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TOTALITARIANISM AND MODERNISM: THE “THAW” AND *INFORMEL* PAINTING IN CENTRAL EUROPE, 1955-1965

In the evening of March 5, 1953 at the Moscow Kremlin died Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin – a man whose impact on world history cannot be overestimated. His influence may be measured not only by the sheer number of murdered citizens of almost every country, but also by the developments in the artistic culture of an immense area, including – in particular, though not only – the eastern part of Europe. Stalin’s death was the beginning of a long decline of the system in which art had played a significant role in a ruthless strategy of subjugating – above all, but again not only – the nations of Eastern Europe. A remark of a classic of the communist cultural policy that as a powerful instrument of propaganda art must not be disregarded, and its political potential must be duly exploited,¹ was a principle valid for some governments of the Eastern bloc till its very end in 1989. The decline of the Soviet world was long and slow, but some distinct traces of that process, visible already in what Ilya Erenburg called the “thaw,” appeared almost immediately after Stalin’s death. The upheaval in the Kremlin and vanishing, one by one, of the dictator’s comrades, such as Lavrenti Beria, resulted in the famous “secret speech” on Stalin’s crimes delivered early in 1955 by his successor, Nikita Khrushchev. Different responses which Khrushchev’s speech obtained in the rival communist factions in the countries of Central Europe dominated by the USSR determined differences among specific political strategies and cultural policies of the states of the so-called people’s democracy. In Poland, the copies of Khrushchev’s “secret” address were virtually available to the general public, which meant the coming end of the Stalinist regime, how-

¹ A. Łunaczarski, “Sztuka i rewolucja,” (in:) *Pisma wybrane*, vol. I, Warszawa, 1963, 287.

ever, to give a contrary example, in Romania the speech was known only to the “inner circle” of the most reliable communists. By analogy, in Poland the “thaw” in culture began already in 1955, while in Romania it commenced ten years later, when Nicolae Ceausescu came to power.

The political dynamic of the “thaw” in Central Europe disrupts uniform chronological frames. With the exception of Yugoslavia, whose post-war history developed in a different rhythm and whose artistic culture was functioning in a different and hardly comparable context, Poland was that country in which the effects of the post-Stalinist “thaw” appeared first and in fact turned out permanent, despite fluctuation and the political bankruptcy of the national “hero” of the Polish October of 1956, Władysław Gomułka, discredited by an ant-Semitic and anti-intelligentsia campaign in 1968, and the bloody suppression of workers’ riots in Gdańsk and Szczecin two years later. In a sense, though, Gomułka was lucky enough, if one compares his fate with that of Nicolae Ceausescu, since he died peacefully in his own bed. In Hungary, the breakthrough which caused political changes was the most radical, but the reaction was also the most violent and brutal. The Budapest uprising, which was welcomed with sympathy and hope by the peoples on both sides of the “iron curtain,” and which brought about fear and panic of the governments in the East and West alike, had quite a paradoxical influence on Hungarian culture. On the one hand, it delayed the modernization (if one may use this term) of the local art, yet on the other, thanks to slow and gradual but systematic implementation of a “new economic policy” by Janos Kadar (otherwise responsible for the suppression of the insurrection), which provided a basis of “goulash communism,” once the process of modernization started, it became steady. It should also be remembered that the art of “new expression” or neo-expressionism, which in the eighties all over Central Europe was a sign of more or less open dissent, in Hungary acquired a virtually official status: neo-expressionists represented the People’s Republic of Hungary at the oldest and most respectable European exhibition – the Venice Biennale of 1986.

In Czechoslovakia, after a series of make-believe maneuvers of the local communists in the late fifties, a more thorough “defrosting” of the cultural policy began in the early sixties to gain momentum year by year until the epilogue of the “Prague Spring” on August 21, 1968, when Bulgarian, Polish, Hungarian, East German, and – last but not least – Soviet troops put an end to the hope for “socialism with a human face.” What happened later, and what is usually referred to as “normalization,” was quite a gloomy period of Czech and Slovak history, nevertheless, perhaps for this reason precisely, it was also a period of an interesting underground culture in its full bloom.

The postwar culture of Bulgaria was in the state of permanent stagnation. Even though, apart from the USSR, the Eastern European changes of the power system caused by the death of Stalin and Beria occurred in Bulgaria as early as in 1954, when Todor Zhivkov began eliminating his rivals who seized power in the late 1940s after the death of the legendary Dimitrov, still, the influence of those developments on culture was rather slight and did not pertain to artistic culture at all. Such a situation lasted practically until the eighties, while Zhivkov ruled the country continuously till 1989, when he was put under house arrest by the new authorities and started working on his memoirs which were published a few years later.

Situated right on the "front line," the German Democratic Republic was in a particularly difficult situation. In fact, the first symptoms of resistance against the Soviet power system became visible immediately after Stalin's death in 1953. The most violent episode of that resistance was the Berlin uprising of June 17, 1953, which must have been quite a problem for the local power elite. The problem was solved in a dialectical fashion of, as Martin Damus has put it, "stalinist de-Stalinization".² Intellectuals and artists were allowed to cherish some hope, but they were soon quite brutally deprived of any illusions. A resolution of the conference in Bitterfeld of April 1959 made it explicit that the culture of the GDR was supposed to be "socialist" in the first place, which of course meant that it had to conform to the rules set by the Central Committee of the German Socialist Party of Unity (SED). Thus, the cultural "thaw" was over before it even started. The building of the Berlin wall in 1961 was a literally palpable sign of the end of hope, preventing any possibility of contact with the West; in particular with enemy number one of the East German communists, the Western part of Germany. Realizing that in the evening before the fatal night of August 12, 1961 the citizens of the GDR could freely cross the internal German border only to find out the next morning that the way out was irrevocably closed, one may fathom the depth of public shock. The GDR was a very sensitive spot of the Soviet system – a genuine "combat zone" – which was why the post-Stalinist Kremlin regime, i. e. the group of Khrushchev, adamantly supported Walter Ulbricht, a Stalinist *par excellence*, who was in charge of the "stalinist de-Stalinization."

No doubt, the death of Stalin all over Central Europe provoked the hopes for some "thaw," quite often expressed in a covert manner only. Such hope in disguise was perhaps a sign of the times and a measure of

² M. Damus, *Malerei in der DDR. Funktionen der bildenden Kunst in Realen Sozialismus*, Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991, 123 ff.

the Stalinist captivation of Central European culture – the obscurity of the prospects which soon turned out more than well justified. Let us now compare two paintings – quite different, coming from two different countries and executed in two different years, yet expressing the same disguised hope for the future.



1. Tibor Csernus, “Three Literary Editors”, 1955 [Petöfis Literature Museum, Budapest]

“Three Literary Editors” by Tibor Csernus of 1955 [the Petöfi Museum of Literature, Budapest, il. 1] represents an interior of a cafe with three seated men. They are sitting at the table covered with a cloth – on the table there are some glasses, a bottle, and a newspaper. They all wear, as became the literati (at least at that time), suits and ties. A common cafe scene, quite typical of the tradition of European painting, yet this is exactly why the picture is interesting. Not long before, showing such a painting in public was absolutely out of question, and in a sense Csernus performed a truly revolutionary gesture, even though it was a revolution *à rebours*. He referred to the tradition of the cafe as an insti-

tution of literary life at the moment when others were still painting different interiors and men wearing quite different clothes. If a man of letters ever appeared in the iconography of the socialist realism, it was not in a cafe, which the ideologues of Marxism-Leninism associated with bourgeois idleness rather than with the commitment to socialism. According to Anatol Lunacharsky's dictum quoted at the beginning of this essay, socialism could not do without the writer who was not supposed to waste his time in a cafe, but to take part in the life of the proletariat and implement the postulates of its avant-garde, the communist party. Hence, rejecting the iconography of the socialist realism, Csernus went against the grain of the communist ideology, claiming the writer's and artist's right to be free of the party's pressure and to work in cafes and not on the great construction sites of socialism. He favored the tradition of a literary culture in which the cafe represented the myth of non-commitment and liberty; of the rebellion against purposefully organized society. Sitting in a cafe and writing poems (or not) is the writer's right, as it were, to be different from (once) the bourgeois philistine or (now) the worker. Moreover, the painting contains still another significant element which is particularly important from the point of view contrary to the artistic practice of the socialist realism, namely all the objects of everyday use collected on the cafe table – the glasses, the bottle, the newspaper. According to Katalin Keserü, whose historical account of the iconography of Hungarian painting is the background of this interpretation, they bring to mind the tradition of "small still lifes" characteristic of the art under Horthy's dictatorship, condemned – just as all the period of the admiral's rule – by communists.³ Hence, an apparently innocent interior, normal-looking men and common objects of everyday use acquired deep political meaning – in the era of totalitarian oppression and socialist-realist terror they expressed hope for a change; for a "thaw" that would come after long years of biting "frost."

The other painting, "Die Freunde" done in 1957 by the East German painter Harald Metzkes [the private collection, il. 2], is equally well set in the local context of hopes for the future and possible threats. It was painted at the moment when the changes in the USSR were already well under way. In the GDR, on the one hand, a special French issue of the *Bildende Kunst* included a debate on the art of Picasso, treated by the local artists as the model of modernity, while on the other, the Central Committee of the communist party issued a declaration on the "ideological struggle for socialist culture." The painting – a portrait of a group of

³ K. Keserü, "Historical Iconography of Hungarian Avant-Garde", *Acta Historiae Artium Hung.*, vol. 35, 1990-92: 79.

friends, East Berlin artists – is a triptych, referring, according to an interesting analysis of Karin Thomas, to the tradition of Beckmann.⁴ The scene is located in the atelier of the Academy at Paris Square, Berlin, which is made explicit by a view of the nearby Brandenburg Gate. In the foreground, the first figure on the left is the painter himself, holding a



2. Harald Metzkes, *Die Freunde*, 1957 [private collection]

huge saw as if he were holding a double bass, an instrument associated with jazz music, very popular among the East German bohemia yet considered decadent by the authorities. Right next to Metzkes we can see Manfred Böttcher, who later became a legendary figure of the independent art of the GDR, and the sculptor Werner Stötzner, separated from Böttcher by a sitting waitress. Perhaps the most interesting is the fifth figure, somewhat distanced from the rest of the group – Ernst Schroeder, wearing fashionable clothes, with a cigarette in his hand, legendary not only because of his art, but also because of his original lifestyle. This distance, writes Karin Thomas, is ostentatious, since Schroeder's position among the other artists was quite specific. He would often visit Paris (which explains his chic suit) and he must have been familiar with the latest trends appearing in that still unquestionable capi-

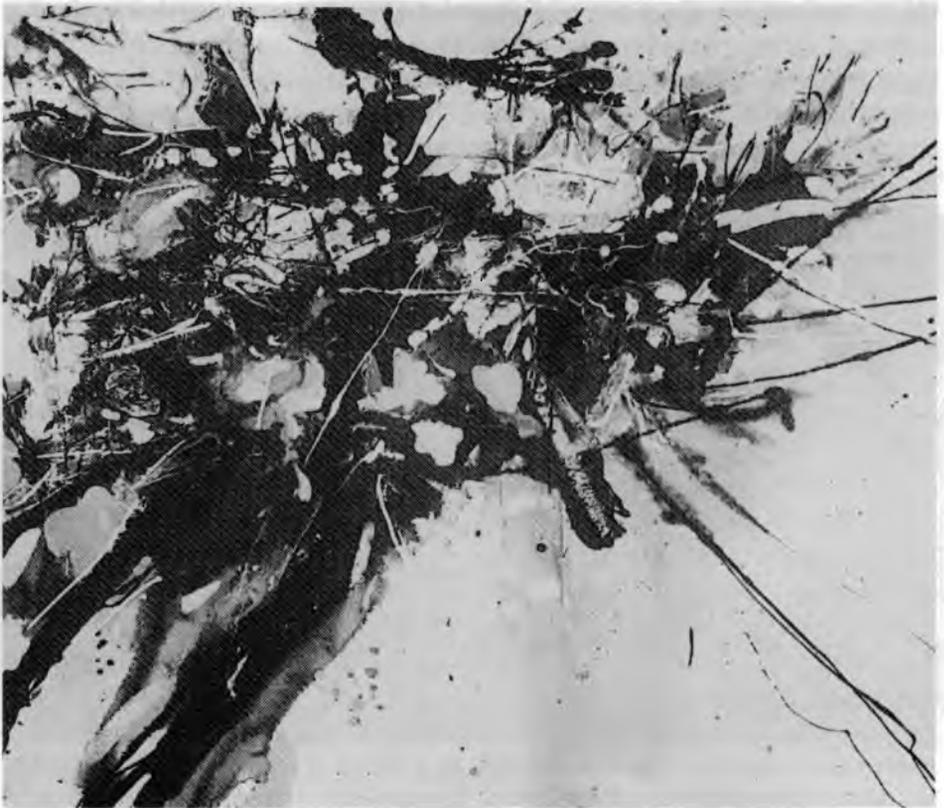
⁴ K. Thomas, *Krise und Ich-Findung im künstlerischen Psychogramm Freundesbild und Selbstportät*, (in:) *Deutschlandbilder. Kunst aus einem geteilten Land*, E. Gillen (Hrsg), Berlin: Berliner Festspiele GmbH, Museumspädagogischen Dienst, Dumont 1997, 545-547.

tal of modern art. In a sense, Schroeder provides a semantic key to the painting, since what is at stake here is modernity or, more precisely, the right to practice modern art, emphasized by the sidepieces of the triptych referring to the wings characteristic of the *Pittura Metafisica*. Moreover, the painting contains a number of references to Picasso, and particularly to the early stages of his art (a man with the trumpet, another one sleeping on the table, as well as, on the other side, an acrobat wearing dark tights); Bernard Buffet (the figure of a woman holding a child); and the still lifes of Morandi (the bottles in the top left corner of the left sidepiece). The picture conveys certain expectations, but also fears that the "thaw," which has just started, may all too soon come to an end. The other motif can be related to two coffin-like chests in the right sidepiece – a kind of *requiem* for the lost hopes for freedom of artistic expression.

Executing his collective portrait of the Berlin painters, Metzkes was already quite aware that in fact the hopes for loosening the grip of the party control over the artistic culture after Stalin's death were nothing but illusion. In the GDR the artistic "thaw" never gained momentum. In Germany the traces of abstract painting, and particularly of the *informel* with at that time was the ideal icon of modernity – evidence of the freedom of expression and a sign of following current trends in art – were virtually nowhere to be found.

