exhibitions: The Balkans, Between Eastern Europe and the New Europe’, in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci, and Ksenia Nouril, Primary Documents (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 107–8.

⁵⁹ Voinea, 108.

⁶⁰ Voinea, 108.

⁶¹ Clair Bishop, ‘Introduction’, in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci, and Ksenia Nouril, Primary Documents (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 67.

⁶² Bishop, 67.

⁶³ Bishop, 67.

the 1990s might be contrasted with those present around or immediately after the regime changes of 1989 in the Central East European region discussed in this chapter.

Parallel to, and often coincidingly with these ‘survey’ exhibitions, curators incorporated different strategies to analyse, reframe and guide the interpretative framework of (Central) East European art. The word ‘strategy’ in this context is understood as a conscious attitude toward not just the exhibited artworks but also toward the exhibitions as an institution and institutional practice, a source and representation of power where the curatorial intents and decisions prescribe interpretations of the artworks.⁶⁴ The Bulgarian cultural anthropologist, Svetla Kazalarska connects these (strategic) curatorial projects to the mnemonic function of the visual arts.⁶⁵ The visual arts of late and post-socialist times function as a classical ‘art of memory’ where different ideas and considerations on and about the socialist past and its reminiscences in the present can be staged and negotiated, and this way serve as reference points in the social matrix of cultural memory.⁶⁶ Through its referential nature, art becomes a ‘possible medium for carrying and shaping memories of the recent past’.⁶⁷ It is this ‘mnemonic power’ of the visual arts that is harvested in curatorial projects and allows the curatorial strategies through the medium of the exhibition to influence public perception of not just art but of socio-cultural history as a whole.

In her essay, Kazalarska also distinguishes four different types of narratives applied by Western curators in the presentation of artistic productions made behind the Iron Curtain. The first, ‘heroic’ narrative presented the dissident or ‘unofficial’ artist as a freedom fighter.⁶⁸ This curatorial and institutional approach became most prevalent in the United States during the 1980s among the recently emigrated Soviet dissident artists. This strategy openly and vocally presented underground artists as the victims of an oppressive, centralised cultural policy, and as martyrs of the socialist bureaucracy sacrificing themselves for artistic freedom and liberated self-expression, understood as cornerstones of (Western) avant-garde art and modernism.⁶⁹ The

⁶⁴ Piotr Piotrowski, ‘Central Europe in the Face of Unification’, in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci, and Ksenia Nouril, Primary Documents (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 79.

⁶⁵ Svetla Kazalarska, ‘Contemporary Art as *Ars Memoriae*: Curatorial Strategies for Challenging the Post-Communist Condition’, in *IWM Junior Visiting Fellows’ Conference Proceedings*, vol. Vol XXV (Vienna: IWM, 2009), 1.

⁶⁶ Kazalarska, 1.

⁶⁷ Kazalarska, 1.

⁶⁸ Kazalarska, 3.

⁶⁹ Kazalarska, 3–4.

second strategy provides a ‘postcolonial narrative’ to the Eastern Bloc questioning the relationship between the global artistic and cultural centre(s), the West, and its former or current semi-peripheries, the (post-)Soviet space, and (real) periphery, the global South that was often referred to as the ‘Third world’.⁷⁰ Postcolonial discourse also wishes to describe the mechanisms of social and cultural inclusion and exclusion, the construction of the ‘Other’, and the creation of geographical hierarchies.⁷¹ In line with postcolonial theory in cultural and social studies, art historical postcolonial thinking applied to Eastern European art questions the notions and expropriation of aesthetic values and stylistic language of (Western) Modernism, highlights the shame and deference of Eastern artists vis-à-vis their Western counterparts, and the denial of certain existing artistic practices, for example, Socialist Realism. Furthermore, postcolonial art history works against the forceful inclusion of Eastern art in the Western, hierarchical canon.⁷² This way these curatorial strategies could revisit already existing notions of Eastern-Western artistic relationships as well as de- and reconstruct earlier narratives and interpretative frameworks while challenging Western supremacy through the co-existence of parallel modernities. The third narrative described by Kazalarska is contextualisation. ‘Contextualisation narratives’ similar to postcolonial ones were interested in the deconstruction of already existing notions and frameworks of art, even surpassing the very notion of Eastern European art itself.⁷³ These curatorial strategies were interested in the local, country-specific context in which artists lived, and in which art had been conceived, produced, and consumed. Contextualist art historical discourse stresses the country-specific periodisation of art based on the unique historical and political circumstances separating the East Bloc countries.⁷⁴ Such historical and political circumstances might be the 1956 ‘thaw’ in Poland and to a lesser extent the Soviet Union and the Hungarian revolution of 23 October, or the 1960s and more specifically 1968 and the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia. These specific events that serve as the foundation for locally relevant periodisations often reflect on the degree of artistic freedom compared to a previous period or to other socialist countries as the use of abstraction in Poland during the ‘thaw’ or the artistic freedom in Czechoslovakia during 1968 attest to this.⁷⁵ For example, while abstract art enjoyed relative freedom in Poland during the 1950s with large national institutions hosting abstract exhibitions attended by high party functionaries, similar

⁷⁰ Kazalarska, 4–5.

⁷¹ Kazalarska, 5.

⁷² Kazalarska, 5.

⁷³ Kazalarska, 6.

⁷⁴ Kazalarska, 7.

⁷⁵ Kazalarska, 7.

attempts to present abstract works scandalised in the Soviet Union scandalised the party elite and were closed by the authorities.⁷⁶ Furthermore, contextualising narratives highlighted the ambiguities surrounding categories of ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ art and separated historically distinct regions instead of treating the whole Bloc as a uniform whole.⁷⁷ Such regions were the Baltics, the Balkans, the former Yugoslavia, often attached to the Balkans, and Central Europe both in its Germanised form of ‘Mitteleuropa’ and as the inheritor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, linked by shared historical connections to the Habsburg dynasty.⁷⁸ These conceptions of Central Europe further politicised not just the curatorial approaches but the general discourse around the region as the demarcation of East and Central Europe always reflected the separation of the countries of the (former) Eastern Bloc from the Soviet Union as well as Russia and Soviet-Russian influence.⁷⁹ Comparatively, the role of Austria not just as the basis of regional unification for Central East Europe, but also as a centre for these exhibitions and curatorial interpretations and as a mediator between East and West was called into question.⁸⁰ The idea of Austria as a ‘mediator’ in the region emerged after the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 when both Western and Eastern allied forces were removed from the country. In the following period of the mid-20th century, Austria faced an identity crisis for which the ‘project’ of a unified and cordial Central Europe seemed to be a possible solution as the previous chapter testified to this.⁸¹ Critics of Austria’s renewed interest in the region have questioned whether the goal was really to form new, collaborative partnerships in the region as it was discussed in the previous chapter with the Cultural Ministry of Rudolf Scholten, or whether these collaborations and projects were asserting Austria and its capital Vienna as once again the capital and (local) centre of the region as it had been during the imperial rule of the Habsburgs.⁸² The interest of Eastern countries in the maintenance of good relationships

⁷⁶ Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, 68–69.

⁷⁷ Kazalarska, ‘Contemporary Art as Ars Memoriae: Curatorial Strategies for Challenging the Post-Communist Condition’, 7.

⁷⁸ Kazalarska, 7.

⁷⁹ Edit András, ‘The Ex-Eastern Bloc’s Position in New Critical Theories and Recent Curatorial Practice’, in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci, and Ksenia Nouril, Primary Documents (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 87.

⁸⁰ Kazalarska, ‘Contemporary Art as Ars Memoriae: Curatorial Strategies for Challenging the Post-Communist Condition’, 7.

⁸¹ Compare with, for example, Meyric Hughes, ‘Were We Looking Away?’, 112.

⁸² Kazalarska, ‘Contemporary Art as Ars Memoriae: Curatorial Strategies for Challenging the Post-Communist Condition’, 7; Dunja Blažević, ‘East - West Side Story’, in *Passage Europe: Musée(s) Art Moderne Saint-Etienne; [Realities, References, a Certain Look at Central and Eastern European Art]*, ed. Lóránd Hegyi and Musée d’art moderne de Saint-Etienne (Saint-Etienne: Musée d’Art Moderne, 2004), 20.

between Austria and its periphery is understandable as it provides them (easier) access to the larger European context. However, as the Serbian art critic, Dunja Blažević pointed out in one of her essays, a parallel can be drawn between Austrian interests in its (former) peripheries such as the Balkans, and more specifically Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the interest Italy and Italian cultural workers (for example, art critic, Giancarlo Piti) have afforded to Albania, a former zone of interest for fascist Italian expansion.⁸³ Lastly, the fourth approach described by Kazalarska is the ‘Europeanisation narrative’ present mostly during the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 with members of the former East, including the Baltic states, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia.⁸⁴ These exhibitions in the early 2000s highlighted the unification of the continent, the ‘New Europe’ beyond the division of the Cold War East-West conflict where art and culture were specifically responsible for ‘bridging’ these differences separating the former two sides of the Iron Curtain.⁸⁵ Given the scope of the current text, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, these narratives are not represented here.

Despite the examples given by the above-quoted authors (Voinea, Bishop, Kazalarska) were taken from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s reflecting on the general preoccupation and subject matters of authors in the disciplines of art history and curatorial studies, this framework, arguably, provides a structure that can be applied to earlier curatorial strategies and exhibitions featuring and occupying themselves with Eastern European art made during the Cold War and the separation of the two halves of Europe. The following subsections are dedicated to the survey of these exhibitions and the application of these frameworks outlined above, so that ‘Détente’ could be later positioned in relation to them.

East European and Czechoslovak art exhibitions in the West, 1980-1991

The previous subsection highlighted the different curatorial approaches present from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s in Western institutional circuits, this subsection aims at surveying the exhibitions featuring and presenting Eastern European, and more specifically Czechoslovak art in this period. As it had been discussed in the previous chapter, Eastern European artists generally had difficulties accessing the Western art world while Western institutions and audiences had scarce knowledge of the cultural productions made on the other side of the Iron

⁸³ Blažević, ‘East - West Side Story’, 20–21 and see also note 1 on page 27.

