

## **Feedback from the opponent of the bachelor thesis**

**Title:** '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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**Study programme:** Bachelor

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The bachelor thesis entitled *'Détente' (1991-1994): renegotiation of Cold War era East-West artistic divisions through the works of Czechoslovak artists in the early 1990s*, focuses on the investigation of a series of exhibitions realized between 1991 and 1994, entitled 'Détente'. The thesis also compares 'Détente' with other exhibitions that featured Central Eastern European and specifically Czechoslovak modernist art in the 1980s and early 1990s, presented in a Western context. In doing so, this thesis aims to extend the analysis of these exhibition projects and examine them in relation to the 'postcolonial discourse' and based on art historical writing developed by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski.

First of all, I appreciate the clearly defined structure of the thesis already in the introduction. Formally, the thesis is divided into three logical chapters and is well structured. The first chapter focuses on the historical background of the 'Détente' exhibition and the historical background: cultural policy in the Eastern Bloc and 'Normalized' Czechoslovakia. The second chapter focuses on an overview of exhibitions of Eastern European and Czechoslovak art in the West between 1980 and 1991 and theoretical proposition of 'Détente' as a curatorial strategy around 1991. The last chapter proposes a postcolonial reading of these exhibitions based on Piotr Piotrowski's conceptualization of 'horizontal art history'. While it is clear that this thesis is based on a historical and theoretical analysis of specific exhibition projects and an exploration of the position of Central Eastern Europe in relation to Westcentric art history, drawing on the work of Piotr Piotrowski, this thesis neglects to delineate the state of research (the existing literature) as well as situate the work within the context of the discipline. Therefore, it is unclear what literature the thesis draws on and how this thesis contributes to existing research and according to what the theoretical texts used were selected. Moreover, although the entire third chapter draws on Piotrowski's theoretical work, the thesis does not situate his research within the broader discipline of art history, nor does it provide information as to why this particular theoretical text was chosen for analysis. In addition, crucial publications are omitted, such as Maria Orišková (ed.) *Curating 'EASTERN EUROPE' and Beyond: Art Histories through the Exhibition* (2013), which reflect on the history of exhibition-making in the region.

Similarly, in relation to the geographical focus of this thesis, a number of terms used to define the research area appear in the text without being defined and placed in an ideological context: 'Eastern Europe', 'Central Eastern Europe', 'Eastern Block', 'Central Europe/ Mitteleuropa', 'Former Eastern Europe', etc. The terminology chosen here is particularly important as the thesis aims to provide a postcolonial reading of regional art history. Despite the aforementioned homogenising categories of the region, the thesis also rightly notes, citing Piotrowski, that there were differences across the Eastern Bloc in relation to cultural policy; in general, 'unofficial' artists rarely had the opportunity to exhibit internationally. The thesis however also rightly mentions that there were some exceptions of the international collaborations, such as the Krakow Graphic Biennial in Poland, the alternative

gallery space György Galántai in Balatonboglár in Hungary, and the transnational exchange of art through mail art. The thesis however concludes that, '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 results of extended research efforts done in the last 20 years and might not have been relevant knowledge at the time of 'Détente'.' (10) It is thus unclear why they are mentioned in the thesis, and again (given the omission of this research's own positionality/literature review) it is unclear what the theoretical and historical sources and situatedness of this thesis are. As the theoretical interpretation of the thesis is based on Piotrowski's 2012 theoretical work, which is also from the last 20-ish years, it remains unclear why current research that has made a significant contribution to the knowledge of cultural exchange in the region and beyond has been omitted. For example, Klara Kemp-Welch's book *Networking the Bloc. Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981* (2018), like other recent publications, challenges the traditionally held notion of isolated Cold War artistic production. Similarly, in 2018, Beata Hock and Anu Allas edited *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, a volume that connects regional art historical discourses to the global context. In addition to these publications, several research projects have been undertaken in recent years, such as the current research at the University of Copenhagen entitled *Exhibiting Across the Iron Curtain. The forgotten trace of Danish artists exhibiting in the context of state socialism, c. 1955-1985*. In terms of cultural exchange between East and West before 1989, Edinburgh gallerist Richard Demarco was a major figure who brought many artists from Eastern and Western Europe to the Edinburgh Festival, such as the Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor and the German artist Joseph Beuys in 1973.