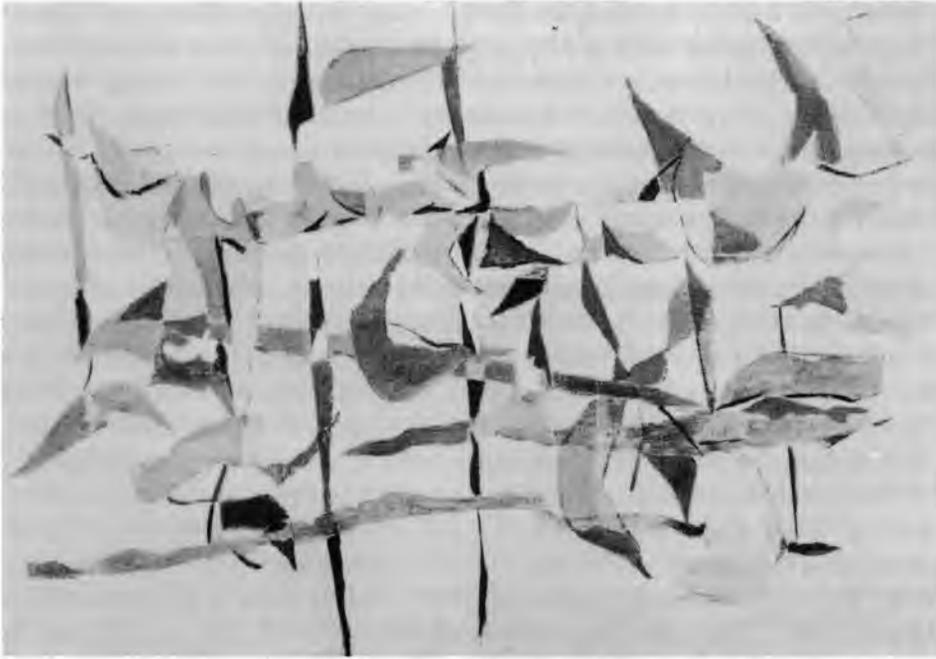
However, at the same time the situation in other East Central European countries was quite different. In Poland Tadeusz Kantor painted his best known *informel* pictures. The so-called Second Exhibition of Modern Art in the Warsaw Zachęta Gallery, which was, according to Mieczysław Porębski, a kind of "levy" of non-objective art,⁵ included many examples of *tachisme*, abstraction, and other modernist poetics. It was by no means a small, private undertaking, hidden from the sight of the authorities – quite on the contrary, party dignitaries took part in the opening ceremony which was described in detail by the national press. Some time later *informel* pictures appeared also in Czechoslovakia, painted by Zdeněk Beran, Vladimír Boudník, Josef Istler, and Antonín Tomalík, although they were not exhibited on official occasions attended by the party dignitaries, but rather at private shows, such as, for instance, two famous, legendary "Confrontations" in Prague in 1960, and an exhibition organized under the same title in Bratislava. Also in Hungary, slowly recovering after the bloody uprising, in the sixties Krisztián Frey and Endre Tót started painting *informel*-like pictures outside the domain of official culture.

⁵ K. Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce. Rozmowy z profesorem Mieczysławem Porębskim*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1992, 103.



3. Tadeusz Kantor, *Pas'aks*, 1957 [National Museum in Poznań]

It cannot be denied that the attitude of the authorities affected the dynamic of “thaw” and, conversely, the dynamic of “thaw” forced the authorities to take some definite stand. One striking example illustrates a strategy adopted by the communist authorities in Central Europe with respect to modernism particularly well, namely an exhibition of the art from twelve socialist countries organized in at the end of 1958 in Moscow. Next to the works of artists from the Soviet Union, the show included exhibits from Albania, Bulgaria, China, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Korea, Mongolia, Poland, Romania, and Vietnam. The Polish exposition was quite unique and indeed very different from anything shown by the other delegations of the states of “people’s democracy,” which was why it attracted the attention of the public, artists, and officials. According to the spectators, the difference consisted in a distinct emphasis on modernism, sharply contrasting with



4. Adam Marczyński, *Kontrasty*, 1957 [National Museum in Kraków]

the otherwise uniform style of the socialist realism. No doubt, it was also evidence of a specific attitude adopted with respect to modernity by the Polish communist authorities.

The organizers of the Polish exposition adopted an assumption that in Moscow they should show nothing but the modernist art, or at least that they must not show the socialist realism like all the other delegations. That decision seems particularly important, no matter what was really shown in Moscow by the Poles, since when one takes a closer look at the choice of exhibits, it turns out that the dominant was not modernism *par excellence*, but post-impressionistic colorism and more expressive, or perhaps more allusive, forms of realism. The selection included some abstract art interpreted as radical modernism (e. g., the works of Adam Marczyński il. 4), but in fact abstraction was rather marginal. Still, in the present context it is significant that Marczyński's art turned out the most appealing to the Moscow audience. "The number of spectators in the Polish section was so high, that on the second day of the exhibition our Soviet assistant asked us for permission to put up protective ropes in front of some exhibits, for example the paintings of Adam Marczyński,"

remembers a participant of the show.⁶ Nevertheless, particularly against the uniform background of the socialist realism, all that display of expressionist, post-impressionist, and abstract poetics was interpreted by the Moscow and international audience in terms of modernism. What is perhaps even more interesting, the exhibition was prepared at the moment when the authorities were becoming less and less favorably inclined towards the violent eruption of the interest in modernism among Polish artists and critics, so distinct in 1956-57, demanding some return to the poetics of realism.⁷ Soon after that the party issued quite an amusing decree allowing for no less than "fifteen percent of abstraction" in any exhibition of visual arts, which, of course, could not be observed. Such a rule could only function as a signal of an official disapproval of the mass interest in the abstract art in Poland, as well as to some degree appease the hard-liners, but it had no genuine influence on the state of affairs.

The Moscow exhibition indicated quite clearly that the Polish authorities did not want to give up their small "portion of independence" in international relations (including culture), gained by Władysław Gomułka after the breakthrough of October 1956, won in hard negotiations with Khrushchev. The ambitions of Gomułka himself can perhaps be best illustrated with an anecdote related by Stefan Kisielewski: "Once a delegation of the Romanian Central Committee visited Poland and someone got an idea to show them an exhibition of painting at the National Museum [in Warsaw – P. P.]. It turned out to be an exhibition of contemporary Polish painting, including mostly abstraction. On seeing it, they got mad, left, and went to see Starewicz, who was then in charge of culture, to ask him what it meant, such formalism in a socialist country, such Western influences? Then Starewicz went to Gomułka whose reaction was the following: abstract painting is not my bag, and I will talk about it with director Lorentz [of the National Museum in Warsaw – P. P.], but the Romanian comrades have no right to decide about our exhibitions anyway."⁸

Of course, one can ask a question whether, organizing the Moscow exhibition, the Polish authorities had any other choice, i. e. whether, as all the other delegations, they could show the socialist realism. In other

⁶ "Wystawa polska w Moskwie. Rozmowa z inż. arch. Andrzejem Pawłowskim, projektantem ekspozycji działu polskiego na wystawie sztuki krajów socjalistycznych w Moskwie", *Życie Literackie*, no. 5 (1959) (annex *Plastyka*, no. 30).

⁷ Cf. A. Rottenberg, „Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki”, (in:) *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1945-1960*, ed. A. Wojciechowski (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1992), 201. (Annex „Wytyczne Sekretariatu KC w sprawie polityki kulturalnej w dziedzinie plastyki”, 233); B. Fi-jałkowska, *Polityka i twórcy 1948-1959*, Warsaw, 1985, 409 ff.

⁸ „Pomówmy o znajomych... Rozmowa Marka Łatyńskiego ze Stefanem Kisielewskim”, *Kontakt*, no. 7-8 (1988), 100 f.

words, was a return to the socialist realism possible in the Poland of the late fifties? In a sense, everything was still possible, and in the past communism often proved that simple truth, still, in that case it was already a different, post-Stalinist communism and the beginning of the so-called real socialism, when the regime started to respect reality at least to some, if relatively minor, extent. In such a context, the return to the past was out of question. In Poland the political and cultural processes precipitated by Stalin's death in 1953 were so advanced that they proved irreversible. Moreover – and that might have been the key aspect of the situation – some members of the party establishment were interested in the permanence of the changes not so much because of good will, but due to their sense of the real. It became obvious that ruling by means of more or less subtle surveillance was more effective than simple terror. However, the question was not the actual range of options available to the communist regime, but the choice of its strategy. If, then, the authorities pointed to the modernist art as the domain of its political identity-building on the international scene (which is especially important in this case, since the other communist states would rather not approve of modernism), and, for that matter, in Moscow, the headquarters of communism, one must realize that under the circumstances such an attitude was indeed exceptional and quite significant – exceptional because in no other country under the Soviet domination the modernist art, and in particular the *informel* painting, appeared in official artistic culture; and significant because it happened to determine the paradigm of the functioning of the modernist art far in advance. On the other hand, though, if the modernist art, including also the *informel*, could develop in the domain of official culture, it does not mean that such art can be interpreted as official in the literal sense of the term.

More or less at the same time, comparable artistic trends were developing, also outside the official culture, in the neighboring Czechoslovakia. In contrast to politics, the "thaw" in art started almost simultaneously with the changes in Poland.⁹ At the beginning of 1955, under the auspices of the Czechoslovak Association of Artists, in Prague there was organized an exposition called "exhibition of the eleven" which was by no means revolutionary – its significance consisted in rejecting the strict rules of the socialist realism and turning toward the tradition

⁹ *Ohniska znovuzrozeni: České umění 1956-1963*, ed. M. Judlova (Praha: Galerie hlavního města Prahy 1994; *Šestdesiate roky v slovenskom výtvarnom umeni*, ed. Z. Rusinová, Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 1995; *Odwilż. Sztuka ok. 1956*, ed. P. Piotrowski, Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe, 1996. On the institutions and structure of artistic life at that time, cf. *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1945-1960*, ed. A. Wojciechowski, Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1992.

of modernity; both expressionism and fauvism, but above all the painting of Matisse.¹⁰ In the same year two important exhibitions were organized in Poland. One of them was the "Arsenal," arranged as an annex to the international youth festival under a common slogan "Against War, Against Fascism," which primarily presented the achievement of the young generation seeking an alternative to the socialist realism mostly in the vague tradition of expressionism. The other was a modest show called (because of the number of participants) the "exposition of the nine," organized in Cracow by a group of artists who were definitely more mature and more experienced. Neither of the two exhibitions included any examples of the *informel*, nevertheless, they were both breaking the ground for the artistic "thaw" which gained momentum in the following year. In 1956 Tadeusz Kantor showed in Poland his paintings done after several months spent in Paris, yet for a series of his works of a *par excellence informel* character the audience had to wait until 1957. In Czechoslovakia the painting of gesture came to the surface in 1958-59, stemming, however, predominantly from the indigenous heritage of the Czech surrealism, inspiring many artists active in the early sixties.¹¹

The problem of tradition is the key to understanding the function of modern art in Central Europe, both between the world wars and in the forties, before the communist authorities started imposing a new cultural policy based on the institutionalization of the socialist realism. That change was particularly brutal in Czechoslovakia, where (unlike in Poland or Hungary) it did not mean just a harder application of the already introduced political principles, but a regular coup which in 1948 thoroughly modified the system, abolishing all political parties in favor of the dictatorship of the communist one. If we follow the observations of Czech art historians who claim that the tradition of surrealism is a valid point of reference for the *informel* in general, then it turns out that the situation of the Czech artists was unique, since surrealism happened to be an essential episode in the history of the twentieth-century Czech art. Moreover, the Czech surrealism was quite original and could not be reduced to the French model in its historical, ideological, and artistic aspects, which, of course, does not mean that it was isolated – the Czech artists produced their idiosyncratic version of the trend.¹² "In Poland,"

¹⁰ V. Lahoda, "Krotký modernismus", (in:) *Ohniska znovuzrozeni: České umění 1956-1963*, 17-19.

¹¹ *Český informel. Průkopníci abstrakce z let 1957-1964*, red. M. Nešlehová, Praha: Galerie hlavního města Prahy 1991; M. Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu. Pojetí „informelu“ v českém umění 50. a první poloviny 60. let*, Praha: Base, ARTetFACT 1997.

¹² *Český surrealismus, 1929-1953. Skupina surrealistů v ČSR: události, vztahy, inspirace*, eds. L. Bydžovská, K. Srp Praha: Argo Galerie hlavního města Prahy 1996.

observed Kantor, "there was no surrealism because of the dominant catholicism,"¹³ yet there too one could find some references to the surrealist tradition. Before World War II, surrealism was endorsed by the revolutionary Warsaw artist, Marek Włodarski, and after the war two other artists – Marian Bogusz and Zbigniew Dłubak – on their way home from the concentration camp at Mauthausen made a stop in Prague, where they also became familiar with surrealism – notably, in its Czech version.¹⁴ Besides, the "atmosphere of surrealism" was an element of the experience of a group of artists in Cracow, who during the war formed a cercle of "self-education," later to become the advocates of the modernist art in their city. Remembers Mieczysław Porębski, "we had [during the war – P. P.] one number of *Révolution surréaliste* and one prewar issue of *Nike* with an article by Miss Blum."¹⁵ Indeed, not too much. Hence, as far as the surrealist heritage is concerned, Poland, or any other country of Central Europe, cannot be compared to Czechoslovakia, nonetheless, the tradition of the forties, regardless of its specific content, played an important role in the reception of the *informel* in the late fifties. The so-called first Exhibition of Modern Art (in Cracow), opened at the end of 1948, was to become an enormously significant point of reference for the Polish "thaw" modernism. However, on the other hand, a direct *informel* inspiration came from elsewhere, i. e., from Tadeusz Kantor's trips abroad (to France). To put it ironically, Kantor brought the Polish *informel* in his French bags, while the Czech artists, who travelled as well, were mostly exploring their own surrealist tradition.¹⁶ We will return to this problem again below – now let us just realize that the artistic situation in Hungary was quite different, since, for the most part due to the pressure of politics, in the late fifties no reception of the *informel* could take place there. In the forties, the dominant Hungarian group (functioning under specific political circumstances) was the so-called European School, in an eclectic manner combining the traditions of the classic French modernism, some kinds of abstraction, as well as, perhaps, distant and vague inspirations of surrealism.¹⁷ Those, however, would have virtually no impact on the reception of the *informel* in Hungary, which came much later and took quite a peculiar form. We will return to this question below, too.

¹³ Tadeusz Kantor. *Malarstwo i rzeźba*, ed. Z. Gołubiew, Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe, 1991, 82.

¹⁴ „Od Klubu Młodych Artystów i Naukowców do Krzywego Koła. Rozmowa B. Askanaś ze Z. Dłubakiem”, (in:) *Galeria „Krzywe Koło”. Katalog Wystawy Retrospektywnej*, ed. J. Zagrodzki, Warszawa: Muzeum Narodowe, 1990, 27.