⁸⁴ Kazalarska, ‘Contemporary Art as Ars Memoriae: Curatorial Strategies for Challenging the Post-Communist Condition’, 8.

⁸⁵ Kazalarska, 8.

Curtain. As the British art critic and curator, Henry Meyric Hughes observed, in the 1950s, Central East European countries generally wanted to represent themselves at international events of the global, contemporary art world exhibiting at the Venice Biennale from 1953 and the documenta in Kassel since it was first organised in 1955, but they often faced financial difficulties due to their lack of hard currency, and hardly won any prizes or received attention in Western media.⁸⁶ However, the participation in these events was reserved for the members of the party elite, and the highest ranks of the ‘official’ artists represented by powerful artist unions and state-run institutions.⁸⁷ In the 1960s and 1970s, due to the different implementations of ‘real’ socialism, and the oppression during the Czechoslovak Normalisation period, the accessibility to both Western and Eastern cultural products varied across the region. The more open and cooperative countries like Poland and Hungary presented art historical exhibitions in Western art institutions from the mid-1960s onwards. For example, two comparable exhibitions, the ‘Hungarian Art from the 10th to the 20th Century’ (‘L’art de Hongrie du Xe au XXe siècle’) in 1966 and the ‘Thousand Years of Art in Poland’ (‘Mille ans d’art en Pologne’) in 1969 were organised in the Petit Palais in Paris to represent the historical development of art in the two countries respectively. In the 1980s, there could also be smaller or larger exhibitions organised featuring Polish or Hungarian contemporary art like the ‘Présences polonaises’ at the Musée national d’art moderne Centre Georges-Pompidou curated by Pontus Hulten in 1983.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, similar contemporary Czechoslovak art exhibitions in the West were absent, and large-scale historical shows, like the ‘Baroque in Bohemia’ (‘Le Baroque en Bohême’) in the Galeries nationales du Grand Palais Paris in 1981, could only be noted from the early 1980s onwards along with other exhibitions of ‘secondary’ artforms such as drawing or photograph. From the French context two of these exhibitions might be cited here, the ‘20th-century Czech drawings’ (‘Dessins tchèques du 20 siècle’) and the ‘Czech photographs: 1920-1950’ (‘Photographes tchèques : 1920-1950’), both presented in connection with curator, Pontus Hulten at Centre Georges-Pompidou Paris in 1983. In the German-speaking context similar exhibitions were the ‘Gothic art from Bohemia’ (‘Kunst der Gotik aus Böhmen’) and the ‘Prague around 1600’ (‘Prag um 1600’), the former exhibited at the Schnütgen-Museum Köln in 1985, the latter at the Kunststiftung Ruhr Essen in the Federal Republic of Germany and at the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna in 1988 and 1989. These exhibitions fit into the change of cultural attitudes in East-West relationships that afforded artistic exchange between the two

⁸⁶ Meyric Hughes, ‘Were We Looking Away?’, 111.

⁸⁷ Meyric Hughes, 104.

⁸⁸ Kalinovská, ‘Exhibition as a Dialogue : The “Other” Europe’, 32.

Blocs, usually founded by bilateral cultural exchange agreements.⁸⁹ The selected artworks in these exchange programs often reflected the aesthetic taste and prejudices of the socialist bureaucracy or favoured the self-interest of the cultural elite of the ‘official’ scene (often the leadership of the artists’ unions).⁹⁰ As the example of ‘Prague around 1600’ shows, these exhibitions were often ‘packaged’ in a way that allowed easy touring in West Europe for a relatively low cost. These financial considerations were usually more important than the selection and presentation of locally relevant works.⁹¹ A close inspection of the Czechoslovak state collaborators in these exhibitions, the National Gallery in Prague and the Museum of Applied Arts in Prague, also highlights this observation that the state reserved the right to select and influenced the selection process of artists presented in the West, and thus, prescribed certain interpretations to the artistic possibilities in Czechoslovakia.⁹²

In the early 1980s, the international curatorial and art institutional scene saw the emergence of new, large-scale inter- and transnational exhibitions featuring artists from different national, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds.⁹³ The Czech-American curator, Milena Kalinovská gives two exhibitions as models for this new kind of emerging representation of art, the ‘A New Spirit in Painting’ at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1981 and the ‘Zeitgeist’ in the West Berlin Walter Gropius Building in 1982.⁹⁴ Both of these shows presented a great variety of artists coming from across the Western world including the United States and the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, and some Danish, Dutch, and French artists with intent of representing either the new ways and ‘turns’ in painting that surpasses the national borders, or the general ‘spirit of the age’ through and with the lenses of contemporary art.⁹⁵ Probably the first similar effort for the exhibition of art made in Eastern Europe was ‘EXPRESSIV – Central European art since 1960’ developed and curated by the Czech-American art historian and collector Meda Mladek and the German art historian Dieter Ronte. Exhibited at the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington D.C. and the Museum of Modern Arts Ludwig Stiftung in Vienna around 1987, the two curators in a similar manner, searched for a common, shared

⁸⁹ Meyric Hughes, ‘Were We Looking Away?’, 107.

⁹⁰ Meyric Hughes, 107–8.

⁹¹ Meyric Hughes, 107–8.

⁹² Alexander Tolnay and Villa Merkel, Galerien der Stadt Esslingen am Neckar, eds., *Tschechische Malerei heute: Galerie der Stadt Esslingen, Villa Merkel, 29. Januar bis 26. Februar 1989* (Esslingen: Galerie d. Stadt, 1989), 11.

⁹³ Kalinovská, ‘Exhibition as a Dialogue : The “Other” Europe’, 30.

⁹⁴ Kalinovská, 30.

⁹⁵ Kalinovská, 30; John Russell, ‘Art: The Zeitgeist Signals Just Downstairs on 73d St.’, *The New York Times* Vol. CXXX, no. No. 44,760 (7 November 1980): 64.

‘spirit’ in Central European artistic production that connects the region beyond the historical divisions, the ‘social, political, and philosophical systems’ that separates the Eastern and Western Blocs.⁹⁶ The selection of Polish, Czechoslovak, Hungarian, Austrian, and Yugoslav artists was meant to represent a historical correlation between the former territory of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and the unique artistic ‘spirit’ presented in and with the exhibition.⁹⁷ This consideration of historical Central (East) Europe excluded Northern Italy (formerly part of the Habsburg mission of Empire), but also the geographically Central European two Germanies and Switzerland.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the exhibition ‘EXPRESSIV’ tried to show how the regional, ‘common aesthetic features’ prove the existence of a ‘legitimate art’ independent of the major artistic centres of the West (Paris, London, New York) and the East (Moscow).⁹⁹ This form of ‘legitimate art’ is – as the title suggests – expressive, suggestive, psychologising, and represents reality ‘as it is experienced’.¹⁰⁰ These conceptions of Central-East Europe as a political, cultural, and ‘philosophical’ unity where art can be linked to certain notions of well-established intellectuals and writers such as Sigmund Freud or Frantz Kafka, strike a close cord with contemporary (dissident) intellectuals and political writers interested in the separation of Central East European countries on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain from the Soviet political and cultural apparatus.¹⁰¹ This also aligns with the observation made by the Hungarian art historian, Edit András that the concept of Central-East Europe is always political in the sense that it historically always expressed the separation from both the Russian imperial and the Soviet hegemonic programs.¹⁰² A similar political delineation of the region can be observed in the French concept of the ‘Europe médiane’ or ‘middle Europe’ formulated on the works of the Polish writer and essayist, Czeslaw Milosz who wished to separate ‘Central’ and ‘Eastern’ Europe as for him they represented completely opposite worlds.¹⁰³ In his view,

⁹⁶ Meda Mladek and Dieter Ronte, *Expressiv - Central European Art since 1960* (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst - Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, 1987), 11–12.

⁹⁷ Mladek and Ronte, 11–12.

⁹⁸ Mladek and Ronte, 11–12; for a detailed discussion of the Habsburg mission, see Alan John Percivale Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809-1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary*, A Phoenix Book P683 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

⁹⁹ Mladek and Ronte, *Expressiv - Central European Art since 1960*, 11–12.

¹⁰⁰ Mladek and Ronte, 11–12.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, *Central Europe*, 267–69; also compare with Magdolna Balogh, ‘Közép-Európa-Diskurzusok Magyarországon 1945 Előtt És Után: Avagy: Ma Is Kell Nekünk Közép-Európa’, *Közösségi Kapcsolódások - Tanulmányok Kultúráról És Oktatásról* 2, no. 2 (10 January 2023): 85–95, <https://doi.org/10.14232/kapocs.2022.2.85-95>.

¹⁰² András, ‘The Ex-Eastern Bloc’s Position in New Critical Theories and Recent Curatorial Practice’, 87.

¹⁰³ Compare with Czeslaw Milosz, *Une autre Europe* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1964).

there exists, a separate, unique, as it were ‘middle’ Europe located between the German and Russian spheres of influence that might include the Baltic states (then politically and legally still parts of the Soviet Union), Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and to a certain extent Yugoslavia. As an exhibition, ‘EXPRESSIV’ might be located between the ‘postcolonial’ and ‘contextualising’ narratives of Kazalarska’s framework described above as the curators tried to surpass the hierarchical boundaries of geography (the East-West separation) while revising the framework of artistic discourse on Central East European and centring (contextualising) art in a unique, local, and regional socio-political condition. However, its locality (Austria and the United States), and more specifically its historical reference to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire questions its postcolonial nature.

