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## MODERNISM AND TOTALITARIANISM II

### MYTHS OF GEOMETRY: NEO-CONSTRUCTIVISM IN CENTRAL EUROPE 1948-1970

In 1948, in the year when in other Central European countries we can observe a consolidation of the Stalinist regime, Marshall Broz Tito, a former ally of Stalin, forsook his allegiance to the U.S.S.R. By the same token, Yugoslavia became more independent as regards its foreign policy and could make an attempt to improve its economic situation and living standard of its several ethnic groups. Analyzing the history of Tito's rule, one may have an impression that his decision to secede from the Big Brother was actually a success. The status of Yugoslavia and certain liberties enjoyed by its population, concerning both business opportunities and the freedom of traveling to the West, were objects of envy of the other countries of Eastern Bloc which proved less lucky in their relations with Stalin and his followers. At times, the efforts to emulate Yugoslavia would result in bloodshed, as in the case of the Prague Spring, violently suppressed by the Warsaw Pact troops twenty years after the Yugoslav secession, or Romania. The Romanian independence of the Big Brother turned out detrimental both to its people and to its dictator, considered a new incarnation of Dracula and called "Genius of the Carpathians." The internal reforms in Yugoslavia as well as its economically motivated openness to the West gained momentum in the seventies, precisely at the moment when Czechoslovakia reached the climax of the dark age of "normalization." Still, few Eastern and Central Europeans were actually aware that the symptoms of liberalization did not refer to any politically significant changes. In fact, the reverse might have been the case. In Yugoslav society, relatively well off, at least in Eastern European terms, any critique of the power system had little popular support. Thus, both

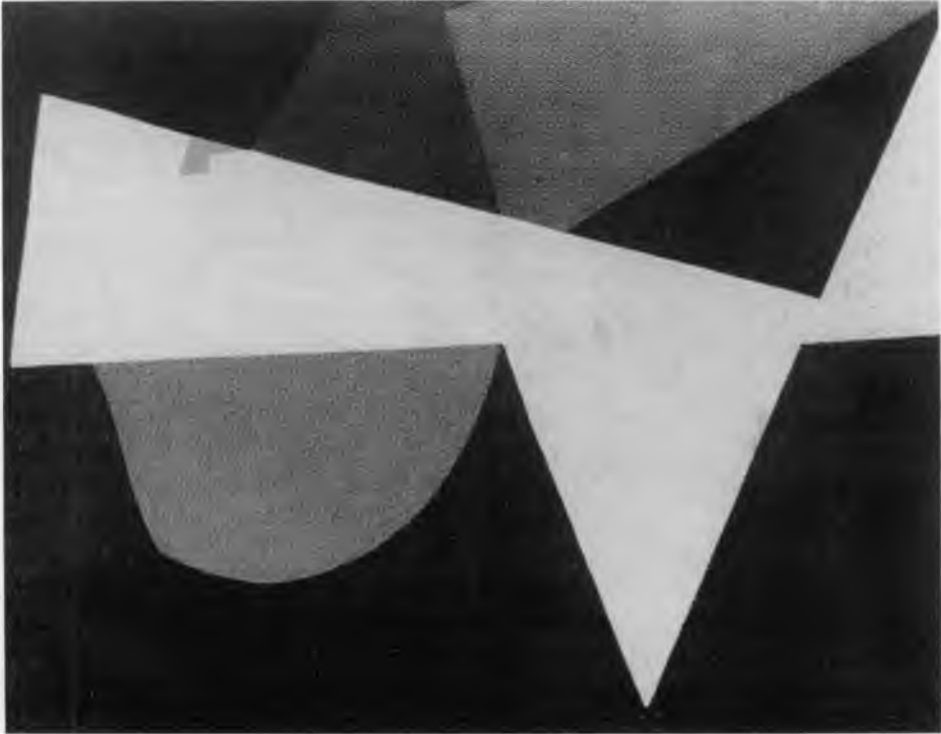
small groups of intellectuals who did not like any version of communism at all, and nationalists who voiced specific ethnic ambitions were energetically persecuted by the police. This, perhaps, explains the failure of Yugoslavia and the conflicts which at the end of the 20th century eventually tore that multi-ethnic state into pieces.