¹⁵ Czerni, 32.

¹⁶ M. Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu...*, 29 ff.

¹⁷ P. György, G. Pataki, *Az Európai Iskola és az elvont művészek csoportja*, Budapest: Corvina, 1990.

Discussing the reception of the *informel* in Central Europe, which was, in fact, limited to Czechoslovakia and Poland, one cannot fail to notice another important factor, as relevant as the local traditions: the interest in existentialist philosophy. The popularity of existentialism, with its emphasis on subjectivity and the inner experience of the individual; on the freedom of a single human being rather than that of the community; was definitely a reaction to the institutionalization of Marxism in Central Europe and a polemic with the main ideas and values of the official philosophy: materialism and collectivism. The two foremost French existentialists – Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus – were becoming more and more popular both in Poland and in Czechoslovakia, and since any reference to their ideas in literary and philosophical debates made the party “philosophers” react with outrage, their reputation among the intellectuals opposing the regime rose higher and higher. In the West, particularly in France which was the most fascinating Western country for the whole Central Europe, the *informel* was related in many ways to existentialism, so that the reception of new currents in philosophy resulted in a favorable climate for the interest in the painting of gesture (and the reverse). In such a context, the *informel* appears to have been a defense of individualism against the state-imposed collectivism.

Before we consider the Central European reception of the *informel* in detail, we must make some terminological stipulations. In the local critical and historico-artistic discourses – both in the late fifties and now – the concept of the *informel* has not been precisely defined. In fact, this is true also with respect to art history in France, however, in the countries taken into account in the present essay the term *informel* signified a general cluster of features characteristic of non-objective but also non-geometrical painting. It has been often treated as a synonym of the painting of gesture, *tachisme*, the “other art” (*art autre*), *art brut*, lyrical abstraction, and – as will be demonstrated below – the painting of the matter (*la peinture de matiere*), called also structural abstraction. The differences in meaning are extremely minute, or perhaps they are none, except for the last term which has been semantically determined by its context of experiments with the matter (material) of the work.

Our account of the reception of the *informel* in Central Europe with begin with the case of Poland. We will disregard the “Arsenal” exposition, which has been utterly mythologized by Polish art historians – no doubt, it played a key role as far as the rejection of the socialist realism was concerned, still, its significance for the process of adoption and reactivation of modernity in Polish artistic culture was rather minor. Most relevant evidence is a statement of Piotr Krakowski, a critic closely associated with the modernist artists of Cracow, quoted by Elżbieta Grabaska, one of the organizers of the “Arsenal”: “He arrived and I showed him

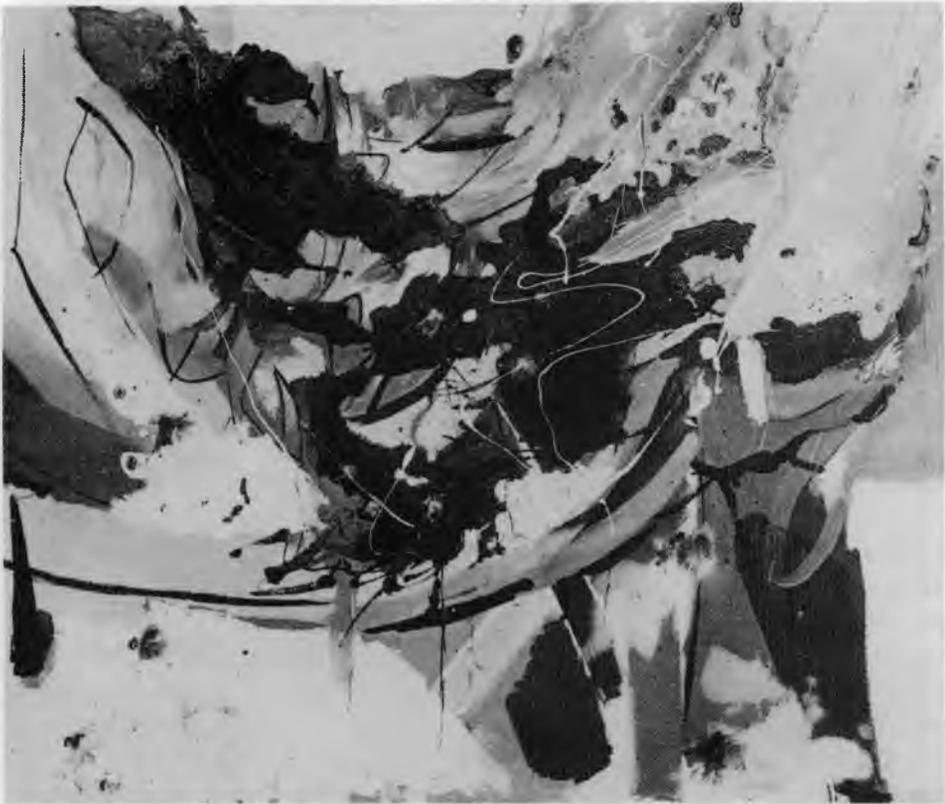
the exhibition. He looked at me with his eyes wide open and went on and on: *What is this? It is as though I were back in Germany of the late twenties and early thirties, or perhaps at the same time in Warsaw. What kind of painting is this? Do you really think this is modern painting?* Such were the words of a man from Cracow who could every day look at ... the works of Jarema, Stern, Kantor, and all the others who did not take part in the 'soc.' His point of reference was not 'soc,' but the 'moderns' who appeared officially right after 'October'.¹⁸ They displayed their works in Cracow at a modest but very significant show, called the "exhibition of the nine," in the fall of 1955 (Tadeusz Brzozowski, Maria Jarema, Tadeusz Kantor, Jadwiga Maziarzka, Kazimierz Mikulski, Jerzy Nowosielski, Erna Rosenstein, Jerzy Skarżyński, Jonasz Stern). The exposition was small and its catalogue plain, yet its significance seems enormous. Although the exhibited paintings for the most part stemmed from the poetics characteristic of the late forties and referred to the (so-called first) Exposition of Modern Art (Cracow, 1948/49), its audience was directed more towards modernism than to the engaged art of the "Arsenal." The "exhibition of the nine" made possible the 1957 revival of the Cracow Group, i. e. the rise of the so-called II Cracow Group and the Krzysztofory Gallery with the leading figure of Tadeusz Kantor. Two other expositions of modern art, organized some time later in Warsaw (II Exhibition of Modern Art, "Zachęta," 1957 and III Exhibition of Modern Art, "Zachęta," 1959), as well as the March Salons at Zakopane, were also rooted in the "exhibition of the nine." This, of course, does not mean that during the "thaw" the modernist tendencies in Polish art could be found in Cracow only. In Warsaw Group 55 founded one of the most important "thaw" galleries – the Krzywe Koło Gallery, run by Marian Bogusz, which was an annex to the Krzywe Koło Club, a famous "revisionist" discussion group.¹⁹ That Gallery became an exhibition center for other groups of artists active in Poland at the same time: St-53 of Katowice and two Poznań ones – 4F+R, the oldest in the postwar Poland, established in 1947 and reactivated again in the mid-fifties, and R-55. Besides, the Krzywe Kolo Gallery showed the painting of Jerzy Kujawski, which was perhaps the "purest" and most direct example of the *informel*, maybe because the artist lived permanently in Paris. As we will see, the gallery run by Marian Bogusz was also a forum of Central European artistic encounters.

¹⁸ "Arsenał jest pewnego rodzaju marginesem. Rozmowa z Elżbietą Grabską", rozm. M. Kitowska-Łysiak, M. Ujma, P. Kosiewski, M. Waclawek, *Kresy*, no. 12 Fall 1992, 167.

¹⁹ W. Jedlicki, *Klub Krzywego Koła* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1963); *Galeria "Krzywe Koło"*, 84-117. Cf. also B. Wojciechowska, *Bogusz i Galeria „Krzywe Koło"*, (in:) *Marian Bogusz 1920-1980*, eds M. Dąbrowska and I. Moderska, Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe, 1982.

The apogee, as it were, of the cultural “thaw” in Poland was the year 1957: the II Exhibition of Modern Art took place in Warsaw, while in Cracow the reactivated Cracow Group became one of the most influential artistic circles of the period. The same year brought also major changes in the editorial board of *Przegląd Artystyczny*, the main tribune of Polish art criticism and a journal which from its very first “modernized” issue promoted a new “thaw” discourse, favorable to the idiom and atmosphere of the *informel*. Of course, *Przegląd Artystyczny* was by no means the only journal focusing on the problematic of modern art, still, in fact, next to *Projekt* which was founded a year before, as well as *Plastyka* and *Struktury* which appeared later, it proved the most important forum of analytic art criticism with a modernist, not to say “formalist,” bias. In 1957 Tadeusz Kantor, the leader of the Cracow Group and a major protagonist of the Polish artistic “thaw,” published an essay which was intended to be a response to the critics of the II Exhibition of Modern Art, but in fact it was a kind of manifesto of the Polish *informel* – “Abstraction is Dead – Long Live Abstraction.” Kantor wrote that the modern art (of geometrical abstraction) was brought about by the desire to impose on the world a measure of rationality. Since at that time intellect used to be considered a basic instrument of comprehension, art created under its auspices was subject to the intellectual rigor of form. Such an attitude was characteristic of the classic avant-garde and a great movement of the reconstruction of artistic language. As an example, Kantor mentioned the achievement of Piet Mondrian. Now, however, he claimed, after the experience of several decades of the twentieth century, we became aware that intellect is not a sufficient instrument of cognition. In the modern world there are many forces which defy intellectual recognition: the absurd, rebellion, negation, irrationalism, etc. We cannot describe the world adequately by means of reason only, therefore we must use also other instruments, such as imagination, instincts, and emotions. The Polish artist referred to dadaism and surrealism as those trends in modern art which repudiated intellect, turning to imagination and irrationalism as more promising tools of description. Notably, such art did not lose its cognitive function – quite on the contrary, it revealed many hitherto unknown dimensions of reality. It was dadaism and surrealism, wrote Kantor, which invented “automatism” and “chance” as effective methods of both creation and cognition. Matter, he argued, is an element which has its consistence, but no construction. Thanks to “chance” (as an artistic method), the latter undergoes structuration, much more appropriate as a factor of form than geometry used by the classics of the avant-garde. *Tachisme* or *informel* (which is, according to Kantor, a better term) ridicules the ambition to apprehend matter by the intellect. In conclusion, he wrote: “Art is a kind of comprehension of life. Abstract art

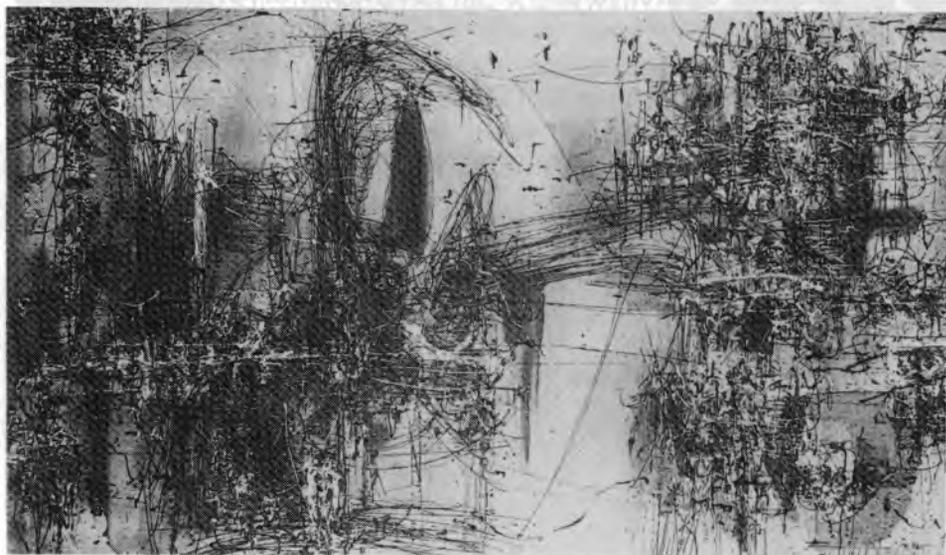
based on geometry, which has already produced thousands of works, has today become an equivalent of scholastic life. Subject to the rigor of construction, limited, demarcated with the beginning and the end, calculated and stiff, it has represented life as a meticulously ordered string of causes and effects. Nowadays the sense of life is more complicated. Just like life, the art of today is involved in meaning which forever remains unknown, at least in part. We have been watching its movement which can be rationally controlled only to an extent. The art of today has been trying not to convey, produce or record this movement and activity, but to be its result. This has nothing to do with imitation – either of the object or of the imagined reality. The painting itself has become creation and a manifestation of life – its continuation. This is quite a new conception of the work of art and a new aesthetics.”²⁰



5. Tadeusz Kantor, *Amarapura*, 1957 [National Museum in Poznań]

²⁰ T. Kantor, “Abstrakcja umarła – niech żyje abstrakcja,” *Życie Literackie*, no. 50 (1957), annex *Plastyka*, no. 16, 6.