The next important exhibition on Eastern European art with similar aims was ‘Trigon’ developed by the Hungarian art historian Katalin Néray and the Austrian art historian Wilfried Skreiner at the Neue Galerie at Landesmuseum Joanneum in Gratz during an extended period from the late 1980s to 1991. Its original concept was to bring together two still socialist countries (Hungary and Yugoslavia) with two non-allied countries (Switzerland and Austria) and the Federal Republic of Germany.¹⁰⁴ The exhibition’s original title of ‘Näherungen’ or ‘Approaches’ meant to represent the similar, but ‘barely visible tendencies’ (‘zaghafte Tendenzen’) in the Central East European region emphasising regionality over the forced internationality of the recent past.¹⁰⁵ As the political changes of 1989-1991 started to take place in the region, the curators included voices from the former East, for example, the Czechoslovak art historian Jiří Ševčík, so that the final concept of now ‘Trigon’ included not just the original five countries, but also Czechoslovakia, and through the unification of the two Germanies, the former Democratic Republic of Germany as well.¹⁰⁶ ‘Trigon’ inspired by the ‘peace in Europe’ showcased the historical, country-specific aesthetic characteristics of each represented country in the exhibition while maintaining that some similarities might be observed among them.¹⁰⁷ The selection of artists followed a similar, international and cooperative method where each country could nominate seven of its own artists while a curator from another country selected from them.¹⁰⁸ The concept also emphasised that Western curators should select Eastern artists

¹⁰⁴ Steinle Christina and Foitl Alexandra, eds., *Trigon* (Gratz: Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, 1991), 22.

¹⁰⁵ Christina and Alexandra, 22.

¹⁰⁶ Christina and Alexandra, 13 and 22.

¹⁰⁷ Christina and Alexandra, 13 and 23.

¹⁰⁸ Christina and Alexandra, 23.

while Eastern curators selected Western ones. The juxtaposition of individual artistic statements presented historical facts contrary to earlier homogenising tendencies, for example, those of 'EXPRESSIV', meanwhile preserving the similarities of an artistic context reaching beyond the post-Yalta borders.¹⁰⁹ This way, 'Trigon' could better contextualise and investigate the colonial conditions present in the former East than did 'EXPRESSIV' a few years earlier. However, this could have not been achieved without the inclusion of Eastern curators and art historians. The last of these large-scale Austrian exhibition projects before 1991 was the 'Zeichen im Fluss' or 'Signs in Flow' by the German art historian and curator Wolfgang Drechsler at the Museum of Modern Art Vienna in 1990. Drechsler tried to analyse contemporary currents of Central East European art while representing its discourses with history, politics, and national identity.¹¹⁰ One artist represented Czechoslovakia (Jiri David), Hungary (Laszlo Feher), Austria (Johanna Kandl), and one group Yugoslavia (the Irwing).¹¹¹ This exhibition avoids the frameworks provided by Kazalarska, however, the selection of artists – and artist group – whose work reflects on the unique historical, political, and cultural circumstances of their respective countries meanwhile the exhibition related their works, and thus, the artists themselves to national symbols and respective nationalisms of their countries, 'Zeichen im Fluss' placed these works in a deeper historical and political context that surpasses the confines of the classical discourses of the East-West divisions.¹¹²

From the 1960s, the Federal Republic of Germany was one of the most receptive Western countries to Eastern European art which reflected not just the genuine interest in artistic products made on the other side of the Iron Curtain but also West Germans' desire to escape the provincial and (semi)peripheral realities and constraints of the country as well as their predilection for the 'exotic'.¹¹³ Despite all of these, it proves difficult to cite many examples of Czechoslovak contemporary art exhibition before 1989 in the West German context. Probably the first documented exhibition that featured still living Modernist artists for the country was the '8 artists from Prague in Munich: Boštík, Boudník, Demartini, Grigar, Jetelová, Kolíbal, Malich, Šimotová' ('8 Künstler aus Prag in München...') organised by German art gallerist, Walter Storms in 1983.¹¹⁴ This exhibition was one of those survey attempts mentioned above

¹⁰⁹ Hegyi, 'Détente - Chances of Integration', 13–14.

¹¹⁰ Hegyi, 17–18.

¹¹¹ Wolfgang Drechsler et al., eds., *Zeichen Im Fluss* (Wien: Museum Moderner Kunst, 1990), 8.

¹¹² Compare with Drechsler et al., 8.

¹¹³ Meyric Hughes, 'Were We Looking Away?', 109.

¹¹⁴ Tolnay and Villa Merkel, *Galerien der Stadt Esslingen am Neckar, Tschechische Malerei heute*, 11.

that tried their best at grasping what might have happened behind the Iron Curtain in the ‘unofficial’ scene. However, the presentation style of these artists and their works might not be ascribed simply to the fact that they were coming from the Eastern Bloc, rather seen as one of the standard forms of presenting art made in a neighbouring or foreign context as it can be observed in the similar survey and presentation style of such exhibitions as, for example, the ‘Paris 1960-1980: Panorama of contemporary art in France’ (‘Paris 1960-1980: Panorama der zeitgenössischen Kunst in Frankreich’) where French contemporary artists and art tendencies were ‘surveyed’ and presented to the Austrian audiences at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna a year earlier, in 1982.¹¹⁵ The first large-scale ‘survey’ of Czechoslovak art in the German, and specifically West German context was the ‘Czech Painting Today’ (‘Tschechische Malerei Heute’) at the Galerie der Stadt Esslingen in 1989. The curator, Alexander Tolnay, selected 17 painters from three different generations who, in his opinion, were connected through their shared experience of the ‘uncertainties’ of the 1980s caused by late-stage Normalisation policy.¹¹⁶ These painters represented an ‘obvious analogy’ on a ‘metaphysical’ level to their colleagues working in the West, namely the incertitude of certain values, their return and recourse to the past, and their ‘fictitious substitute of reality’. Furthermore, the exhibition testified how ‘similar creative forces are also at work on the other side of the border’.¹¹⁷ Tolnay’s preface also reveals that he visited Czechoslovakia and specifically artist studios to acquire the necessary knowledge on these painters and their works.¹¹⁸ ‘Czech Painting Today’ apart from being an attempt on a large-scale survey of the painterly production of the post-war period – it is acknowledged by Tolnay that it is not a comprehensive selection due to the limited space of the exhibition venue – was also an attempt if not at entirely inserting Czechoslovak Modernism but to proximate it to the Western audiences and art canons. The discussion of Czechoslovak art, however, reiterated the register of colonial exoticism, bemoaned by Bishop above, and Orientalisation vis-à-vis Eastern Europe criticised by later art history, in phrases such as the reflections on the ‘current cultural awakening’ in Normalised Czechoslovakia.¹¹⁹

A later exhibition, the ‘Tradition and Avantgarde in Prague’ (‘Tradition und Avantgarde in Prag’) presented at the Kunsthalle Dominikanerkirche in Osnabrück, and at the Rheinisches

¹¹⁵ *Paris 1960-1980: Panorama Der Zeitgenössischen Kunst in Frankreich : Ausstellung Der Wiener Festwochen* (Vienna: Wiener Festwochen, 1982).

¹¹⁶ Tolnay and Villa Merkel, *Galerien der Stadt Esslingen am Neckar, Tschechische Malerei heute*, 11.

¹¹⁷ Tolnay and Villa Merkel, *Galerien der Stadt Esslingen am Neckar*, 11.

¹¹⁸ Tolnay and Villa Merkel, *Galerien der Stadt Esslingen am Neckar*, 11.

¹¹⁹ Tolnay and Villa Merkel, *Galerien der Stadt Esslingen am Neckar*, 11.

Landesmuseum in Bonn in 1991 tried to present contemporary Czechoslovak art ‘in dialogue’ with its own avant-garde history and artistic tradition. These approximation efforts created a highly un- and ahistorical setting where artists coming from the ‘unofficial’ scene were allowed to exhibit and show their works ‘together’ with the established Czechoslovak canon. Such a show could have not happened in the country prior to 1989 due to the separation of the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ spheres of art.¹²⁰ ‘Tradition and Avantgarde’ was a very strong contextualisation effort in the sense of establishing and presenting strong, locally important, and relevant points of artistic reference while avoiding homogenisation through its emphasis on the historically established individual artistic viewpoints. This contextualisation was further highlighted by the catalogue of publishing texts from Czech literary authors like Václav Havel and Jiří Gruša. These exhibitions show the diverse or maybe shifting attitudes of West German institutional actors in the late 1980s and early 1990s emphasising locality, regionality, and locally relevant frameworks of Eastern Europe art.

These locally relevant, and historically supported frameworks were seen as less important in the French context where, in the period discussed here, only two contemporary Czechoslovak art exhibitions were organised, both by the French philosopher and art theoretician, Etienne Cornevin in 1990. ‘40 Czech and Slovak Artists’ (‘40 artistes tcheques et slovaques’), exhibited at the Musée de Luxembourg in Paris, was the first large-scale presentation of Czechoslovak contemporary art in the country. The exhibition, as the title suggests, presented 40 artists working between 1960 and 1990 which periodisation according to Cornevin was to surpass the ‘cliché’ of locally relevant, historical, and political reference points such as 1968 or 1989.¹²¹ The artists selected for the exhibition represented the most ‘originals that Czechoslovakia had to offer’ at the time as well as ‘the chaotic diversity of poetics, generations, and nationalities’.¹²² ‘40 Czech and Slovak Artists’ despite making an effort to contextualising art in the Eastern European context through the inclusion of a historical essay on the development of post-war Czechoslovak art by Jindřich Chalupecký or an interview with Stanislav Kolíbal, made a great effort on placing the featured artists and artworks into a West-centred art canon or the ‘known world’.¹²³ These Czechoslovak works through their unique relationship (‘attachment’) to the

¹²⁰ Karin Thomas and Václav Havel, *Tradition Und Avantgarde in Prag* (Osnabrück : Köln: Galerie Pravis ; Dumont, 1991), 14.

¹²¹ Etienne Cornevin, ‘Defense et illustration de l’art moderne par temps couvert’, in *40 artistes tchèques et slovaques: 1960-1990 [expositions, Paris, Printemps Haussmann et Musée du Luxembourg, Courbevoie, Galerie Art/Défense, 1990]*, ed. ABCD (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), 11.