The last third chapter applied the horizontal art history proposed by Piotr Piotrowski. The work argues that Piotrowski's conceptualization is based on a critical postcolonial paradigm of art history. Piotrowski himself, however, did not work with the term 'postcolonial'. Although the student adopts 'postcolonial' terminology from Svetla Kazalarska's 2009 essay 'Contemporary Art as Ars Memoriae: Curatorial Strategies for Challenging the Post-Communist Condition', which draws on arguments that resonated concretely in the first decade of the 21st century that sought to come to terms with the region's post-Communist experience and the new positioning of Central Eastern Europe. However, the very term 'postcolonial' implies the existence of colonies and suggests a much deeper historical exploitation of people and countries. The thesis did not define this term and did not explain how and why it is used and understood here in the context of Central Eastern Europe. Although it can be argued that his aim to decentralize and dehierarchize art history can be considered a decolonial strategy, it would be useful to define the terminology used more precisely. However, otherness and peripheral status is evident here and is also relevant in relation to discussions about the canon and representation of Eastern European art within the art institution. For instance, Eastern Europe's peripheral status is discussed in relation to Europe's 'class B' and 'second-class citizenship' (Gržnić 2010; Majewska 2021) and its status as a 'post-socialist 'other'' (Tlostanova 2017). Madina Tlostanova, for example, specifically focuses on the analysis of the decolonization of knowledge and decolonial aesthetics in relation to Euromodernity in the context of the post-Soviet world. We can speak here of a decolonial mindset that aims to separate itself from Eurocentric knowledge production. Moreover, if this notion is to be taken literally, then in the context of postcolonial art history in the region, the thesis should be concerned with the relationship to external or internal colonies, for example, the existence of a European internal colony or as a European subaltern group of Roma (Kóczé and Trehan 2009).

However, I believe that the student's aim was to deconstruct the hierarchies that existed in the art world and to emphasize the Eastern European position in the context of making exhibitions. In relation to this, I must highlight the student's effort to conceptualize the problem of representation and challenge the art historical canon by bringing the theoretical work of Griselda Pollock into the discussion. Overall, the analysis provided of the selected exhibitions in relation to 'vertical' and 'horizontal' art histories is very well conducted and thoroughly analysed. The author concludes that exhibitions such as 'Dialogue' (1986) and 'Détente' (1991-1994) are examples of 'horizontal' art historical and curatorial strategies. Through the student's own original research and a conducted interview, this thesis also demonstrated the aim of 'Détente' to counteract the marginal position of Czechoslovak artists in relation to their Western counterparts. The author describes it as a gesture that aimed to present 'Eastern European artists as equal in a 'horizontally' structured constellation.' (42)

Despite the above-mentioned shortcomings, I must conclude that the stated aim of this bachelor thesis, namely, to analyse the 'Détente' series of exhibitions and to compare them with other exhibitions of Eastern European art presented in Western Europe in the 1980s-1990s, all against the background of Piotrowski's theoretical writings on the horizontal history of art, has been successfully fulfilled by this thesis. Overall, I appreciate the original research that this work has undertaken, and the interview with curator Han Knoll that complemented that research. The work contains a wealth of important information, a substantial overview of exhibitions of 'Eastern European' art in a Western context between 1980 and 1991. The thesis also significantly questions the position of the region in the context of global art history, as well as the construction of the canon. The work is well written, well-structured and well researched. The research is very well conducted and presented. It is of a very high stylistic standard for an undergraduate degree.

Proposed grade: 2