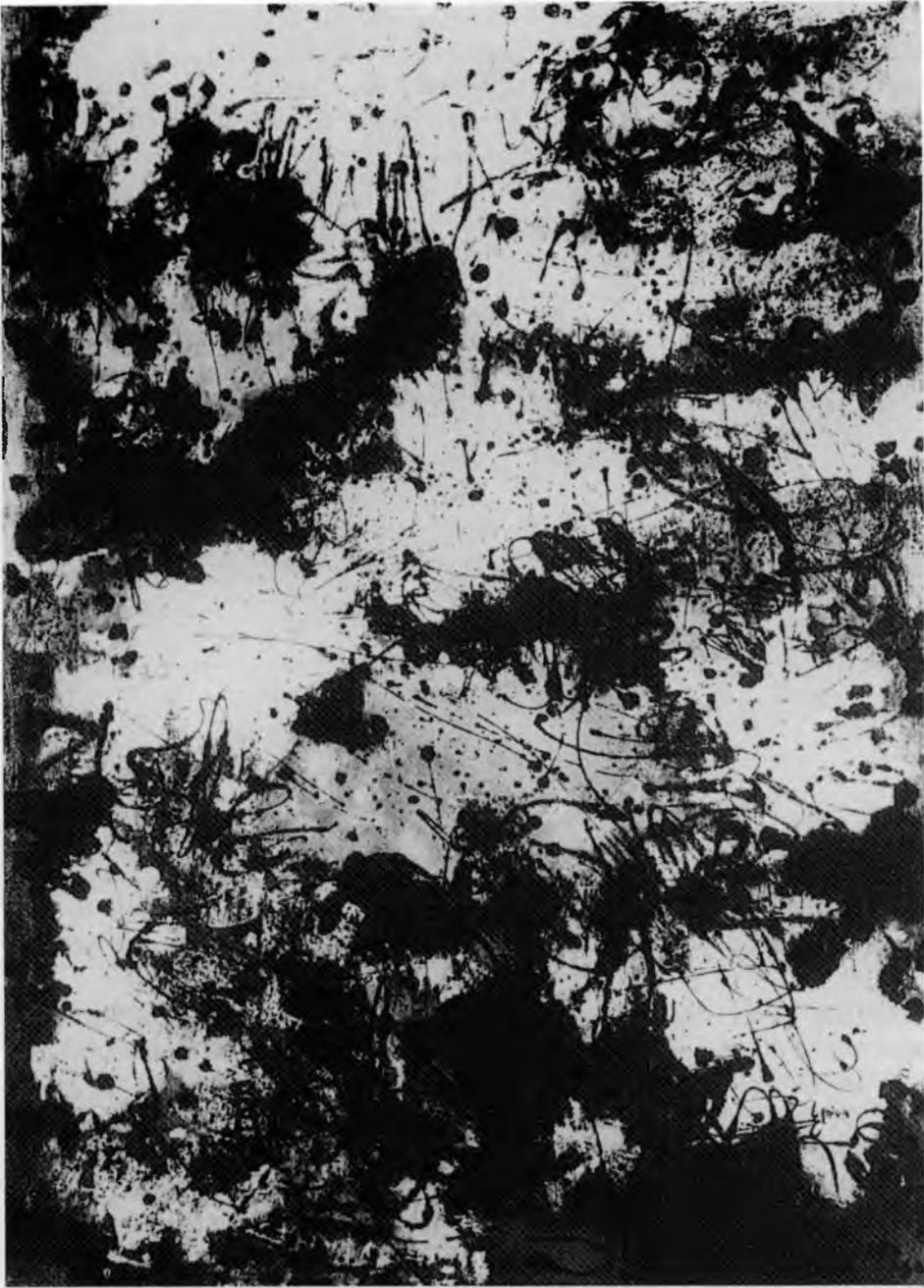
Also in 1957 Kantor painted his most characteristic *informel* works: “Amarapura,” [il. 5] “Akonkagua,” “Oahu,” “Pacyfik,” “Pas’akas” [il. 3] and “Ramanaganga.” All of them epitomize the same poetics consisting in violent brush strokes and brisk “throwing” of the paint on canvas. The dynamic of forms shaped by chance, with no preconceived composition, is related to conspicuous tension in texture. Actually, it is not color but



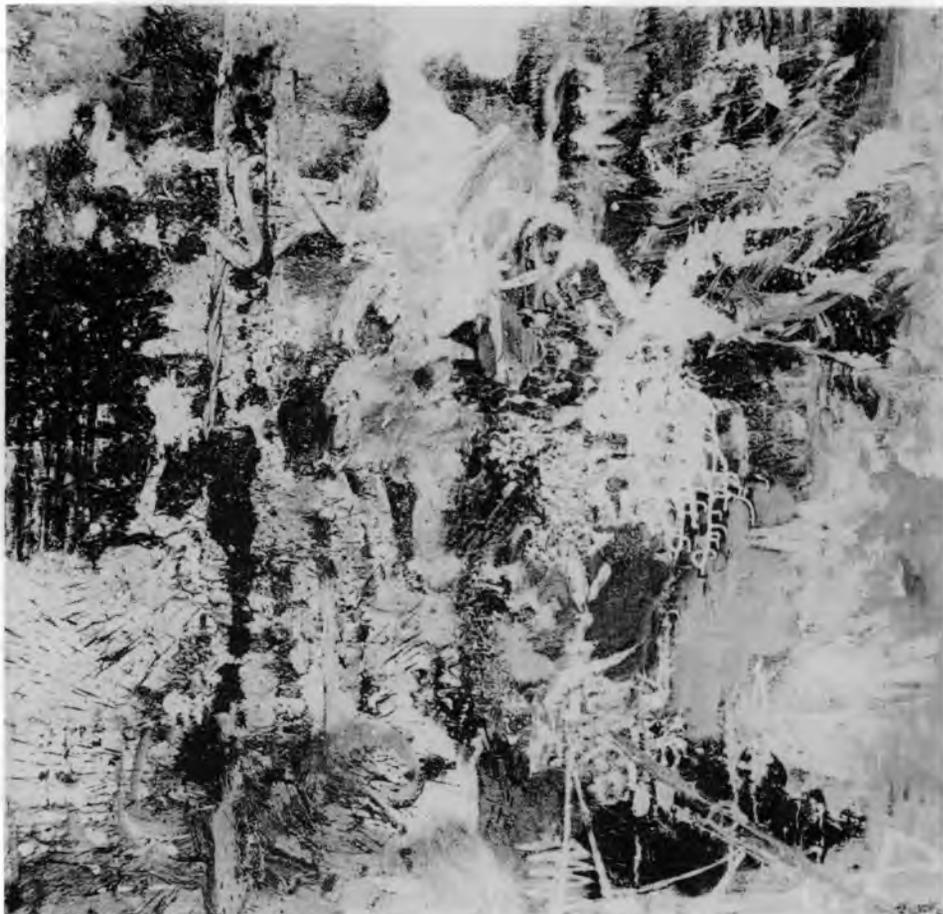
6. Jerzy Kujawski, *Pejzaż kosmiczny*, 1957 [Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź]

paint, reflecting violent gestures of the painter, which organizes the visual and emotional identity of the painting. Of course, Kantor was not the only Polish artist doing the “classic” *informel*. The others were: Jerzy Kujawski, who lived in Paris [il. 6], Alfred Lenica [il. 7], Zdzisław Salaburski and Teresa Tyszkiewicz [il. 8]. However, to refer to Porębski’s term one more time, there was no “levy” of the *informel* as such. If the use of such a metaphor was motivated at all, it pertained to all kinds of modern art for which abstraction remained an important point of reference and not to the painting of gesture in its fully developed form. The dominant model was a specific hybrid of abstraction and figuration – the two painters who managed successfully to combine both extremes were, on the one hand, Tadeusz Brzozowski, and on the other, Tadeusz Dominik, whose artistic background and experience were quite different.

Still, it is perhaps not so important to list a number of the painters of gesture *par excellence*, or those who in one way or another explored that



7. Alfred Lenica, *Plamy na Ziemi i Niebie*, 1957 [Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź]



8. Teresa Tyszkiewicz, *Formy zrodzone*, 1957 [National Museum in Warsaw]

direction. In Central Europe terms such as *informel* were not very precise. What is relevant, is the character of the art inspired by the *informel* and its evolution. Following this process, one can realize – to quote another Porebski’s remark – that it favored the “experience of matter, rather than gesture,”²¹ foregrounding the aesthetic values typical of the art of the matter, rather than the philosophical ones related to the classic, particularly French, painting of gesture, not to mention political overtones characteristic of the COBRA group. That aestheticization of the *informel* by the “materialization” of canvas turned out quite symptomatic and historically significant.

²¹ Czerni, 105.

It should be noted, perhaps somewhat in advance, that the Slovak and Czech art historians have reached similar conclusions as regards modern art in their countries.²² They have also stressed the aestheticization of the *informel* – the importance of composition, the pursuit of formal perfection and harmony of color, the approach to the painting as a finished whole, etc. What appears particularly interesting, most likely as an effect of the Central European tradition, even the so-called structural, “materialist” painting, involving thick impasto and added pieces of non-painterly matter, has been interpreted in spiritual terms, rather than in terms of matter and the body. The Czech artist Jiří Valenta, practicing the art of the matter in its classic variant, placed it in the neo-Thomist perspective of Jacques Maritain.²³ Paradoxically, then, especially in contrast with the Western models, in Central Europe the attitude to the matter was *par excellence* spiritualistic. That emphasis on the spiritual, underlying also the most radical experiments of the art of the matter, was definitely related to the defense of culture as a domain of sublimated spirit, sharply contrasting with the materialist artistic rebellion in the West, exemplified by the art of Dubuffet, the COBRA group, or a German group SPUR. The artists of Central Europe, living under the permanent pressure of “cultural policy” whose purpose, at times stated quite explicitly, was total instrumentalization of culture, i. e. its virtual elimination (at least insofar as we define it as a realm of unrestricted expression of individuals), could not approve of the subversive strategies of their Western colleagues. While for the artists in the West culture was an element of the bourgeois system of values, in Central Europe it was primarily an instrument of resistance against the regime. Since in the countries occupied by the Soviet troops the very concept of bourgeoisie was ambiguous, an anti-bourgeois rebellion in art must have been ambiguous just as well.

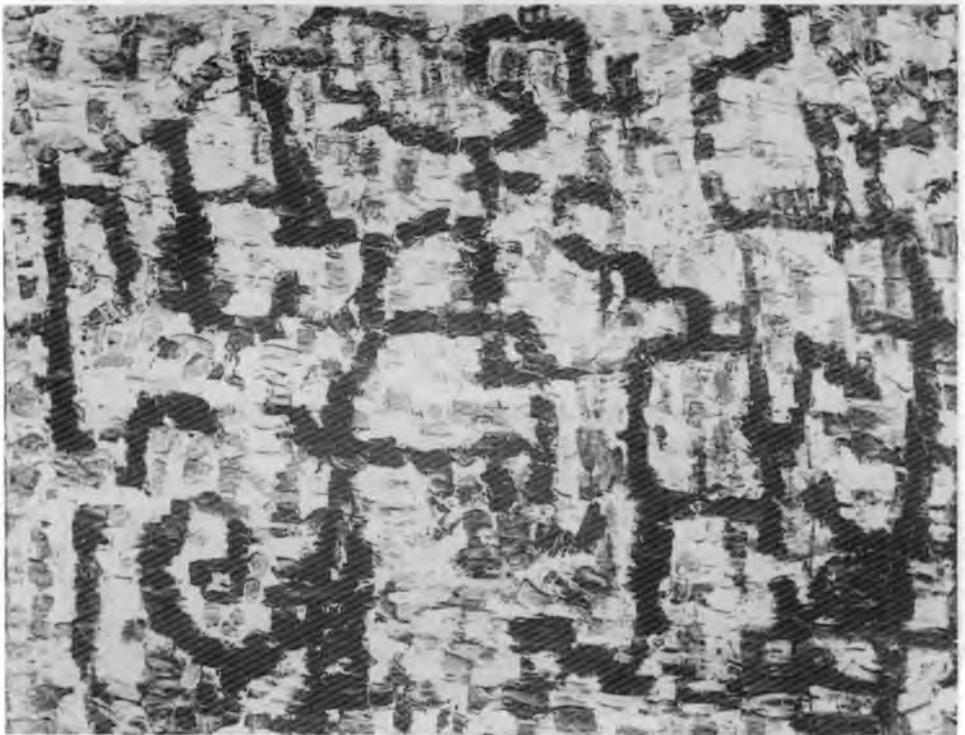
Consequently, the Central European preference for the painting of the matter may have been characteristic of the region – it may have been related to a certain delay in the reception of the *informel* in that geographical area or, more precisely, with a fact that Central European artists became familiar with that kind of art in an aestheticized, museum stage of its evolution when matter – a formal, rather than existential aspect –

²² M. Nešlehová, *Odvracená tvář modernismu*, (in:) *Ohniska znovuzrození...*, 174 ff. (Nešlehová quotes F. Šmejkal who in this context wrote about a “specifically Czech version of the European *informel*,” 192); cf. also: M. Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu...*, 242 ff. K. Bajcurová, *Pramene slobody. Štruktúrna, lyrická a gestická abstrakcia*, (in:) *Šesťdesiate roky v slovenskom výtvarnom umení ...* 107 ff.

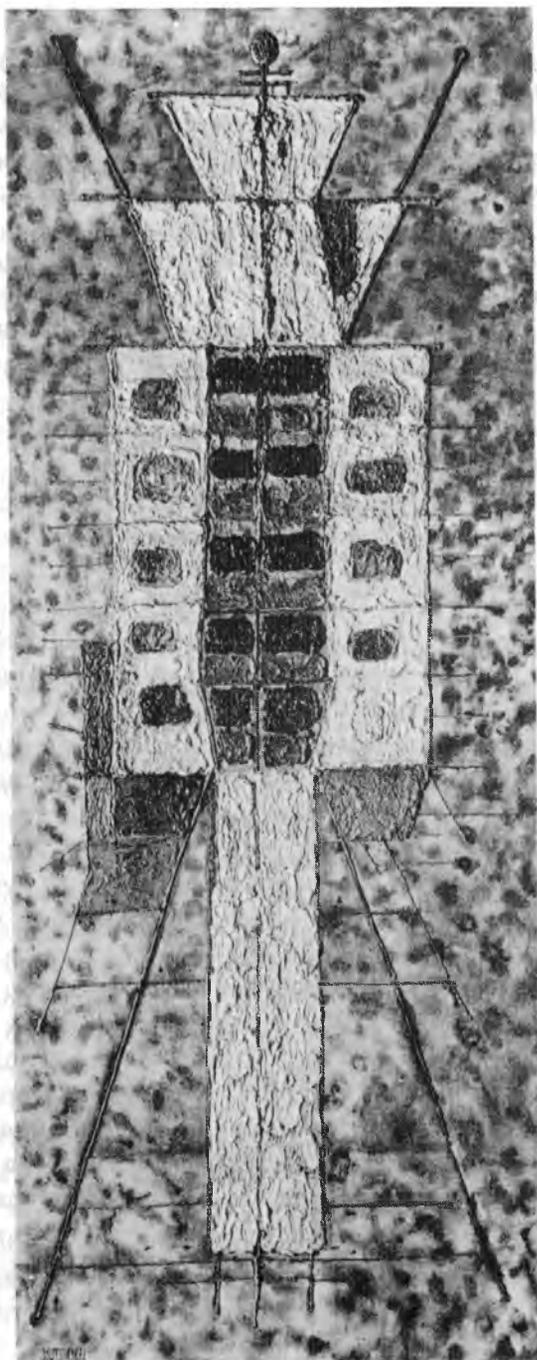
²³ M. Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu...*, 146.

started playing the major role. On the other hand, the tendency at the aestheticization of artistic subversion might have had deeper roots in history. After all, the idea of the defense of culture must have been much more obvious to Central Europeans who experienced its systematic politicization and instrumentalization by the communist regimes.