¹²² Cornevin, 11.

¹²³ Cornevin, 10.

post-war Western art currents, became universal, and paradoxically, this universality familiarises them enough not to seem ‘exotic’ to the French audiences.¹²⁴

The other exhibition, ‘The Praguers – the years of silence’ (‘Les Pragois – Les années de silence’) which was presented at three different locations, the Galerie Lamaignere – Saint-Germain and Galerie van Melle in Paris, and the Nouveau Théâtre in Angers in 1990, strikes similar cords with ‘40 Czech and Slovak Artists’. Also curated by Cornevin, the starting point for ‘The Praguers’ was the ‘remarkable quantity’ of post-war artworks in the Czechoslovak (unofficial) scene that went against the general tendency of (Western) contemporary art, that is, being over-intellectualised yet coward, or as Cornevin formulated it: exhibiting ‘pieces of bravery without a soul’ (‘morceau de bravoure sans âme’).¹²⁵ These exhibitions reproduced the colonial register not just through their chosen language and forms of expression but also through the essentialisation of Eastern European art. Cornevin’s discussion of Czechoslovak art represents the Western art world as the centre, the ‘known world’, disregards any locality or locally relevant framework, and generalises Czechoslovak Modernism through a ‘heroic narrative’ talking about the ‘years of silence’ and the ‘masked or hidden times’ (‘temps couverts’).¹²⁶ He also saw Czech and Slovak artists ‘diverging’ from the Western artistic standards – against which they are measured – and thus, surpassing them, a narrative that can be closely read with Western European accounts of the morally higher and purer savage man that is familiar and similar, yet always different.¹²⁷ Furthermore, these two examples also show how arbitrary was the representation of Czechoslovak Modernism in France as both exhibitions were curated by the same person, Cornevin, this way their existence was not the result of public or intellectual interest as much as the result of personal interest in the subject, and, second that the framework of these exhibitions and consequently of interpretation remained in the territory of Western dominance.

These examples of Western exhibitions were concerned with Czechoslovak contemporary art, and those shows without the representation of Czechoslovak artists, due to the nature of the subject of this work – ‘Détente’ – were excluded from detailed discussion. However, one such exhibition should be considered for its striking similarities to the main concept of ‘Détente’.

¹²⁴ Cornevin, 10–11.

¹²⁵ Etienne Cornevin, ed., *Les Pragois : Les Annees de Silence* (Angers: Présence de l’art contemporain, 1990), page unnumbered.

¹²⁶ see the title of his essay: ‘Defense et illustration de l’art moderne par temps couvert’, 10.

¹²⁷ For a further discussion, see, for example, Terry Jay Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2001).

This show was organised by the Swedish art historian and curator, Olle Granath, at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1986, and featured Polish and Western ('non-Pole') artists together, as the title 'Dialog' suggests, in dialogue with each other. Granath selected eight Polish artists working behind the Iron Curtain and invited them to select a pair for themselves from the Western contemporary art canon with whom they would like to collaborate.¹²⁸ This concept was conceived during his studio visits in Warsaw and Lodz in 1982 where, in his words, 'one sense[d] a great hunger for contacts with artists from other places'.¹²⁹ This one-week-long visit described by Granath highlights the argument made in Chapter 1, namely that some Eastern Bloc countries such as Poland had incomparably easier contact with the Western and non-allied world such as Sweden at the time. Despite the seemingly perfect match in concepts between 'Détente' and 'Dialog', the selection of (Central) East European contemporary artists and providing them with access to the West through an artistic dialogue, the emphases, however, were placed differently in both cases. While 'Détente' was primarily concerned with East-West cultural relationships in late-stage and post-Cold-War Europe, 'Dialog' was placed in a wider, more universally institutional context. On the one hand, as the Polish art critic and curator, Anka Ptaszkowska, noted at the time, 'Dialog' was more concerned about the 'fake openness' of the (Western) art world which was expressed in the surge of new artists, galleries, museums, and international exhibitions, and its preoccupation with the Duchampe-esque intellectual games that in fact meant a closure through the 'imitation' of choice and selection.¹³⁰ In her opinion, 'Dialog' was a recreation of this original Duchampian game-act but with 'real' openness since the artists could choose their pairs, those with whom they wished to be exhibited.¹³¹ Another Polish art critic, Wieslaw Borowski also noted that contemporary exhibitions, especially those with a larger selection of artists organised at an international scale were highly academic with each work carefully selected based on preplanned purposes or subject matters with aspirations 'to affect history'.¹³² These academic considerations paired with the extensive power of curators and institutional actors often resulted in exhibitions that

¹²⁸ Olle Granath, 'To Let Live', in *Dialog*, ed. Björn Springfeldt and Moderna museet (Stockholm, Sweden), Moderna museets utställningskatalog, nr. 201 (Stockholm: Moderna museet, 1985), 10.

¹²⁹ Granath, 9–10.

¹³⁰ Anka Ptaszkowska, "Que signifie, a l'heure actuelle, le geste de la direction du Moderna Museet, qui demande a des artistes polonais d'inviter pour une exposition commune des artistes d'autres pays?", in *Dialog*, ed. Björn Springfeldt and Moderna museet (Stockholm, Sweden), Moderna museets utställningskatalog, nr. 201 (Stockholm: Moderna museet, 1985), 14–15.

¹³¹ Ptaszkowska, 15.

¹³² Wieclaw Borowski, 'In a world beyond the sanctioned', in *Dialog*, ed. Björn Springfeldt and Moderna museet (Stockholm, Sweden), Moderna museets utställningskatalog, nr. 201 (Stockholm: Moderna museet, 1985), 24.

found their motivations beyond the mere ‘love of art’.¹³³ While this was the case on the international level, i.e., in the West, the exhibition organised by Olle Granath ‘resigned’ this basic curatorial right when the curator selected only half of the participants which, in turn, allowed a true and ‘unrestricted dialogue’ between artists and artistic positions beyond the existing, and sanctioning aesthetic and promotional systems of art.¹³⁴ Both Ptaszkowska and Borowski, despite their background and involvement in the Polish ‘unofficial’ art scene (both were founding members of the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw in 1966 of which Borowski became its first director) their interpretation of what ‘Dialog’ was, escaped both the East-West divisions and the Cold War, and ascribed contemporary Polish art and the participation of Polish artists to a unified, international, i.e., Western art world where they were ‘relatively known’ but not well circulated.¹³⁵ This ‘relatively known’ status was the result of the country’s more open and liberal cultural policies as well as exhibitions like the ‘Présences polonaises’ at the Centre-Pompidou in Paris described above.¹³⁶ On the other hand, ‘Détente’ was a more conscious effort that similarly to ‘Dialog’ wanted to provide a platform for artistic collaboration and dialogue as well as to ease the ‘great hunger for contacts’ described by Granath in the exhibition catalogue, but addressed the particular situation of historical circumstances in which these artists lived and created their works. ‘Détente’, while trying to overcome the regional divisions of pre-1989 Central East Europe and to surpass these traditional East-West discourses, contrary to ‘Dialog’ did not ascribe its subject and artists to the ideal of the universal or did not fail to ‘mention’ their historical background, origin, and specific political conditions.

‘Détente’ as a curatorial strategy around 1991

The previous two subsections discussed the frameworks in which curatorial efforts addressing Eastern European art produced before the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 operated as well as detailed some major exhibitions featuring Eastern European and, specifically, Czechoslovak contemporary artworks. The current subsection looks at the ‘Détente’ exhibitions as a curatorial strategy to redefine the East-West discourse in the early 1990s.

¹³³ Borowski, 25.

¹³⁴ Borowski, 26.

¹³⁵ Ptaszkowska, “‘Que signifie, a l’heure actuelle, le geste de la direction du Moderna Museet, qui demande a des artistes polonais d’inviter pour une exposition commune des artistes d’autres pays ?’”, 15.

¹³⁶ Compare with, for example, Kalinovská, ‘Exhibition as a Dialogue : The “Other” Europe’, 32.

To a certain extent, 'Détente' connected to major curatorial and institutional currents of the late 1980s as the narrative of Loránd Hegyi in his essay published in the second exhibition catalogue suggests.¹³⁷ Hegyi creates a clear, linear line between these earlier exhibitions ('EXPRESSIV', 'Trigon', 'Zeichen im Fluss') and 'Détente', and presents the latter as the 'possible continuation of [their] integration process'.¹³⁸ As a conscious curatorial project, 'Détente' wanted to provide contemporary artists coming from Normalised Czechoslovakia, a country where the Brezhnevite 'real' socialism of the late 1960s and 1970s was relatively strictly implemented, with the opportunity to collaborate and exhibit together with Western, established artists. The two curators, Christine König and Hans Knoll, similar to other Western curators (Olle Granath, for example), through their extensive networks and connections and studio visits (in the case of Knoll from the mid-1980s while in the case of König supposedly from around the Velvet Revolution of 1989) could map the Czechoslovak 'unofficial' art scene serving as the basis for the exhibition. 'Détente', furthermore, aimed at representing a selection of artists correlating to the variety of stylistic approaches and mediums of the country's Modernist tendencies. For this reason, 'Détente' might be compared to contemporary, often 'historical' survey exhibitions such as the 'Tschechische Malerei Heute' in Esslingen in 1989, or to a lesser extent, the French exhibitions, '40 Czech and Slovak Artists' and 'The Praguers'. However, the curators' decision to go beyond merely 'showing' these artists by placing their works into a larger context connecting to the 'Western world' and juxtaposing them with each other, emphasised the Eastern European artists' political, economic, socio-cultural, and 'philosophical' circumstances. Through this mere shift, 'Détente' regained a renegotiation value never present in earlier pairing exhibitions like 'Dialog'.

In the framework of Kazalarska, 'Détente' as many previous Central East European exhibitions curated around 1990 with their curators coming from the region (Austria, Germany), fits well into the 'postcolonial narrative'. This postcolonial nature is supported by the questioning of the fundamental relationship dynamics of European and global politics established at the Yalta Conference in 1944. Through the inclusion of Western artists, often beyond the margins of the Western world (for example, Austria), and their pairing with (Central) East European artists, it also raised questions of the artistic and cultural relationships between the two Blocs. These questions related to the possible integration of the region into the Western canon, and the hierarchy between the Blocs and their respective cultural product. Hegyi's understanding of

¹³⁷ Hegyi, 'Détente - Chances of Integration'.

¹³⁸ Hegyi, 20.

‘Détente’ at the time was that the exhibition was part of the ‘integrational process’ of (post)socialist Central East Europe into the Western world.¹³⁹ It is argued in this text that ‘Détente’ was much more than just an attempt to ‘integrate’ the East into the West; it was a fundamental effort to ‘deconstruct’ the traditional narrative of the East-West division and to liberate, ‘normalise’ artistic collaborations between the two, former Blocs.¹⁴⁰ In this sense, a parallel might be drawn between ‘Détente’ and a much later exhibition, ‘Living Art – On the Edge of Europe’ organised at Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands in 2004. In her essay, Kazalarska reads this exhibition as a ‘postcolonial’ curatorial narrative trying to ‘restore justice’ to previously marginalised artists coming from the Eastern European underground scenes by presenting their works made in the 1960s and 1970s along with those made at the same time in the West.¹⁴¹ So, the curators of ‘Living Art’ seemingly aimed at similar de- and reconstructions as did König and Knoll, but with an emphasis on historical developments in a more traditional institutional setting. Furthermore, as the attached interview reveals, ‘Détente’ tried to address the status differences between Eastern and Western artists. For example, an anecdote of Joseph Kosuth and Jiří Valoch, one artist-pair from the exhibition, can be telling here. Kosuth who was already an established artist at the time, and recognised as one of the founding figures of (text-based) conceptual art in the West, either personally or through his assistant (something unimaginable for an artist socialised in the Eastern Bloc), selected the most central, biggest room or most visible place for his installation while Valoch usually chose secluded, less central spaces. At the Budapest exhibition (1993-1994), Kosuth chose the façade of the venue (originally an old, representative church built in the 17th and 18th centuries) making his work the very first thing visitors would see.¹⁴² In his interview, Knoll retells the story of him asking Valoch to choose the place for his work first and to choose the one he likes best. To his surprise, Valoch decided to exhibit his works inscribed at the door and window frames. After realising that the installation also highlighted the conceptual meaning of Valoch’s works, Knoll allowed them to be exhibited on the doorframes, but his decision was commented on by Meda Mladek, co-curator of ‘EXPRESSIV’ as a ‘typical’ Western curatorial attitude towards Eastern European art.¹⁴³ Even though its placement reflected the conceptual subject of Valoch’s work, this anecdote can also point out the deference, and possible shame,

¹³⁹ Hegyi, 20.

¹⁴⁰ Compare this with the Hans Knoll interview in the supplements.

¹⁴¹ Kazalarska, ‘Contemporary Art as Ars Memoriae: Curatorial Strategies for Challenging the Post-Communist Condition’, 6.

¹⁴² See the photo documentation attached to this work, courtesy of Knoll Gallery Budapest.

¹⁴³ For the anecdote see the interview with Hans Knoll in the supplements.

Eastern European artists might have felt vis-à-vis their Western colleagues, as well as the curators' 'postcolonial' attitude to combat them. Parallel to these 'postcolonial' attitudes, and certainly to a lesser extent, 'Détente' could be also seen as a 'contextualising' narrative trying to separate Czechoslovakia (with its diverse 'unofficial' scene) from the often homogenised mass of 'Eastern Europe' through emphasising the different implementation of 'real' socialism between Normalised Czechoslovakia that had limited contacts with either the East or the West, and other socialist countries in the region like Poland where 'international' (and transnational) artistic circulation was bigger throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. These historical differences within the Eastern Bloc were one of the first considerations of the 'Détente' curators.¹⁴⁴

Finally, it might prove difficult to compare 'Détente' with certain Central East European, large-scale international exhibitions such as the 1987 'EXPRESSIV – Central European Art since 1960' or the 1991 'Trigon' project. These exhibitions wanted to represent the parallels and similarities between the Central East European region, a concept that was understood beyond political and ideological borders, often ascribed to earlier historical formations (the Habsburg dynastic ambition and Austrian-Hungarian imperialism) and underlined as a separate entity between the great centres of East and West. Both projects originated in the still-present Cold War, around 1986-1987 when formulating 'Central East Europe' as opposed to 'East Europe' or the 'Eastern Bloc' as a whole had political implications. This political significance was laid down in the separation of still socialist countries, specifically, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, and to a lesser extent Yugoslavia (or some federative states of it) from the Soviet-Russian sphere. This consideration was highly present in 'EXPRESSIV' (1987), and less present in the early years of 'Trigon' where the curators still emphasised the common, but 'barely visible' artistic similarities. As was discussed earlier here, the organisation of 'Trigon' witnessed not just the late-scale realities, but also the major transformations of the Eastern Bloc. Starting as a five-country project where Hungary and Yugoslavia represented the 'socialist East', even though both countries had different, arguably, more malleable 'real' socialism than the rest of the Bloc, gradually turned into a 'seven plus one' exhibition as the events of 1989 allowed Czechoslovak artists and curators to participate and as West Germany, a former participant, became (re)united with the former East Germany. For these unique historical circumstances, 'Trigon' will remain one of those unique experiences in the history of Central East Europe incomparable to and surmounted by few. Nonetheless, this text argues in

¹⁴⁴ Compare this with the Hans Knoll interview in the supplements.

the following chapter that 'Détente' through its scope reaching to the cores of the Western world (the United States and the United Kingdoms) could better deconstruct and renegotiate the cultural (and maybe even political) relationships between the two halves of the rapidly dissolving post-Yalta world order.

Chapter 3

The ‘postcolonial’ narrative and ‘horizontal’ art history

The previous chapters presented the concept and the possible material reconstruction of the ‘Détente’ exhibitions on a case-study basis given the availability of archival materials, as well as a framework and survey of contemporary curatorial approaches of Eastern European art in Western institutions from the 1980s to the early 1990s. At the end of the previous chapter, ‘Détente’ was placed into this framework and compared with contemporary exhibitions. It was also established that ‘Détente’ was a strongly ‘postcolonial’ curatorial narrative of Eastern European art. This chapter develops on this observation through the lens of a critical, postcolonial paradigm in art history developed by the Polish art historian, Piotr Piotrowski in the late 2000s. Through the separation and detailed discussion of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ art histories and their application to earlier exhibitions, this chapter argues that ‘Détente’ was an avant-lettre representation of this theoretical framework. Furthermore, it is also argued here that due to the pairing of Eastern and Western artists, ‘Détente’ could place the East-West cultural divisions into a larger, globalised context that went beyond the traditional Central East European approaches present at the time.

In Westernised art historical narratives, the art production of the (global) peripheries of the Western world, a position also occupied by the Eastern Bloc before 1989, is represented in a ‘fragmentary’ form, that is, pieces of a larger, global, ‘Western’ art history.¹⁴⁵ This traditional mode of history writing implies a hierarchy, a ‘vertical’ structure where the Western art world, its urban ‘centres’ like Paris, London, and New York are placed at the top while everything else, the ‘periphery’ is described, often in homogenising terms, in relation to these centres.¹⁴⁶ In the post-war Central-East European context, these centres also included Berlin, Vienna, and Moscow.¹⁴⁷ This shows how ‘vertical’ art history creates a ‘chain’ of global centres (Paris, London, New York), local centres (Berlin, Vienna, Moscow) and peripheries where each location with its artists, artworks, and artistic events, is ranked and placed in a stratified structure. These global and local centres create and distribute the models and specific paradigms in which the art worlds of centres and peripheries are supposed to function.

¹⁴⁵ Piotrowski, ‘Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde’, 50.

¹⁴⁶ Piotrowski, 50–51.

¹⁴⁷ Piotrowski, 51; Mladek and Ronte, *Expressiv - Central European Art since 1960*, 11–12.

These centres also reserve the right to create, amend, and renegotiate the canons of art history.¹⁴⁸ Canons, its Greek original ('kanon') means 'rule' or 'standard', are the bodies of literature or artworks deemed the best quality, the most representative, or most significant at a given time and place.¹⁴⁹ In its original context, the canon was the officially accepted list of texts of the Hebrew Scripture of Judaism, established as a legitimising means of a struggling priestly class.¹⁵⁰ Consequently, even after the secularisation of (art) institutions (academies, universities), they remained part of the political and social matrix and became the foundation for any given artistic practice.¹⁵¹ Due to their connection to the social and political, canons were never really stable as they could be constantly challenged. In the West, these challenges came from traditionally underrepresented and excluded social groups such as people of colour or women.¹⁵² As a result, in the 20th century, different voices of cultural 'otherness' were included to combat canonical uniformities which often further highlighted the privileged position of the original 'writer' (the white, well-to-do, male) because the 'other' was often defined in relation to this dominant 'normality'.¹⁵³ Traditional critiques of the established literary and art canons in the West included, for example, feminist scholars like Susan Hardy Aiken criticising the reproduction of the patriarchal mythology of the 'Oedipal' struggle as the unconscious drive of intellectual and cultural development.¹⁵⁴ Comparatively, peripheries similar to the cultural 'other' are also defined in terms of their distance and difference from the centres, the cultural 'normality' with canons and artistic recognition made by Western museums, art galleries, and publishing houses.¹⁵⁵ In Central and East Europe, the pre-1989 Orientalisation of the region created what the Serbian art historian and curator Bojana Pejić called 'close Other' or 'not-quite-Other'. This 'close Other' exists in the 'strange proximity' ('fremde Nähe') of the Russian art critic Boris Groys, on the geographical margins, at the borders of Western Europe, but at the same time within its universal cultural framework.¹⁵⁶ A periphery in location, but a centre in attitude.¹⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the 'real Other' in the sense described by the literary critic, Edward Said is created through the process of (cultural)

¹⁴⁸ Piotrowski, 'Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde', 51.