To return to the situation of Poland, there were many artists who were more fascinated with the painterly matter, than with gesture. In the Cracow Group it was primarily Jadwiga Maziarska – her paintings, including gravel, stones, plaster, and later wax were explicitly called the “art of the matter.” Some of them, such as “Skazy niepisanych poematów” [Regional Museum in Bydgoszcz] il. 9, were done relatively early – already in 1954. Other painters taking the same direction were Aleksander Kobzdej, Zbigniew Tymoszewski, Rajmund Ziemiński, and Jan Lebenstein [il. 10]. Lebenstein was remarkable also for another reason – in 1959 he won the Grand Prix de la Ville de Paris at the Paris Biennale, which marked the climax of the international interest in the Polish modernist art of the late fifties. That interest could be seen all over Europe, and it did not



9. Jadwiga Maziarska, *Skazy niepisanych poematów*, 1954 [Muzeum Okręgowe in Bydgoszcz]



10. Jan Lebenstein, *Figura na przekątnych*, 1958
[National Museum in Poznań]

stem from artistic categories only. Interpreting culture as an instrument of Cold War politics, Eva Cockroft wrote: "Especially important was the attempt to influence intellectuals and artists behind the 'iron curtain'. During the post-Stalin era in 1956, when the Polish government under Gomułka became more liberal, Tadeusz Kantor, an artist from Cracow, impressed by work of Pollock and other abstractionists which he had seen during an earlier trip to Paris, began to lead the movement within the internal artistic evolution of Polish art, this kind of development was seen as a triumph for 'our side'. In 1961, Kantor and other nonobjective Polish painters were given an exhibition at MOMA. Examples like this one reflect the success of the political aims of the international programs of MOMA."²⁴

Regardless of a specific answer to the controversial question whether Kantor's painting was more a success of the Cold War strategy of the U. S. State Department than an effect of local historico-artistic processes and fascination with the French artistic scene, which at least at that time was still characteristic of all the Central European countries, the political background of the Western interest in the Eastern European "thaw" is self-evident. The Grand Prix which Lebenstein received in Paris can be also, at least in part, explicable in such terms. Moreover, the decision to organize in 1960 in Warsaw the annual congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), an institution which Poland joined shortly before, was, in a sense, a political manifestation, too. Paradoxically, however, the congress took place at the moment when the authorities started slowing down the momentum of the "thaw". It was also the time when the last two "thaw" issues of the *Przegląd Artystyczny* were published – later, with a different editorial board, the journal lost its modernist character. The other "thaw" art journals were simply discontinued: in 1959 the authorities closed *Plastyka* and in 1960 the same happened to *Struktury*. On the occasion of the AICA Congress, the Krzywe Koło Gallery organized an exhibition called "Confrontations '60" which, in a way, summed up the most recent achievements of Polish artists. Incidentally, the Gallery functioned until 1965, finally to be closed by the authorities as well, yet the legendary Krzywe Koło Club, no doubt the most challenging intellectual center of the Polish "thaw", was closed already in 1962. At the same time, the communist party started making efforts to regain control of culture, yet on the other hand, regardless of a harder line, in the early sixties the regime did not want a return to the

²⁴ E. Cockroft, *Abstract Expressionism. Weapon of the Cold War* (in:) *Pollock and After. The Critical Debate*, ed. F. Francina, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Icon Editions, 1985, 131 f.

"frosty" atmosphere of the early fifties. Perhaps technically such a return was still quite possible, but – despite the occasionally aggressive rhetoric of the party officials – it did not seem desirable. The authorities decreed fifteen percent of artistic freedom, issuing a ridiculous resolution concerning the organization of exhibitions, and society accepted it as a kind of tongue-in-cheek game. That game was played till the end, i.e. till the rise of independent underground culture in the early eighties, which, in fact, at least as regards art, was never persecuted viciously, even in the times of the martial law. After October 1956, Polish artists lived, to borrow an appropriate metaphor of Miklós Haraszti,²⁵ in a "velvet prison", practically enjoying much more than just the official fifteen percent of liberty, nevertheless, they still lived in a cell and their freedom was strictly limited by the party decree.

Paradoxically, when the Polish regime was making attempts to introduce a more restrictive cultural policy, the Czech authorities made their political system more liberal. It was a dynamic process which began in the early sixties with revisals (political rather than legal) of the Stalinist sentences and purges as well as vindication of certain episodes of history (particularly of the Slovak national uprising), and concluded with a dramatic crisis and catastrophe in 1968, when the troops of the "friendly socialist states" put a brutal end to the liberal developments. There is a significant coincidence as regards certain exhibitions in Poland and Czechoslovakia, which actually bore the same title. In 1960 in expositions called "Confrontations" were organized simultaneously in both countries, but while in Poland the immediate context was, on the one hand, the international congress of the AICA, and on the other, the epilogue of the "thaw," in Prague the "Confrontations" marked the beginning of the liberalization of artistic life. The first two Prague expositions were still held in private ateliers (the first one in the atelier of Jiří Valenta, the other at Aleš Veselý's), but "Confrontations III" became a public event. In fact, Polish and Czech artists were not quite isolated from each other – the first encounter took place in 1962 in Warsaw during a joint exposition organized by the Krzywe Koło Gallery, called "Arguments" (at that time in Czechoslovakia such public demonstrations were still out of question). In a sense, it was a "summit meeting" of the artists of the modernist "thaw" from both countries, which – what is most important – did not take place under the auspices of the official cultural institutions, but because of the initiative of the artists and art critics themselves.²⁶ Incidentally, that ex-

²⁵ M. Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison. Artists under State Socialism*, New York: Basic Books, 1987.

²⁶ Cf. Galeria "Krzywe Koło," 107.

hibition began a series of common exhibitions of the artists of Central Europe which were organized mainly in Poland independently of the official cultural policy and outside the official culture. At times, such events were of an almost dissident character – for instance, František Šmejkal smuggled his paintings to the Warsaw “Arguments” quite “illegally.”²⁷ In 1963 the same gallery organized a similar yet somewhat smaller exposition focused on the artists associated with the Slovak “Confrontations” (Eduard Ovčáček and Miloš Urbásek).²⁸ Unfortunately, those contacts, which the authorities watched rather suspiciously, even though – on the other hand – at least in Poland they did not really mind them, were not as well developed as they could have been, had the history of the Central European countries taken a normal course under the conditions of democracy. Still, they were certainly important and stimulated reflection – perhaps it was a paradox, but the Warsaw “Arguments” provided an opportunity for František Šmejkal to define the specific character of the Czech *informel*.²⁹ Its relevance continues until today, which has been proved by a book of Mahulena Nešlehová, so often quoted in the present essay.³⁰

The Warsaw “Arguments” exhibition provokes one to make still another remark: no doubt, Poland offered at that time the road to modernity, towards the West. It was easier for the Czech artists to read Polish art journals, such as *Przegląd Artystyczny*, not so much because of linguistic affinities, but because publications coming from other communist countries were commonly available in the Czech libraries. Quite often, journals and magazines, as well as mutual visits, were important sources of knowledge and experience.³¹

The 1960 Prague “Confrontations” and those organized a year later in Bratislava functioned as catalysts of the ongoing process of “modernization” of Czechoslovak artistic culture whose tradition had been brutally broken in 1948. The relevant evidence is ample. In 1957 in Brno there was an exhibition of the classic modern Czech art, which, although it was a record of distant history, became, due to the hostile attitude towards modernism characteristic of the official cultural policy, also turned out a catalyst of changes. In 1957 artistic groups “Maj ’57,” “Trasa,” and “UB 12” were founded, and the local journals interested in modernist culture, such as *Výtvarné Práce*, *Květen*, *Výtvarné Umění*,

²⁷ M. Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu...*, 239.

²⁸ *Galeria “Krzywe Koło,”* 110.

²⁹ F. Šmejkal, „Argumenty”, (in:) M. Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu...*, 239 f.

³⁰ Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu...*,

³¹ Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu...*, 55, 241 f.

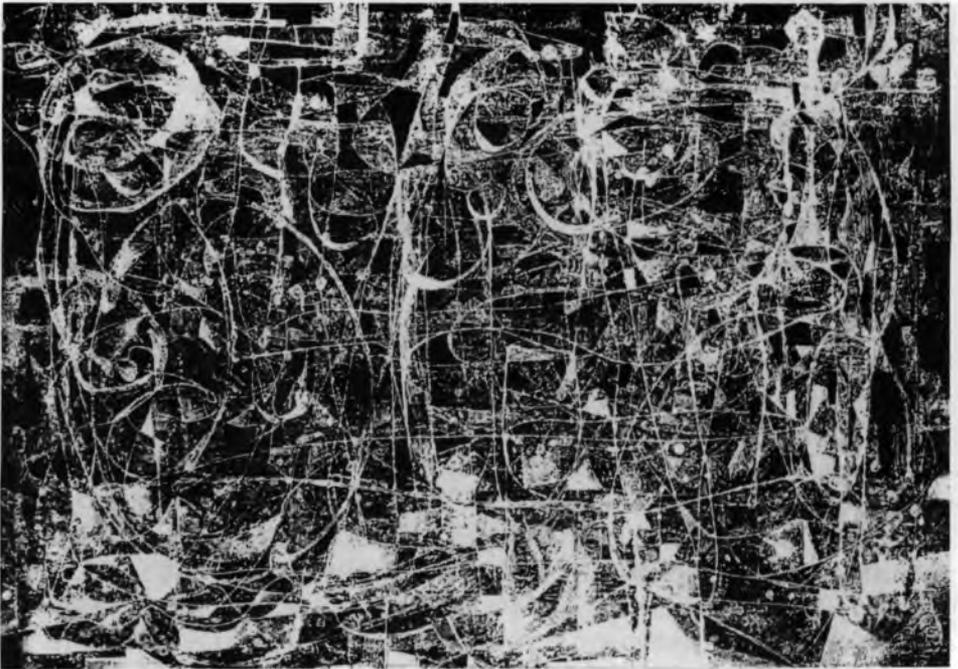
started publishing more and more texts on modern art. In the same year, several important artists – Jan Kotík, Libor Fára, and Robert Piesen – had their individual shows. In 1958, on the occasion of the Expo in Brussels, where the Czech exposition attracted a lot of attention, quite a number of artists could make a visit to the West. Most of them did it for the first time, having also the first chance to see the Western modern art. The “Confrontations” were immediately preceded by a show of Jan Koblasa at his atelier in the Prague district of Dejvice, organized in spite of an official ban on June 5, 1959, which stimulated the criticism of the so-called “false,” academic modernism.³² An aftermath of that criticism were the “Confrontations,” intended to be a manifestation of art which deliberately rejected the classic variant of modernism. In the first place, however, the Czech *informel*, which was only one version of the artistic “thaw” or the “thaw” modernism, stemmed from the indigenous background of surrealism.

Mahulena Nešlehová, a historian of the Czech *informel*, recognized the traces of the *art autre* (to use a term of Michel Tapié) already in the paintings of Toyen, an outstanding artist of the Czech surrealism of the thirties.³³ In her subsequent study, she made her analysis even more extensive, pointing also to other Czech surrealists, including a classic of the movement, Jindřich Štyrský, and considering in detail the artists of the forties – not only those living in Czechoslovakia, but also Alen Diviš who lived in New York.³⁴ Definitely, the local surrealist tradition was very powerful in the postwar Czechoslovakia, particularly in Czechia – the Ra group (Mikuláš Medek and Josef Istler who endorsed the idea of psychic automatism) let it successfully get through the war. The art of Medek seems quite remote from the *informel* model of the painting (in contrast to the work of Istler whose paintings from the late fifties and early sixties are its classic examples [il. 11]). It is original in its application of metaphor and the atmosphere of the uncanny. Still, with time, Medek’s art absorbed certain features suggestive of the *informel* poetics, especially thick layers of paint, typical of the painting of the matter, and texture “drawn” with short, brisk brush strokes [il. 12, 13]. The role of Medek in fostering artistic atmosphere and the freedom of creation and imagination cannot be overrated – it was him and the writer Vratislav Effenberger who became the key figures of the Czech surrealism after Karel Teige had died in 1951. Medek’s atelier on Janáčkově nábřeží was

³² Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu...*, 47.

³³ Cf. M. Nešlehová, „Podoba českého informelu”, (in:) *Český informel...*, 12.

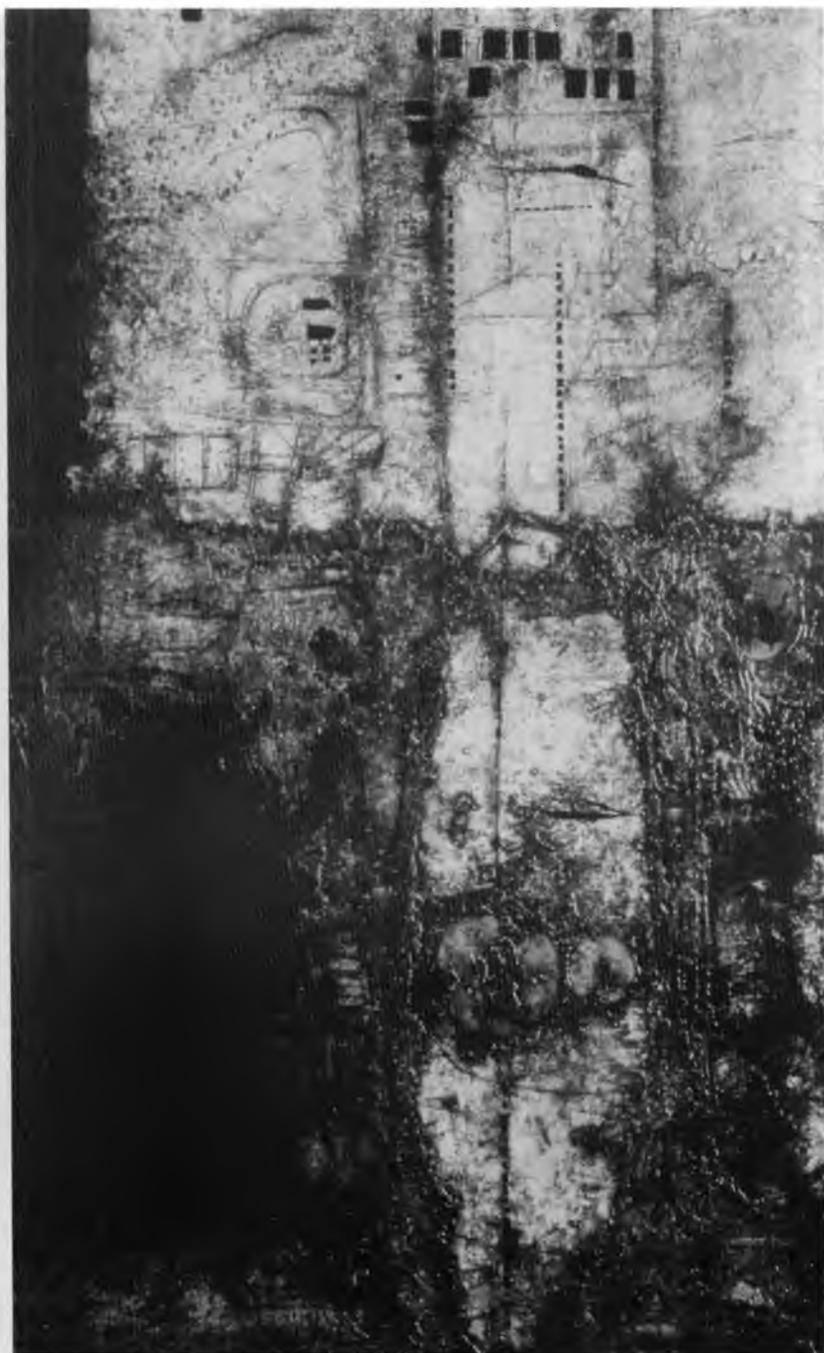
³⁴ Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu...*, 24 ff.



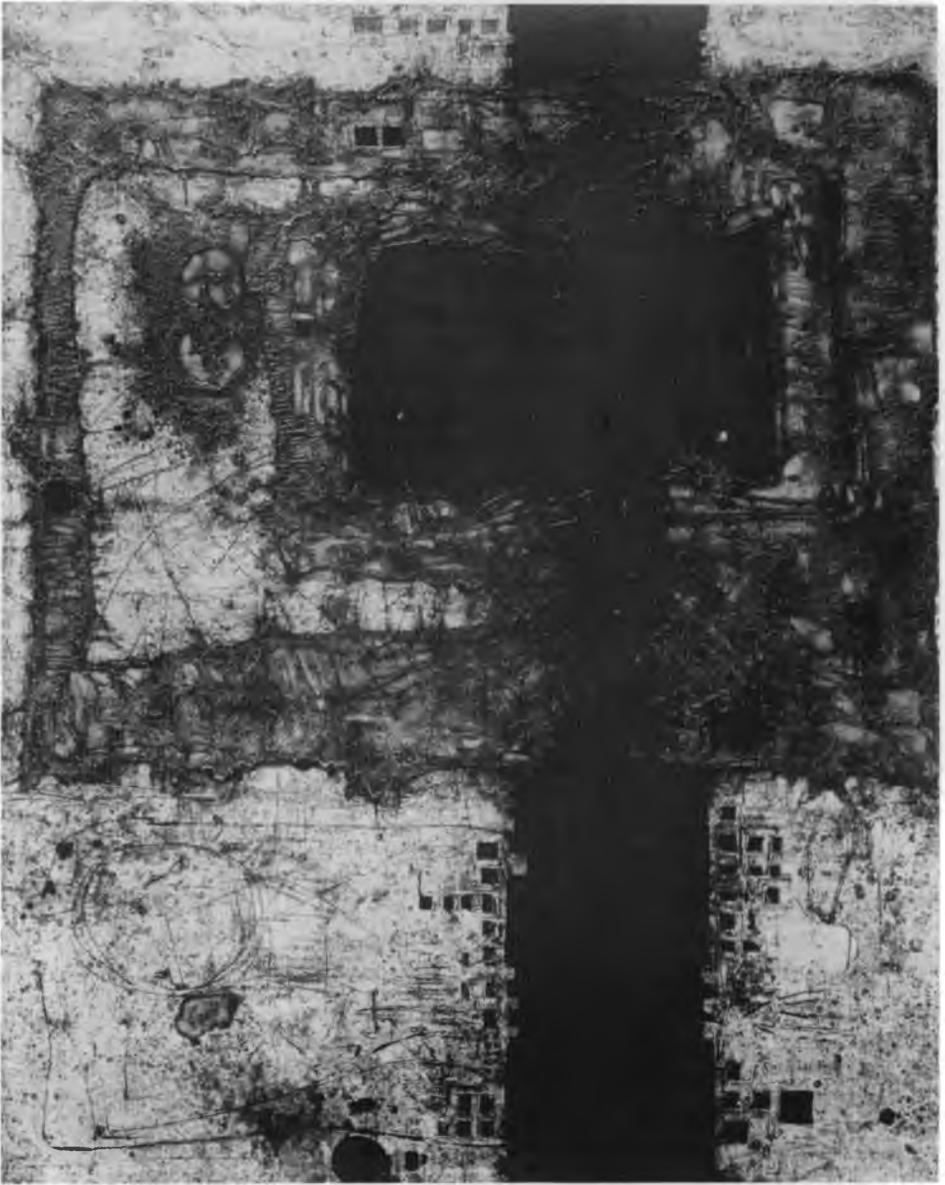
11. Josef Istler *Obraz III* 1958 [Oblastni galerie w Liberci]

in the fifties the meeting place of painters whose reflection and art, rooted in the surrealist heritage, was evolving in the direction of the *art autre* and *informel*: Josef Istler, Jan Kotik, Zbynek Sekal, and since 1958, Jan Koblasa.³⁵ Yet the most inspiring artist stimulating the rise of the Czech *informel* was certainly Vladimir Boudnik with his manifestoes of “explosionism” from the late forties which paved the way towards abstractionism on the one hand, and democratic art on the other. Boudnik – the other, next to Medek, unquestionable authority of the Czech artistic scene, believed that imagination can “explode” in everyone and that everyone can find in reality any forms (he would put his theory into practice in unique “street actions”). With his colleagues from the machine factory where he worked, and then with passers-by on the Prague street, he made experiments in recognizing forms on the walls of buildings, persuading others to mark on the “abstract” surfaces any shapes and contours that could come to their minds. In his own art he used all kinds of unconventional materials and “non-artistic” technologies: sand, file dust,

³⁵ M. Nešlehova, „Podoba českého informelu”, (in:) *Český informel...*, 22.



12. Mikuláš Medek, *Náhla přihoda na žluté hranici I*, 1963 [Oblastni galerie w Liberci]



13. Mikuláš Medek, *Senzitivni manifestacie II*, 1963 [National Gallery in Prague]

organic substances, etc., which was probably closer to the idea of *art brut* of Jean Dubuffet or that of Tapies and Burri than to the classic variant of the painting of gesture [il. 14].

Slovak art was in a somewhat different situation, without its own tradition comparable to the powerful and inspiring heritage of the Czech surrealism. Moreover, the process of liberalization began in Bratislava later than in Prague and it had a more limited scope. Nevertheless, the development of the so-called lyrical abstraction was quite intense. Among the leading artists of the Slovak *informel* one should mention Eduard Ovčáček [il. 15] and Miloš Urbásek, whose names have already

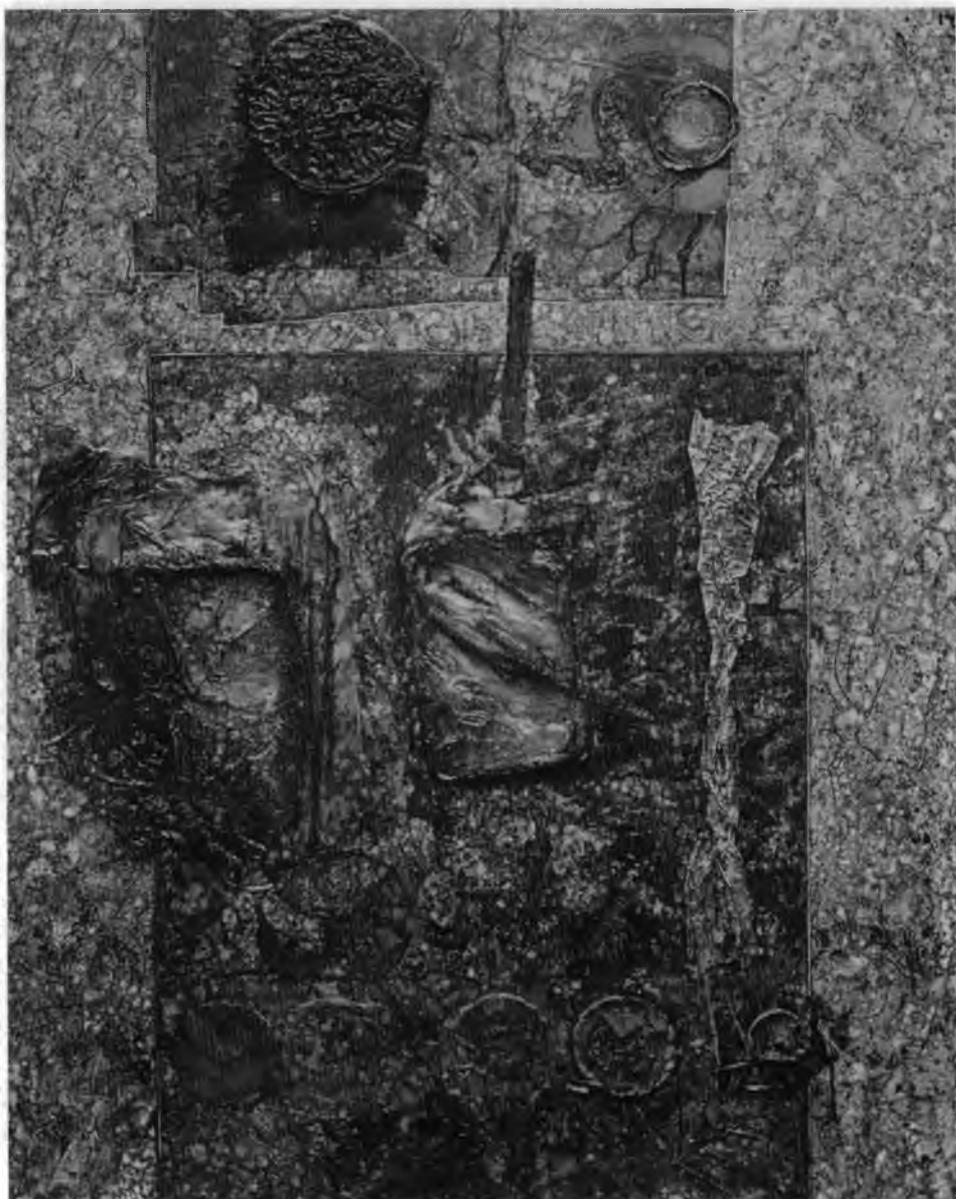


14. Vladimír Boudník, *Strukturalni grafika*, 1960 [National Gallery in Prague]

been referred to in the context of one of Warsaw exhibitions and who, according to Katarina Bajcurova, owed a lot to Boudník.³⁶ Others were, first of all, Rudolf Fila [il. 16], Viera Kraicova, and Dagmar Kočišova. Those, of course, were not the only artists interested in the *informel*, but the point is not so much the number of painters, as the specific characteristics of the local art. Art historians claim that, contrary to the artists of the *informel* in Europe, the Slovak painters never got rid of objective associations. In one way or another, argues Katarina Bajcurova, the spectator will always find in their paintings references to reality.³⁷

³⁶ Bajcurova, 110.

³⁷ Bajcurova, 107, 110.



15. Eduard Ovcáček, *Vel'ky epitaf*, 1962 [Štatna galeria w Zline]

Let us, however, return to the Czech *informel* which was much more dynamic and original, if we take into consideration its unique background. One may have an impression that there, of all the countries of



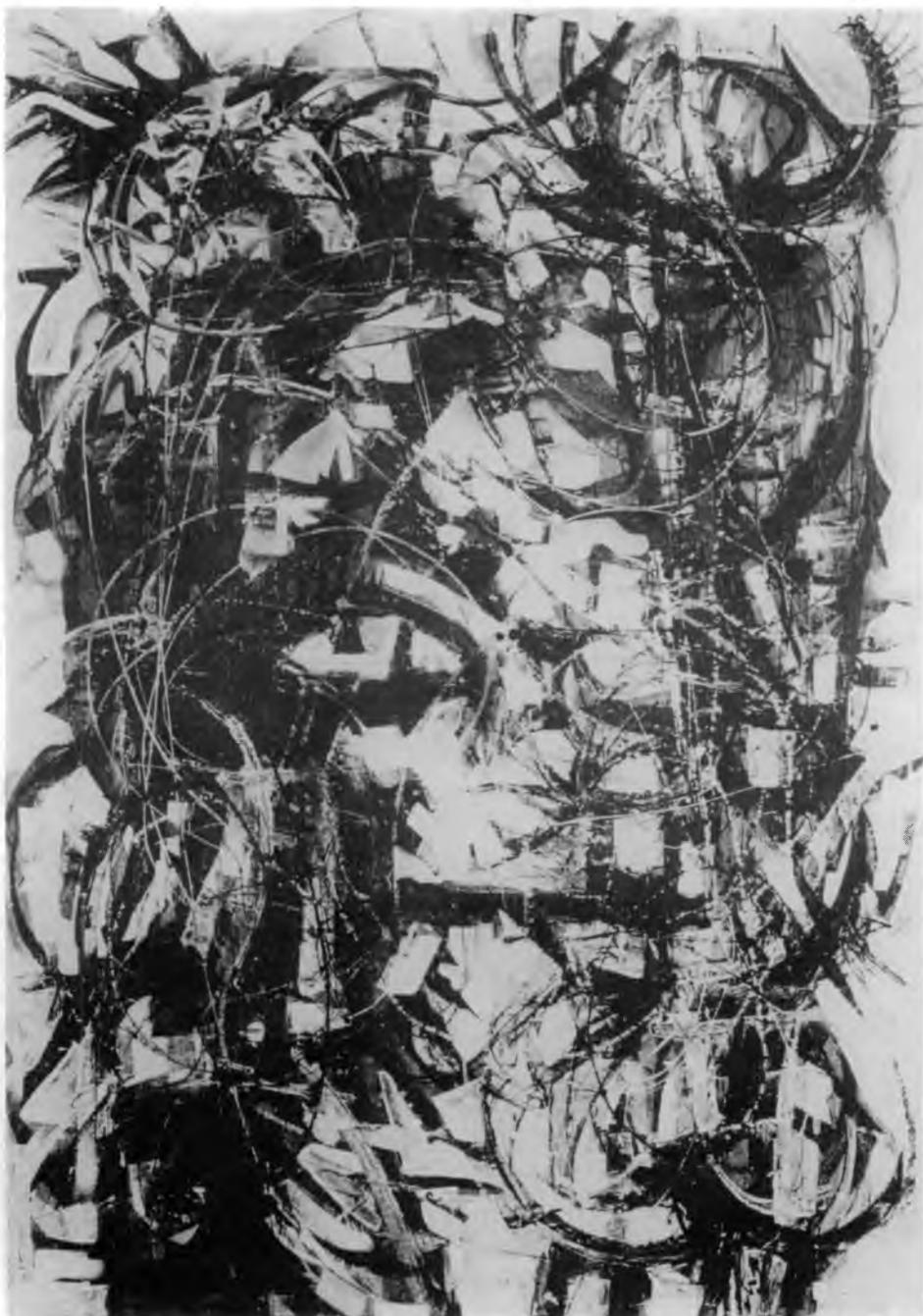
16. Rudolf Fila, *Černý akcent*, 1963 [Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava]

Central Europe, the *informel* reached the phase of the fullest development, in spite of the prevailing opinion that it was of a “moderate” rather than “radical” kind.³⁸ That “moderateness” was not enforced by the

³⁸ Lahoda, 57-60.