¹⁴⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, Re Visions: Critical Studies in the History and Theory of Art (London New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

¹⁵⁰ Pollock, 3.

¹⁵¹ Pollock, 3.

¹⁵² Pollock, 5.

¹⁵³ Pollock, 5.

¹⁵⁴ Pollock, 5.

¹⁵⁵ Compare with Piotrowski, 'Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde', 51.

¹⁵⁶ Piotrowski, 52 and specifically note 2 on the same page.

¹⁵⁷ Compare with Piotrowski, 53.

colonialisation.¹⁵⁸ In Central East Europe, during the Soviet occupation of the region, many local cultures reserved their views of cultural hegemony vis-à-vis the Soviets not just as ‘Eastern’ and ‘Asiatic’ people, but also as, in certain cases, former subjects (Poland and Hungary).¹⁵⁹ Added to this are the local hierarchies between local capitals (Prague) and ‘countryside’ towns (Brno, Ostrava, or Bratislava) described by Piotrowski, the whole chain of ‘vertical’ (art) historical relationships can be mapped in which every locality is a centre, a semi-periphery, and a ‘complete’ periphery to every other location.¹⁶⁰ Given precisely the ‘close otherness’ of Central East Europe in the ‘strange proximity’ of Western European cultures, traditional postcolonial propositions such as the inclusion of the non-Western (art) historical voice in the canon need to be revised as art historians in these margins, often unconsciously, reproduce the West-centred ‘vertical’ structure.¹⁶¹ Piotrowski’s proposal is a paradigm shift in art history that aims not at destroying or ‘cancelling’ Western narratives but rather at repositioning them in a ‘horizontal’ relationship with other, marginal, and locally written histories of art. His proposal is a ‘horizontal’ art history.¹⁶²

According to Piotrowski, there are always two considered when ‘vertical’ and homogenised art histories are written: the established (Westernised) canons and the stylistic languages relative to Modern art movements. In other words, artworks created both in the centre (Western Europe) and the periphery (Eastern Europe), are described and thus interpreted by using the language of Western art criticism and are framed in the context of Western artists and events.¹⁶³ Contrary to this ‘vertical’ mode, ‘horizontal’ art history tries to undermine the authority assumed by these artists, events, and discourses by, for example, highlighting the differences between the Western ‘norms’ and their implementations in the Eastern peripheries.¹⁶⁴ Art is always implanted into an economic, political, and socio-cultural matrix that creates its own cultural reference points and local canons with their own hierarchies. These local, peripheral structures already diversify possible (art) histories.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, ‘pure’ stylistic features as they are

¹⁵⁸ Piotrowski, 53; and compare with Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25. anniversary edition with a new preface by the author (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 2014).

¹⁵⁹ compare with David Chioni Moore, ‘Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique’, *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–28.

¹⁶⁰ Piotrowski, ‘Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde’, 56.

¹⁶¹ Piotrowski, 54.

¹⁶² Piotrowski, 54.

¹⁶³ Piotrowski, 54–55.

¹⁶⁴ Agata Jakubowska and Magdalena Radomska, eds., *Horizontal Art History and beyond: Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, Studies in Historiography (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 1–2.

¹⁶⁵ Piotrowski, ‘Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde’, 55.

described in Western art histories are often transmuted in the peripheries as hybrid styles like ‘Russian cubo-futurism’ (the combination of ‘pure’ Western-style cubism and futurism) imply.¹⁶⁶ ‘Russian cubo-futurism’ already points to the difficulty of labelling artistic currents of Eastern European art, and these difficulties are more pronounced in cases like ‘pop art’ that in the West originated in a strong capitalist consumer culture that, due to the fundamental economic, political, and social differences between the two Blocs, could not exist in the East.¹⁶⁷

Most exhibitions organised in France and the Federal Republic of Germany discussed in Chapter 2, can be inscribed into the traditional, ‘vertical’ mode of art history. Through labelling, they often homogenised their selection of Czechoslovak, Czech, and Slovak artists as ‘The Praguers’ or simply the ‘40 artists’, ‘8 artists’, and ‘newest tendencies’ from the country. The large-scale selections tried to represent a totality of the underground scene with contemporary artworks previously not known in the West which representation had often taken the emphasis from the ‘artistic diversity’ and created a homogenised scene of the ‘unofficial’, the ‘dissident’, and the ‘martyrly’. Furthermore, the curators of these shows tended to describe these works in relation to the Western canonised context with allusions to formal or ‘metaphysical’ similarities. These descriptions often seem representative of the ‘colonial’ register (Bishop) and the ‘close Other’ (Pejić), someone who is artistically familiar enough to be approximated to the canon but not equal to those already present in there. As Cornevin described them during the French exhibitions, they are ‘universal’ in their use of the Western codes, and thus, paradoxically, cannot be ‘exotic’.¹⁶⁸ These allusions to the ‘exotic’ and the attempts to overcome them are precise examples of the ‘vertical’ mode of history writing as he tried to place the Czechoslovak artists into the context of the familiar, ‘known’ Western world. The ‘metaphysical analogies’ of Alexander Tolnay in the Esslingen ‘Czech Painting Today’ exhibition also inscribe to this narrative of Cornevin, namely the approximation of Central East European artists to the West through canonical narratives, the language of stylistics, and the discussions of the existential anxieties over the loss of values. The undertones of Kazalarska’s ‘heroic’ narrative also helped to reproduce the ‘vertical’ structuring of not just the artworks but also of the artistic events taking place in socialist Czechoslovakia. For example, Cornevin’s ‘The Praguers’ and his insistence on the ‘years of silence’ (the subtitle of the show) present these artists ‘silenced’, reminiscent of the suppressed freedom fighters.

¹⁶⁶ Piotrowski, 55.

¹⁶⁷ Meyric Hughes, ‘Were We Looking Away?’, 106.

¹⁶⁸ Cornevin, *Les Pragois : Les Années de Silence*, page unnumbered.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Central East European exhibitions, these ‘standard’ narratives became more nuanced. For example, ‘EXPRESSIV – Central East European Art since 1960’ tried to present a unique parallel in the Central East European region by presenting Polish, Czechoslovak, Hungarian, Austrian, and Yugoslav artists together. The curators search for a ‘legitimate’ art, and the exhibition as the representation of said ‘legitimate’ art, independent of the regional and global centres shows attempts at establishing a parallel, ‘horizontal’ art history between the two Blocs of the Cold War era. However, these attempts are undermined by the strong homogenisation under the regional terminology (‘Central East Europe’) and the overemphasised historically shared (and presumably assumed to be positive) experience of the Habsburg and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Comparatively, ‘Trigon’ had similar ‘horizontal’ art historical tendencies. The curators’ selection of artists, however, was less homogenising as the regional tendencies were ‘barely’ visible and the emphasis was placed on the individual artistic statements. The selection process of nominating artists by the participating countries and the inclusion of Central East European curators and art historians not only democratised the process but also counteracted the universal Western ‘voice’ of art history. This strategy is very similar to Western canon heterogenization programs of the second half of the 20th century but given the ‘close otherness’ of (Central) East Europe it proves difficult to determine how effective this strategy was in terms of ‘horizontal’ art history. This question might be covered in subsequent research.

Pairing exhibitions such as ‘Dialog’ (1986) and ‘Détente’ (1991-1994) also applied similar ‘horizontal’ art historical and curatorial strategies. Both exhibitions aimed at representing a selection of contemporary ‘unofficial’ artists from Central East Europe (from Poland in ‘Dialog’ and from Czechoslovakia in ‘Détente’). The curators of these exhibitions also emphasised the individual artistic positions rather than the ‘otherness’ of the Eastern European artists. The short prefaces of Christine König and Hans Knoll to the first ‘Détente’ catalogue also avoid the vertical hierarchisation of the Eastern and Western artists in line with the ‘horizontal’ mode.¹⁶⁹ In the case of ‘Détente 2’, the co-curator Loránd Hegyi sees the earlier exhibitions (‘Détente 1’) as an integrational of Central East Europe in the larger European context.¹⁷⁰ However, Hegyi’s interpretation does not need to reflect on the curatorial intentions of König and Knoll or influence the meaning of the exhibition as a whole. Despite their similar ‘pairing’ strategies, ‘Dialog’ and ‘Détente’ were two very different exhibitions as ‘Dialog’

¹⁶⁹ Ehling, *Détente*, 11 and 13.

¹⁷⁰ Rainer et al., *Détente*, 20.

presented Polish artists as integral, but underrepresented parts of the Western, ‘international’ art scene while ‘Détente’ was more sensible about the economic, political, and social differences between the two Blocs, and the unique circumstances of Czechoslovak artists within the Eastern Bloc. This sensibility can be seen in the selection of older generation artists active during the more liberal period of the 1960s as well as the oppressive Normalisation when their access to international art currents was limited. The younger generations of artists often adapted better to this changed environment.¹⁷¹ But, ‘Détente’ was also a form of ‘liberation’ of East European art. As the interview in the supplements of this work testifies to, the curators actively worked against the existing feelings of shame and deference of Czechoslovak artists vis-à-vis their Western counterparts. Such postcolonial gestures stepped over the expected priority of Western artists and tried to present Eastern European artists as equal in a ‘horizontally’ structured constellation. This way the relationship between the North American, British, and Austrian Western canon that was historically placed on top of the global art historical geography was ‘reduced’ to the mere partner of Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the individualistic artistic positions of Western artists further divided the Western Bloc into a heterogeneous multitude that was faced with a similarly heterogeneous Czechoslovak multitude. This way, ‘Détente’ presented a truly ‘horizontal’ art historical approach that unlike ‘EXPRESSIONISM’ or ‘Trigon’ was able to go beyond the confines of regional locality, and question not just the relationship between the West and its Eastern European periphery, but also the relationship within the often also homogenised Western canon. Furthermore, the Eastern European locations of the exhibition series, Warsaw, Brno, Budapest, and Ljubljana, despite being the results of curators’ connections, represent an important element in the possible cultural self-liberation of the region. As some observers pointed out, in line with postcolonial theory, the cultural liberation of a country or a region, cannot come from the West, or the former coloniser, but must come from either the local context or must be mediated through locally bound actors and culture workers.¹⁷² Besides these considerations, ‘Détente’ seems an example of a sympathetic, East-European-oriented Western curatorial effort in overcoming the economic, political, social, and ‘philosophical’ differences between the two historically entrenched sides of the Cold War.