17. Jiří Balcar, *Dekret I*, 1961 [private collection]

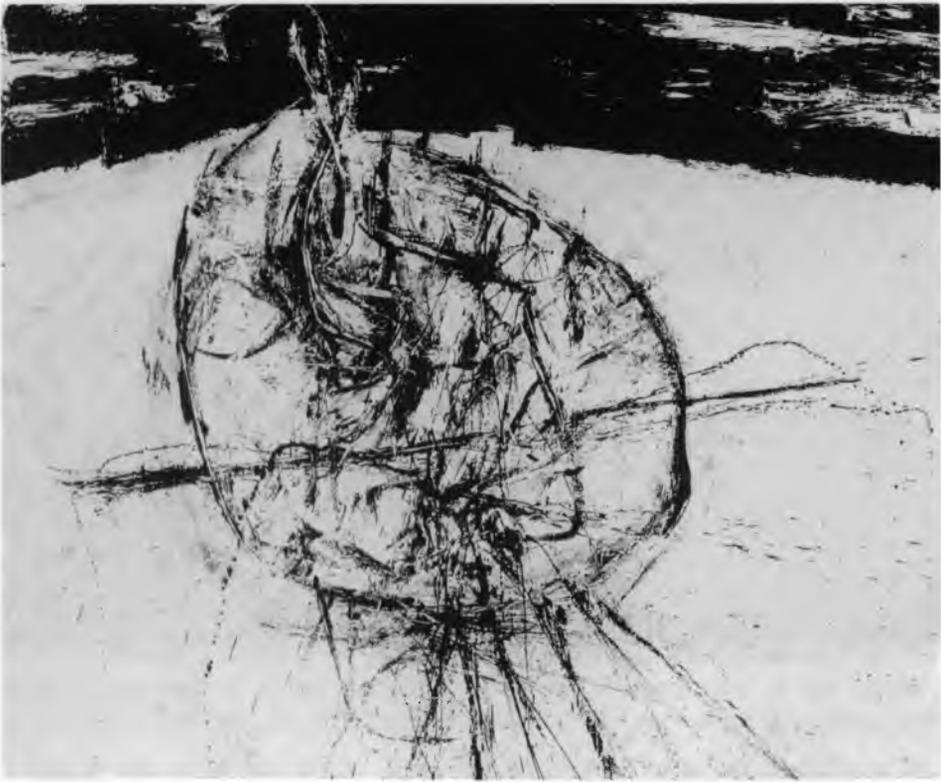


18. Josef Istler, *Obraz*, 1959 [private collection]



19. Jan Kotik, Malba, 1959 [private collection]

resistance of the latter-day socialist realists, whose influence was indeed much stronger than in Poland, or post-impressionists who, incidentally, appeared all over Central Europe (from the GDR to Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria) and everywhere opposed the current artistic processes. According to Lahoda, the "moderateness" of the Czech *informel* stemmed from a sovereign belief that any radicalism was "inappropriate" and from confidence in the "inner" laws supposedly governing the evolution of modernism, which dictated patient effort rather than "jumping" over subsequent stages of the development of modernist art. If such an interpretation is correct, the Czech attitude would be a very interesting example of a unique dialectic materialism which, after all, assumed an obligatory and objective development of social formations, eliminating any "voluntaristic" and "individualistic" theories of historical evolution. In other words, this kind of consciousness would be characteristic of a trend in art which was rooted in the resistance against the official artistic expression of materialist philosophy – the socialist realism. As we can see, in Central Europe anything is possible and



20. Jan Kotik, *Antarktida*, 1960 [Česke muzeum výtvarných umění in Prague]



21. Jan Kotik, *Kompozice II*, 1960 [National Gallery in Prague]

clear-cut distinctions among certain historical standards do not make much sense.

Still, regardless of Lahoda's opinions on the Czech *informel*, it is not difficult to notice the intensity of this art, its popularity incomparable to the situation in any other country of Central Europe, and its considerable diversity. I do not mean here the margins of the trend, observable in Poland and Slovakia, with the dominant hybrid of abstraction and objective painting, but the very core of the *informel*; abstract painting *par excellence*. On the one hand, there are examples of an almost classic variant of the painting of gesture, represented by such painters as Jiří Balcar [il. 17]; Josef Istler [il. 18]; Jan Kotík [il. 19, 20, 21, 22], who travelled a lot and knew the painting of the Western *informel*, particularly of Asger Jorn; and Antonín Tomalík [il. 23], who covered the canvas by a series of vigorous brush strokes – the gestures, as it were, of the artist's body. Like the classic painting of gesture practiced ten years before by Hartung, Mathieu, and Wols, the works of Czech artists were a materialized equivalent of the painter's existence, a unique supplement of his physical, bodily identity.³⁹ On the other hand, contrary to Lahoda's opinions, we can find a radical variant of the painting-as-matter, constructed not just of the tensions of paint or paint "enhanced" with "non-artistic" materials (there are many examples of this kind of art as well: Zdeněk Beran [il. 24], Čestmír Janošek [il. 25], Jan Koblása [il. 26], Pavel Nešleha, Jiří Valenta), but wholly of the "other" matter, as in the art of Zbyšek Sion [il. 27] and, in the first place, Aleš Veselý, where it is not the matter but, literally, material, such as metal and wood, which constitutes the autonomy of the work; its uniqueness and artistic identity [il. 28]. In this kind of art all the references to the artist's existence are bound to disappear – the result is an assemblage, a work that is identical with itself. However, contrary to the American assemblage, incorporating objects from other areas of culture (in particular from mass culture), the Czech assemblages include materials which determine their autonomous poetics. Besides, unlike the American assemblages, Aleš Veselý's paintings-objects belong to the modernist convention of art – adopting the "other" technologies, they do not disrupt the idiom of modernism, formulate its critique or reject its paradigm. In fact, they function within the realm of aesthetics, and not against it. Determining the poetics of the painting-object, metal springs and warped boards make the impressions of the spectator of the classic painting of gesture or, to be precise, the painting of the matter, even more intense. In this respect, especially if we realize that the above

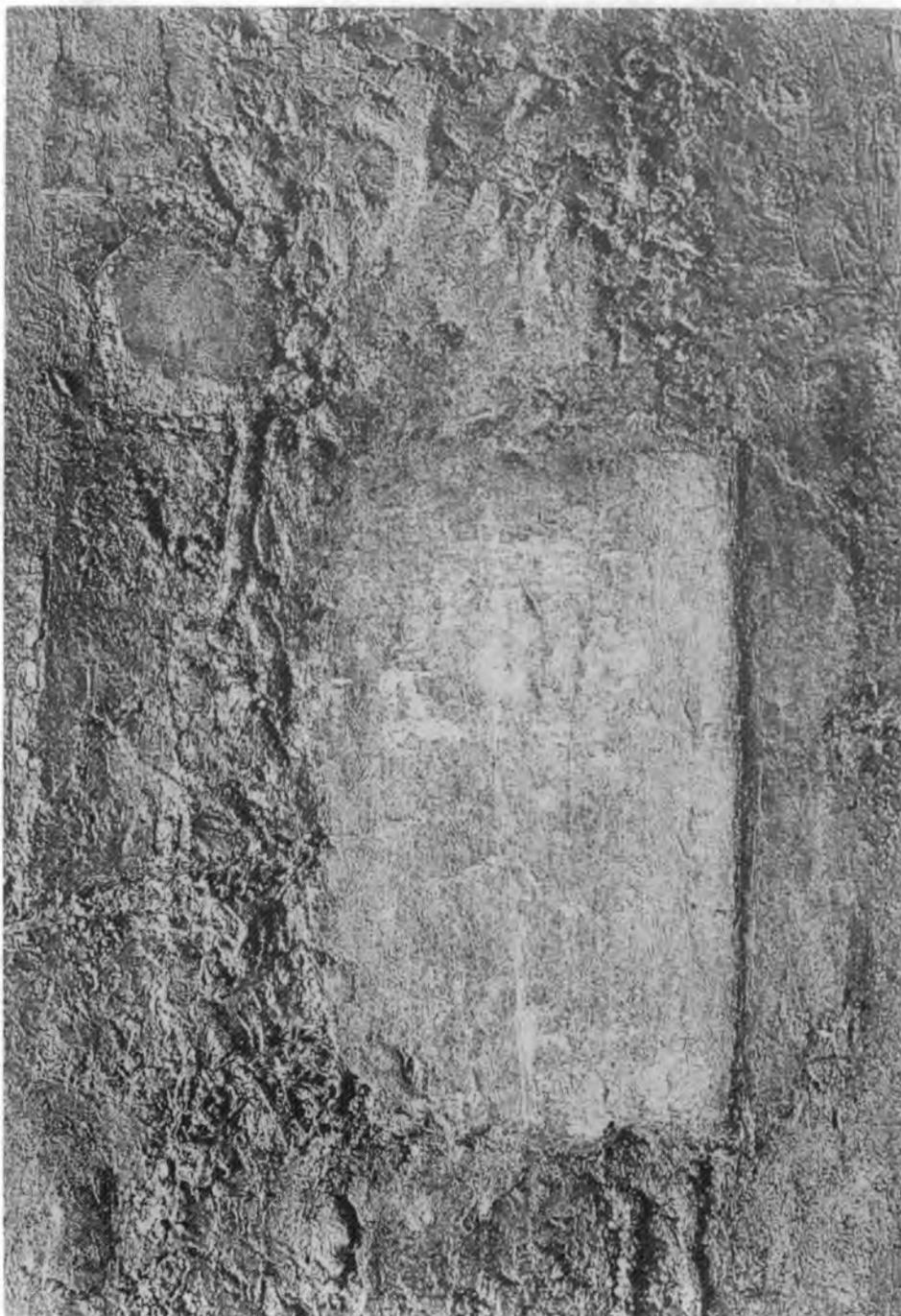
³⁹ Cf. S. Lacombe, "Vivre une peinture sans tradition", (in:) *Paris-Paris, 1937-1957* Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981.



22. Jiří Balcar, *Kompozice*, 1959, [private collection]



23. Antonin Tomalik, *Bez nazvu*, 1959 [private collection]



24. Zdeněk Beran, *Bez názvu I*, 1960, [Česke muzeum výtvarných umění in Prague]

remarks refer to the early sixties, Lahoda's thesis about the "moderateness" of Czech modernism becomes somewhat more tenable.

At that time the art of no Central European country could be called radical. Nonetheless, as far as the early examples of the critique of mo-



25. Čestmír Janošek, *Bez nazvu*, 1958-1959 [private collection]

dernism are concerned, a series of works of the Polish artist Włodzimierz Borowski from the late fifties, called "Artons" evidently deserves some attention. Borowski's "Artons" were indeed quite unique. The earliest ones – oval objects made of glass, mirrors, neon lamps, and bicycle wheels – ironically challenged the solemnity of the visual [il. 29]. They were constructed at the moment when the *informel* enjoyed a high status both in Poland and Czechoslovakia, since it was identified with the most radical idea of painting rejecting the socialist realism. In such a context, Borowski ridiculed the solemnity of the painting and the prestige of pictorialism. In place of the aesthetics and pathos of paint, and the collage of the matter, he put objects taken out of everyday life – a neon lamp and



26. Jan Koblasa, *Finis terrae*, 1961, part 5 [National Gallery in Prague]

a bicycle wheel as the frame of the “picture”; in place of the seriousness of creation, the existential discourse, and the prestige of pure form – so significant in Central Europe from the political point of view as an antidote to the degradation of art by the party doctrine of the socialist realism – he proposed detachment and irony derived almost directly from the heritage of Marcel Duchamp. Thus, the critique of modernism was inherent in Borowski’s works. They represented the rejection of the poetics and, above all, the paradigm of the modernist work of art as an object of spiritualization and high culture identified with pictorialism.

Still, the critique of modernism – of the pictorial pathos – inherent in Borowski’s “Artons” of 1958 did not subvert the autonomy of art which was the principal value of modernism. Generally speaking, neither Czech, nor Polish, nor Slovak, nor other artists still to be discussed below ever questioned that value. The trauma caused by the party control of art under the rule of the socialist realism was widespread and deep, strengthening



27. Zbyšek Sion, *Žluta struktura*, 1960 [private collection]



28. Aleš Veselý, *Obraz-Obiekt* 1960-1964 [private collection]

the belief in the autonomy of art as a remedy for its instrumentalization. Consequently, in the late fifties and early sixties artistic freedom was identified with the defense of the autonomy of the work of art, and not in the involvement in the social and political reality "beyond" art. No doubt,



29. Włodzimierz Borowski, *Arton A*, 1958 [National Museum in Wrocław]

this is the most characteristic feature of all the artistic "thaws" in Central Europe after Stalin's death and the decline of Stalinism.

In terms of history, the problem of the freedom of art in Central Europe at that moment can be approached in a number of ways. While in Poland and Czechoslovakia it was articulated in the form of abstraction

and the *informel* as its model variety, in Bulgaria the socialist realist canon was only “slightly” violated. The Bulgarian political “thaw” was rather superficial and the situation of art did not change dramatically either, especially that there was no local tradition of artistic independence. From the very beginning of the modern Bulgarian state at the end of the 19th century the indigenous culture had been sponsored by the authorities, and since the same was true between the world wars, communists who seized power after World War II did not have many problems with imposing their ideological control – they just took over the institutions of state sponsorship. In the early sixties, when the first signals of the coming “thaw” appeared, in fact the Bulgarian artists had nothing to refer to – no tradition of the freedom of art, liberty of creation and independent social sphere; no tactics of rebellion against the political and bureaucratic dictatorship. Consequently, the so-called “April Generation,” which made its appearance in 1961, attempting to organize an exhibition directed against the terror of the socialist realism was only its modification referring, by some diversity of iconography and color, to the heritage of post-impressionism. Actually, the art of the “April Generation,” whose protagonists soon gained power in the Association of Artists, the only organization of its kind in the country which owned all the local galleries of art (including the National Gallery, a regular museum which was also supervised by an official from the Association, not by an art historian), was just a slight (“modernized”) modification of the socialist realism. Even though the paintings done at that time leave no doubt as to the validity of such an opinion, the members of the “April Generation” still believe that they had instigated a revolution and that the art which they had once produced was truly liberated.⁴⁰ In fact, though, the liberation of art from the political and bureaucratic surveillance through alternative forms of artistic creation took place in Bulgaria only in the mid-eighties, of course in a more post-modernist than modernist way.