¹⁷¹ Compare with Mervart, ‘Shaping “Real Socialism”’: The Normalised Conception of Culture’.

¹⁷² Compare with Blažević, ‘East - West Side Story’; Boris Groys, ‘Back from the Future’, *Third Text* 17, no. 4 (December 2003): 323–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0952882032000166152>.

Conclusions

This Thesis set itself the subject matter of ‘Détente’, a series of contemporary art exhibitions organised between 1991 and 1994. Curated by two Austrian gallerists, Christine König and Hans Knoll, ‘Détente’ aimed at renegotiating the relationship between Western and former Eastern Blocs of the Cold War era. The curators selected five contemporary Czechoslovak artists from the country’s underground, ‘unofficial’ scene who they paired with Western (Austrian, British, and North American) artists creating an artistic dialogue. The first chapter presented an outline of the historical background of the exhibition, the development of cultural policies in the Eastern Bloc, and more specifically socialist Central East Europe and the place of Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and the Normalisation period. The different aesthetic and stylistic frameworks as well as the possibilities of cultural exchange within the Bloc and between the two Blocs are discussed here in detail. These historical circumstances served as the backbone of the curatorial concept of ‘Détente’. The second and third parts of Chapter 1 presented this curatorial concept and reconstructed the exhibition. It differentiated between ‘Détente 1’ (1991-1994) and ‘Détente 2’ (1994) based on the number of participating artists and slight modifications to the original concept. It also reconstructed ‘Détente 1’ in detail based on the case study of the last instalment of this concept at the Municipal Gallery in Budapest in late 1993 and early 1994. This reconstruction was based on archival materials stored in the Archaeological Archive of the Budapest History Museum and, to a lesser extent, the collection of Knoll Gallery Budapest. An interview with one of the curators, Hans Knoll, was also made and supplemented to this text. Even though originally a reconstruction of ‘Détente 2’ was also planned, the lack of documentation at the Museum of Modern Art Ludwig Stiftung in Vienna, the only venue where the show was exhibited, this reconstruction seems impossible. Chapter 1 also talked about the importance of outside financial support and contemporary Austrian cultural and foreign policies.

Chapter 2 presented the general attitudes of Western curators vis-à-vis Eastern European art and artists in the 1980s and early 1990s. These different attitudes included the surveying, ‘curatorial safari’ register described by the British art historian, Clair Bishop that tried to bridge the lack of knowledge present in the West of cultural products made behind the Iron Curtain, as well as more strategic approaches in the interpretation of Eastern European art described by the Bulgarian cultural anthropologist, Svetla Kazalarska. Kazalarska’s discussion was used as a wider framework of the curatorial and institutional strategies. The second part of Chapter 2

presented a wide selection of exhibitions featuring Eastern European and specifically Czechoslovak artists in Austrian, West German, and French contexts between the mid-1980s and early 1990s. Additionally, a Swedish exhibition at the Moderna Museet of Stockholm (curated by Olle Granath in 1986), 'Dialog' was added due to its undeniable parallels to 'Détente'. The chapter also placed these exhibitions in the curatorial framework of Kazalarska. Chapter 3 continued this contextualisation through the paradigm of 'horizontal art history' established by the Polish art historian, Piotr Piotrowski, and argued that many of the exhibitions discussed in Chapter 2 reserved the use of a 'vertical' historical register, that is, they hierarchically ordered the selected artworks by using the Western art canon and stylistic language as the starting point of the interpretation of Central East European (contemporary) art. Two slight exceptions were noted: 'EXPRESSIV – Central East European Art since 1960' curated by Czech-American art historian and collector, Meda Mladek and German art historian, Dieter Ronte at the Museum of Modern Art Vienna and the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington D.C. around 1987, and 'Trigon' curated by various Central East European art historian and curators around the Austrian curator Wilfried Skreiner at the Neue Galerie at Landesmuseum Joanneum Gratz in 1991. It was also argued that similar to these two exhibitions, 'Détente' also used a 'horizontal' art historical register but at the same time relocated the interpretative framework of Central East European art from the regional context to a global, international context where Czechoslovak, Austrian, British, and North American artists could engage in free artistic dialogue. Furthermore, the curators' emphasis on the freestanding artistic positions heterogenized both Eastern and Western parties creating an equal basis for said dialogue. This way, 'Détente' became a self-liberational example dispersed throughout the Central East European regional centres of Warsaw, Brno, Budapest, and Ljubljana. Whether local culture workers, curators, and artists could harness this self-liberating potential is the question for another text.

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Attachments

Interview with Han Knoll, 23 February 2024, Vienna

Could you tell me in your own words what 'Détente' was?

Well, 'Détente' was an answer to the East-West theme in the very early '90s to bring artists, in this case the older generation for certain reason, from Czechoslovakia and the West.

Christine König told me yesterday that the title 'Détente' was her idea. 'Détente' as historical phenomena prescribes a certain interpretation. What did you think about that? Did you agree with it?

For the both of us, it was quite difficult to find a title. I understood this word in the sense that the two Blocks were opening and meeting each other so that the confrontation between East and West was finished. This is how I understood it.

It is interesting because the confrontation between East and West did not finish with détente, and to a certain extent it accelerated in the 1980. Did you not consider this at the time?

I did not see that the confrontation accelerated in the '80s. I think this connects to why I opened a gallery in the Eastern Bloc. In the '80s Hungary was the most open country already, the expectation were high, and things got more and more easy, and simple. Maybe I took it too easy, but I did not care about confrontations. I was taken out of trains by soldiers and such things, but I did not really care. I saw that the whole thing was getting weaker.

You mentioned Hungary as the 'happiest barrack' of the Eastern Bloc, but you chose to work with Czechoslovak artists. Why?

There were reasons for that. One reason was the Czechoslovakia had the toughest border with East Germany, and it was very difficult for artists to get in touch with Western artists or art projects, only for some years in the '60s that somehow lasted to '70-73. Some of these older generation artists could travel to exhibitions with the upcoming shooting starts from the West. So they exhibited in shows with On Kawara, or such superstars. Hungary was more open, they could travel at least to Vienna by bus, Czechoslovaks could not. A very important part of the concept was that we selected older generation artist looking and watching to their Western

counterparts whom they admired, followed, whom they felt artistically related. And we asked them: ‘Who did you watch in the West? Who was important in the West for your art?’

That is an interesting thing because Christine König told me yesterday sort of offered these Western artists to these specific Czech artists saying that ‘look at this, what do you think?’.

This was a different approach. I had experience with these artists since I had been visiting Czechoslovakia since the mid-80s. I visited these artists in their so-called ‘studios’.

In your interview with Mélyi, you talked about how you started visiting Hungary before you opened your gallery there. Could you tell me about when and where you started your visits to Czechoslovakia?¹⁷³

I first visited Bratislava, Brno, and soon Prague. It is difficult to understand this situation because nowadays if you want to visit an artist in his studio, you need to make appointments weeks in advance, but back then they were ‘non-official’ artists – or, whenever we call that – they knew each other, they were close to each other, so they handed me over from one studio to another without any appointments. I met one here in Vienna, I met another one there in Czechoslovakia, and soon I knew the whole underground. That was existing, they started asking about the situation in Vienna and Austria and talking about their situation in Czechoslovakia. I soon discovered histories, how they got ‘non-conformist’, and then I found out some of them had connections with curators from the West, for example, Gian Carlo Politti, the editor of Flash Art who visited them. Then I met such people from the West as well, and this was my reason to the exhibition.

Another thing that I noted that you selected artists of an older generation who started working in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

You had to be behind the Iron Curtain. The exhibition was about that. ‘How similar artists, similar ideas developed in the two systems?’. I give you an example, the most extreme example, of Jiri Valoch and Joseph Kosuth. Joseph or his assistant showed up very early at every venue and they took immediately the central and biggest space, room in the exhibition. Joseph was at the peak of his career, Jiri in a certain way was also because he was a curator, a concept artist, he

¹⁷³ Mélyi, ‘Később úgys minden unalmasabb lett minden... Videointerjú Hans Knoll-l (in German with Hungarian subtitle)’.

was an art historian, a theoretician, etc. but he was a shy person. When we had the show in Prague, and I said 'Jiri, come on, you are the first now. You can choose the best room for yourself.' Jiri was shy and he hesitated, he stood up, went to a door, and said 'I want to exhibit my work here (in the doorframe) and here in the window (frame)', not on the wall. I said 'Jiri you must be making fun of me, you can stop it now. Which room?', and I got this is a concept art piece, so let him do it. So when the opening came, Meda Mladek, the American collector came and I heard her speak to the artists in Czech saying 'Na, ja, this is typical again. Western curator puts the Eastern artists in the darkest corners.' I did not respond, not one word since she did not get Jiri's act. I am sure the artists who heard her agreed that this was typical. They did not get it. This anecdote shows a lot about the East-West situation, and about the exhibition concept.

In your preface to catalogues, you wrote about how earlier exhibitions were problematic. Could you tell me about which exhibitions relating to the East-Western relationship you remember? I have some examples, the ones Hegyi mentioned in his introduction. 'EXPRESSIV', the 'Zeichen im Fluss'.

The Styrian exhibitions connected Italy to Central Europe... Looking back, what I wanted is a normalisation because these exhibitions were still 'exotic'.

Do you think there was a certain orientalisation of Central East European art?

No, I would not say that. Rather, my intention was to have these kinds of exhibitions on a normal, daily level. Nothing special, have artists together on equal standings, with equal expectations, to restore with such steps normal life.