In Romania the “thaw” began with Nicolae Ceaușescu coming to power in 1965. Although at that moment the appeal of the *informel* was much less intense than ten years before, the unique Romanian “thaw” did not last long, terminated in the early seventies with one of the most brutal versions of the Central European communism, and the Romanian artists were mostly preoccupied with various fascinating and dynamic

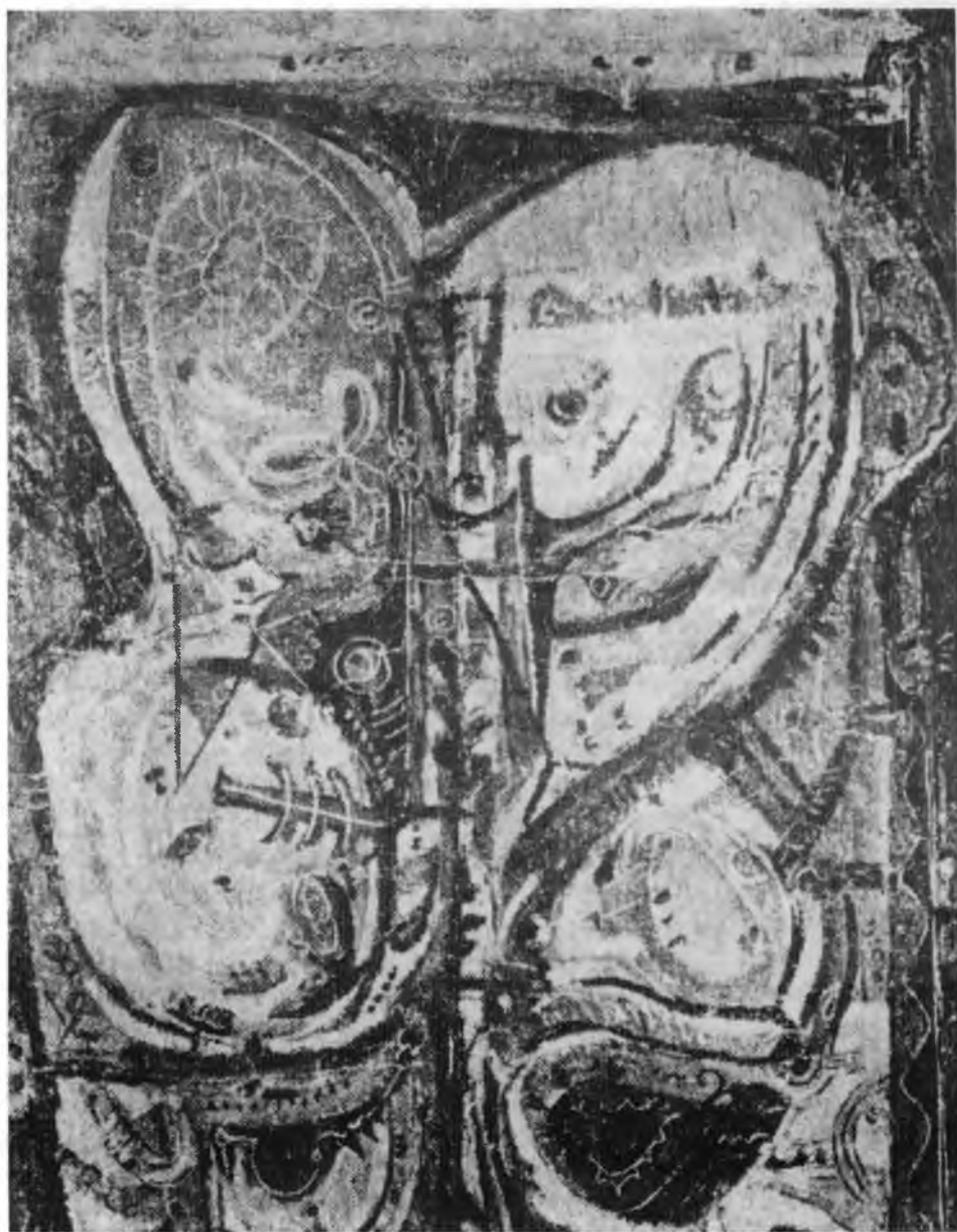
⁴⁰ There is a characteristic polemic of Ivan Marazov, an author associated with the “April Generation,” with a young art historian Diana Popova. Cf. D. Popova, “Abstrakcjata fon na jedno pokolienie,” *Kultura*, no. 19, Sofia 1995: 6; I. Marazov, “Pustinjata fon na jedna ambicija?,” *Kultura*, no. 20, Sofia 1995, 7.

forms of the neo-avant-garde, some traces of the *informel* thinking can be found there as well. A catalyst of the Romanian "thaw" in 1965 was a retrospective exhibition of the classic of the local modernism, Ion Țuculescu, who had died in 1962. Țuculescu never transgressed the boundaries of modernism in its classic version – in the late fifties and early sixties his paintings were still alluding to the French art of the beginning of the century: Picasso, Matisse, the fauvists, and all the post-impressionist pictorial exuberance. The decorative, yet vigorous use of color could have turned out quite close to the system of values represented by the *informel*, but Țuculescu never altogether eliminated from his works objective references. Moreover, his paintings were not the results of free gesture, but of composition, which confined him in the domain of decorative modernism. The boundary of the classic modernism was crossed by Ciprian Radovan, virtually the only Romanian painter whose name can be mentioned in the context of the Central European reception of the *informel*. His works painted in the mid-sixties were close to the poetics of Wols, to whom Radovan quite consciously referred [il. 30].⁴¹

However, Radovan was quite unique in the history of postwar Romanian art, just as unique was also the historical and artistic situation in Romania. While in Czechoslovakia and Poland the *informel* was a manifestation of the artists' resistance – in the late fifties perhaps the most radical, both because of its visual quality, so different from the socialist realism, and because of the existentialist ideology of freedom coming from Paris viewed as the center of modern culture, in Romania, where the "thaw" began much later, it was not the *informel*, but the neo-avant-garde which played the same role. Incidentally, the Romanian neo-avant-garde did not disappear when Ceaușescu went back on his promises of the liberalization of culture, though – unfortunately – its development still remains almost unknown abroad.

Also in Hungary the political, social, and artistic situation was specific. The belated "thaw" began there in the early sixties, yet, unlike in Czechoslovakia, it was not dramatically concluded with an invasion of foreign/friendly troops, but continued (mostly in economy), reaching farther and farther until the eventual fall of communism. In the early sixties Hungary began its evolution towards a specific version of "goulash" communism whose cultural policy was based on the famous doctrine of "3 x T" (Türni, Tiltani, Támogatni – Tolerate, Prohibit, Support). The

⁴¹ C. Radovan, "Reintoarcerea in timp repere," (in:) *Creatie si sincronism european. Miscarea artistica timisoreana (anii 1960-70)*, Timișoara: Muzeul de Artă, Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici 1991), no pagination.



30. Ciprian Radovan, *Univers afectiv*, ca. 1966 [private collection]

Hungarian policy was more restrictive than Polish, particularly in the seventies, but, on the other hand, much more liberal than Czechoslovak, especially during the so-called "normalization."

A different moment of the beginning of the "thaw" in Hungary had its own historico-artistic frame of reference. The *informel*, which became popular in Czechoslovakia and Poland, was already out of date so that the Hungarian artists turning to the West in search for inspiration to resist the socialist realism had at their disposal different models - more up-to-date and perhaps somewhat more appropriate for the "goulash" communism: the pop-art.⁴² Regardless of that unique "shift," in Hungary there is a need to produce a "harmonious" account of the history of local art in accordance with the Western European standards.

For obvious reasons, this is, however, quite difficult. László Beke writes that the simplest way to describe Hungarian art would be to consider it in terms of Western European (and then American) schools of the avant-garde of the sixties, yet, he adds in the same sentence, it is impossible to do so.⁴³ Nevertheless, Beke composed his essay precisely in the way which he questioned, seeking and finding the Hungarian equivalents of particular artistic schools in the West. In a fragment concerning "lyrical abstraction and the *informel*" he claimed that the atmosphere favoring the rise of such art originated at Szentendre, a colony of artists in a small town near Budapest, and brought about the works of two painters, Krisztián Frey and Endre Tót, who did not belong to the Szentendre group but were not isolated from it either.⁴⁴ Certainly, Tót himself, whose art fits the descriptive categories related to the *informel* more than the "calligraphic" painting of Frey, in 1964 believed that he was "joining current tendencies in the world art, approaching the international avant-garde",⁴⁵ in fact, however, the situation was more complicated.⁴⁶

First, already in the late fifties some traces of the *informel* were clearly visible in Hungary - the main inspirations were *art autre* or *art*

⁴² Cf. K. Keserű, *Variations on Pop-Art. Chapters in the History of Hungarian Art between 1950-1990*, Budapest: Ernst Museum, 1993.

⁴³ L. Beke, "The Hidden Dimension of the Hungarian Art of the 1960s", (in:) *Hatvanas Évek. Új Törekvések a Magyar Képzőművészetben*, eds L. Beke et al., Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Galeria, 1991, 314.

⁴⁴ Beke, 316.

⁴⁵ J. Szabadi, "The Gesture of the Artist's Self-Awakening. On Endre Tót's Early Pictures", (in:) *Tót Endre semmi sem semmi / Endre Tot Nothing Ain't Nothing*, Budapest: Műcsarnok, 1995, 11.

⁴⁶ L. Hegyi, "Kalligráfia, absztrakt expressionizmus, informel Magyarországon 1958-1970 között", *Ars Hungarica*, 1991, no 1, 3-14.



31. Endre Tót, *In the Street*, 1965 [private collection]

brut, rather than the *informel par excellence*, yet, at least to some extent, the Hungarian developments were comparable to the European atmosphere of the late forties and early fifties, as well as to the art of Poland and Czechoslovakia in the late fifties. I mean particularly the drawings of Miklós Erdély who was to become a key figure of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. Second, it is essential to specify the historical relations between the European School (i. e. the Szentendre group) and younger artists who were more interested in postwar European modernism, than classical modernism. Among them, an important artist was, above all, Dezső Korniss, whose Budapest atelier “was an important point of reference for many young artists in the fifties and sixties.”⁴⁷ His calligraphic painting was largely shaped by his long visit to Western Europe, which must have been particularly significant for other painters who could not leave the People’s Republic of Hungary and had no access to basic infor-

⁴⁷ G. Perneczky, “Differences and Similarities”, (in:) *Obecność węgierska / Hungarian Presence*, Warsaw: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej “Zachęta,” 1998, 21.



32. Eduard Ověček, *Sešivaný obraz*, 1963 [private collection]

mation about the international art of the mid-fifties. Third, the works of Endre Tót indeed demonstrated some characteristic, salient features of the painting of gesture: the wide impasto, dynamic brush strokes reflecting the unrestricted gestures of the artist, large patches of flagrant colors, etc. However, if we take a closer look, we will see in his paintings fragments of press photos, stencil inscriptions, newspaper columns, and pieces of the national flag, so typical of such artists as Jasper Johns or



33. László Lakner, *Rembrandt Study*, 1966 [Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest]

Robert Rauschenberg, criticizing the painting of gesture and reducing to the absurd the modernist mythology of the lyrical abstraction (to use an American term) [il. 31]. These "quotations" from the "low-brow," trivial reality and mass culture, mixed with "high" culture – with art, as it were, *par excellence* – signify a critique of modernism and its ideology of autonomous art, isolated from the banality of everyday life. In fact, similar devices could be found also in Czechoslovakia, e. g., in the so-called lettristic works of Eduarda Ovčačka [il. 32]. A step farther on this way – towards elimination of the *informel* references in favor of the iconography and approach to the painting borrowed from the pop-art – were the works of László Lakner from the mid-sixties [il. 33]. In the case of Tot, the *informel* was the proper background of various "quotations" (numbers, stencil inscriptions, photographs), whereas for Lakner dripping paint was nothing but a reminiscence; a kind of margin for the multiplied effigy of Rembrandt. The references to the pop-art performed in Hungary a function analogous to that fulfilled in Czechoslovakia and Poland by the *informel* – they expressed the local ambitions to participate in contemporary European culture and share its universe of values.

The critique of modernism in American art is well-known, since it has been thoroughly analyzed by the critics identified with the postmodern revision of the historico-artistic discourses. Notably, however, we can find traces of such critique also in Central Europe or, more precisely, in Hungary which did not experience, like Czechoslovakia and Poland, the wave of late modernism. There, the frame of reference for modernity were the reminiscences of the classic modernism continued after World War II by the European School, a group whose influence in the forties was enormous, but on the other hand, Hungary was the first country in Central Europe which adopted some elements of the ideology of consumerism. Of course, the local standard of living did not resemble that of the late-capitalist consumer society. Even in Hungary the "goulash" communism was at best a caricature of the consumer culture – this is obvious to anyone who lived anywhere in Central Europe in the sixties and seventies. Nevertheless, the language of consumerism, mixed with quotations from the classics of Marxism, was an element of the official Hungarian rhetoric and the background of the local socio-political processes. It was also the context of the painting of Endre Tot from the mid-sixties - a specific response to the *informel* which implied its critique and a transgression of the modernist paradigm.

What was, however, the actual meaning of Tót's critique of the *informel* in a country where there was virtually no such art? What was the significance of his references to mass culture which in Hungary was no-

where to be found? Most likely, those were formal signals of the reception of Western art; adopting models borrowed from the works of Western European and American artists in quite a different cultural milieu. The Central European milieu endowed them with a meaning which was different from the “original” one. It was not criticism of culture – of the modernist repertoire of artistic values – which was the essence of the achievement of Tot, but, just like in the case of a more standard version of the *informel* and the art of the matter in Czechoslovakia and Poland, the effort to establish contact with genuine contemporary art, with – contrary to the ideas of the Anglo-American pop-art – universal culture hoped to provide a remedy for the party control imposed by the regimes of the Soviet bloc. The convergence of the reception of pop-art in Hungary with the rise of the rhetoric of communist consumerism – a “goulash” version of real socialism – is a real historico-artistic challenge which, however, points beyond the limits of the present essay. It seems to deserve its own story about the Central European knot of totalitarianism and modernism.

Translated by Marek Wilczyński