Do you remember the exhibition 'Blood and Honey'? Hungary was not involved in it. I tried to quarrel with the Hungarian ambassador called me during the months when the show was decided, and she asked me if I knew Harald Szeeman and what was I thinking whether Hungarian artists should participate in a Balkan exhibition. I answered her that she should support it as it is a super opportunity for the Hungarian artists invited. She insisted that they would be left out because it would prove that Hungary was part of the Balkan. I replied saying that if she forbade this, she would show that Hungary was really indeed Balkan. She had never ever called me again. During the opening, the Hungarian artists who were already contacted in Budapest came, and were so sad that they were left out... I, of course, told them the reason.

Boris Groys in the early 2000s talked about how Eastern countries had to orientalise themselves because socialism was a hyper-modernist idea, so in a sense, these countries were modernist then the Western ones. So, they had to show that they were in fact not that modern.

I do not agree with his conclusion. In the early 90s, after the first enthusiasm and high expectations, there was a disillusionment and disappointment, and the discourse centred around 'centres and peripheries'. I did not like this discussion. It could have contributed to the understanding of the situation, also to contemporary politics, political decision making when politicians in these former socialist countries interfered with art scene and infrastructure, institutions, they made them worse, except for a few cases like Slovenia.

I brought you another exhibition. One word that reoccurred reading about 'Détente' (both in the articles of the time and the catalogues) was 'dialogue' between East and West because détente was a certain dialogue in the political sphere as well. There was a very interesting exhibition titled 'Dialog' in the Moderna Museet Stockholm curated by Olle Granath. He basically did the same thing with Polish artists. So, he allowed Polish artists to pair themselves with Western artists, and then he exhibited them together.

In Poland or Hungary, such a thing was possible, but not in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, or the Soviet Union. That was one of the reasons to choose Czechoslovak artists in the exhibition. I had the intention to have a gallery in Prague as well, but you know about that.

Reading the archival materials of the Budapest exhibition, I noticed in the press release that this exhibition would be travelling among these cities, however some venues were missing (Ljubljana, for example). Did you have a specific concept to make this exhibition into a series?

Yes, for most of the places, we used my already existing contacts from the socialist times. Many of my friends from the 80s, after the fall of the wall, got to high positions, museum directors, ministers for culture, so on.

So, is that the reason for you only choosing Eastern institutions for 'Détente'? Was it not part of the concept?

Yes, that was my circle. They were hungry for such projects, not just the institutions but the artists as well. I was too busy in those days, I travelled to five cities in five days. I could not go

to Paris, or somewhere like that. I also would not have had the budget. On the other hand, Austria supported these projects quite a lot. The Austrian government in those years had the positive will to collaborate with their Eastern neighbours. This Minister of Culture, Scholten, was a very open-minded person, clever, well-educated, humane... a great man. He was the reason why Hegyi became a director of Mumok.

In interview with Mélyi, you talked about how Szili Pista collaborated with Douglas Gordon, the Scottish artist, because of your work in Hungary. Did you have similar experiences from ‘Détente’ that, for example, Western and Eastern artists worked together?

That was the follow up from this concept. I reacted with this idea against the silly discussion, I mentioned earlier, about ‘periphery and centre’. I thought I need to go the periphery in the West, that was Scotland. Many of the Young British artists were active of Scotland doing crazy things without any money. They were also very international which was important because at that time I wanted to make the Hungarian art scene more internationally connected through these crazy ideas they had, for example, having art works in toilets, etc. I was fascinated by that. In Hungary, Újlak was a new thing from which I had great expectation; however it did not last long.

By the time we get ‘Détente’ to Vienna, we get two new pairs of artists. Could you tell me what was the idea behind that?

Well, it was not my idea. So, I cannot tell you. Probably, the museum wanted to extend the scale and dimension of the choices. What they did added did not fit our first concept because of the artists’ historical positions, and we had only still living artists in the original concept. For me, where I was more involved, what was more important was what the artists said whom they wanted to be exhibited with which was not the case in Vienna. I think it might have Lorand’s decision or someone’s from the department. We still had catalogues available from the Brno exhibition, but he wanted to have a new catalogue published – that is the reason why there are two of them. I was not against this change, though, if he wanted to develop it, it was his right as the director.

Talking about living artists, you specifically chose contemporary art works for the show, not earlier works that were made in the ‘60s or ‘70s.

It would have been too complicated to research these works. We had never really considered it. Most of these artists in the East Bloc did not have many artworks from those decades. They used the materials available to them, usually of poor quality. More importantly, they did not have storage space.

**List of works from ‘Détente – Enyhülés’ at the Municipal Gallery of Budapest,
1993-1994**

Archive reference: Budapesti Történeti Múzeum Régészeti Adattár Intézménytörténeti dokumentációs gyűjtemény, BTM RA M-733-93

Rudolf Fila

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1) Ariadnina nit, 1973
(Ariadnes Faden)
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
145 x 110 cm | 6) Dva, 1983 ([wei]
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
75 x 70 cm |
| 2) Tretie svetlo, 1974
(Drittes Licht)
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
105 x 85 cm | 7) Spád, 1984
(Gefalle)
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
70 x 90 cm |
| 3) Glosa ku Goyovi, 1977
(Glosse auf Goya)
Diptychon
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
100 x 150 cm | 8) Homogenita (Homogenität)
Diptychon
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
90 x 130 cm |
| 4) Venusa miloská, 1983
(Venus von Milo)
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
95 x 95 cm | 9) Kabuki + II, 1986 und 1987
Diptychon
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
90 x 140 cm |
| 5) Jedna (Eins)
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
75 x 70 cm | 10) Bez názvu, 1957 bis 1990
(Ohne Titel)
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
95 x 77 cm |
| | 11) Unik, 1990
(Verlaut)
Öl auf weiß grundierter Leinwand
95 x 75 cm |

Milan Knížák

- | | |
|---|---|
| Animals from the serie of a new paradise:
zusammen mit 16 Spiegeln 1 x 1 m | 3) "DODUCK" (duck), 1990
(kana)
Objekt, Laminat 46 x 26 x 27 cm |
| 1) "SHAPANT" (lephant), 1990 Cápafert
(elfánt)
Objekt, Laminat 110 x 57 x 56 cm | 4) "PIGGISH" (pig), 1990
Objekt, Laminat 67 x 31 x 55 cm |
| 2) "SHEEPY" (lizard), 1990
Objekt, Laminat 80 x 35 x 30 cm | 5) "TIRAFF" (tiger), 1990
Objekt, Laminat 116 x 119 x 68 cm |

Air-Planes

1. N° 1, 1990
2. Objekt, Aluminium 100 x 90 x 36 cm
3. N° 2, 1990 Objekt, Aluminium 109 x 84 x 27 cm
4. N° 3, 1990 Objekt, Aluminium 107 x 67 x 38 cm
5. N° 4, 1990 Objekt, Aluminium 87 x 76 x 22 cm

Stanislav Kolibal

Stavba X; Bau X; Construction X. 1991

Drevená plastika; Holzskulptur; wood sculpture 110 x 240 x 240 cm

Adriena Šimotová

- 1) Stůl (Posledni vecere); Tisch (Letztes Abendmahl)
1991
Objekt: papír, uhel, drevo; Objekt: Papier, Kohle, Holz
130 x 111 x 12 cm
- 2) U stolu (vec urnitr); Am Tisch (Ding innen)
1991
Objekt: papir, uhel, drevo; Objekt: Papier, Kohle, Holz

- 121 x 105 x 30 cm
- 3) Cerný stůl (vne i uvnitr); Schwarzer Tisch (außen und innen)
1991
Objekt: papír, pastel, drevo; Objekt: Papier, Pastell, Holz
67 x 122 x 102 cm
- 4) 3 kresby: Veci I., II., III.; 3 Zeichnungen: Dinge I., II., III.,
Uhel, pastel; Kohle, Pastell je 67 x 39 cm

Jiri Valoch

- 1) - 4) Zeichnungen, Ohne Titel
Foramt Din A4

- 5) Wort-Installation

Tony Cragg

- 1) Wating for a park, 1982/91
Pflastersteine aus Beton (101 St.), Betonringe (3 St.)

Joseph Kosuth

- 1) Installation

David Rabinowitch

- 1) Ceremonial Object 5;
1988/0ale Cross (for Sheila) Köris - bálua kerent
Esche
265 x 210 x 10 cm
- 2) Ceremonial Object 9 as Painting:
Kultilum targ 4, fatweng
Tondo in Brazilian Blue Granite with Centre Removed

- 1990
bras. Granit, Schrauben (verzinkt)
60 x 2 cm
- 3) Ceremonial Object 10 as Painting:
Square in Volga Blue Granite with Centre Removed
1990
russ. Granit, Schrauben (verzinkt)
75,5 x 75,5 x 2 cm

Arnulf Rainer

aus der Serie WUNSCH UND UNGLÜCK

1) - 4) Ölbilder, jeweils Mischtechnik auf Reproduktion, auf Holz aufgezogen:

"Russische Situation", 1991

99 x 121 cm, gerahmt mit Aluminium 102,3 x 124,3 cm

"Brandtheater", 1990

99 x 122 cm, gerahmt mit Aluminium 102,3 x 125,1 cm

"Blut im Amt", 1990

122 x 99 cm, gerahmt mit Aluminium 102,3 x 125,1 cm

(Beschädigung: im linken unteren Drittel ist ein Ritzer von 1 cm Länge, ebenso links eine Ecke verbogen.)

"Damensturz", 1990

122 x 99 cm, gerahmt mit Aluminium 102,3 x 125,1 cm

5) - 26) überarbeitete Drucke, Formate zwischen A4 und A3, gerahmt

Photographs



Image 1 Installation view from the exhibition 'Détente - Enyhülés' (1993-1994) with the installation of Joseph Kosuth, Municipal Gallery of Budapest; courtesy of Knoll Gallery Budapest