Of course, a particular domain where various political developments intersected was that of culture. I say “of course” because in Yugoslavia, just as in any other country of the postwar communist Europe, regardless of its distance from Moscow, culture was a kind of substitute of politics. Due to the restrictions imposed on political rights and institutions, it took over the function of articulating political ambitions and expressing dissident ideas in a more or less (usually more than less) covert form. The communist regimes all over the so-called “Eastern” Europe (including Yugoslavia) employed quite diverse strategies which, however, had a few characteristics in common: while, on the one hand, they did not tolerate (using various methods of suppression) any art openly criticizing the political system, on the other, (with a few exceptions) they tolerated modern art that remained indifferent to politics, even though it did not conform with the ideas of the socialist culture. At times, depending on a specific country, the post-Stalinist thaw would bring about a relatively high degree of toleration, yet in some cases the artists who adhered to modernism could be happy if they did not serve long prison sentences and the regime mercifully” limited its punitive measures to isolating “unruly” individuals and marginalizing their art. In comparison with the Stalinists period that was undoubtedly some kind of “progress” which, nonetheless, lead to what a Hungarian critic called a “velvet prison.”<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, each country had in this respect a specific history – the eastern, communist part of Europe from Bulgaria and Romania to the GDR, and from the Soviet Union to Poland and Yugoslavia, was by no means uniform, the cultural policy including. Still, in almost every country, the situation of the art which was critical in the political sense of the term (provided that there was *any* art of that kind in the first place) was much worse than that of the neutral and autonomous formal experiments of modernism, with the so-called abstract art as its classic example. The communist regimes were generally much less apprehensive about the modernist universalism, the cult of form and the autonomy of the work of art, etc. than about the critical approaches analyzing the system of power. It was precisely because of the emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> M. Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison. Artists under State Socialism*, New York: Basic Books, 1987.

non-commitment and universalism that modernism became for the artists and critics of the post-Stalinist era virtually the only safe manner of expressing camouflaged political values – above all, their resistance to the socialist, Stalinist model of art as propaganda controlled by the Politburo secretaries. Modernist art was an expression of “European” ambitions and protest against the Soviet dictatorship in culture. A particular example of that process was the reception of the *informel* in Eastern Europe,<sup>2</sup> as well as neo-constructivism which was much more significant and long-lasting than the encounter with the *informel*.



1. Vlado Kristl, “Composition”, 1952, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

Yugoslavia was a country where the degree of tolerance of modern culture was relatively high, which, however, does not mean that it had been so from the very beginning or that the modernist tendencies were developing there in a smooth and uniform manner. Josip Broz Tito’s communists were quite reluctant to renounce power in the domain of culture,

<sup>2</sup> P. Piotrowski, “Totalitarianism and Modernism: The Thaw and *Informel* Painting in Central Europe, 1955-1965”, in: *Artium Quaestiones*, No. X, Poznań 2000.

getting involved in various polemics with artists and critics.<sup>3</sup> When it seemed that the battle for the freedom of art in Yugoslavia was won, the regime – somewhat surprisingly – launched a counter-offensive. Early in 1963 the highest-ranking party and state officials, including Tito himself, attacked abstractionism<sup>4</sup> and the reasons for that sudden maneuver were not clear. Jure Mikuš, quoted by Ješa Denegri in his study of the art in the sixties, suggests that – paradoxically – it might have been related to Khrushchev's reaction to modern art, attacked at about the same time in the U.S.S.R.<sup>5</sup> Yet the Yugoslav campaign did not bring the same



2. Aleksandar Srnec, "Drawing", 1952/1953, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. B. Protić, "Slikarstvo šeste decenije u Srbiji", in: *Jugoslovenska umetnost XX veka*, ed. M. B. Protić, vol. 5: *Jugoslovensko slikarstvo šeste decenije*, ed. M. B. Protić, Beograd: Muzej Savremene Umetnosti, 1980, p. 12-16, 17-23.

<sup>4</sup> J. Denegri, *Šezdesete: teme srpske umetnosti (1960-1970)*, Novi Sad: Svetovi, 1995, p. 55-61.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 57; J. Mikuš, "Slovenacko slikarstvo od raskida sa socrealizmom do konceptualizma i zapadna umetnosti", w: *Gledišta*, No. 11-12, Nov.-Dec., 1985.

results as in the Soviet Union and quite quickly the situation improved. Modern art could function in Yugoslavia relatively unoppressed – its development was on the one hand determined by neo-constructivism, and on the other by the *informel*. The latter was perhaps less significant than in Poland or Czechoslovakia, but still it proved popular enough.<sup>6</sup> What is more, according to some art historians, the *informel*, favored in the late fifties mainly in Belgrade, was a kind of response or negative reaction to the popularity of neo-constructivism, dominating chiefly in Zagreb.<sup>7</sup> Thus, against the background of other Central European countries, the Yugoslav relationship between the two trends was rather unique, since for the most part the return to neo-constructivism elsewhere was, as we will see, a reaction to an earlier interest in the *informel*, and not the reverse. In addition, what may have been a valid contributing factor were the regional ambitions and rivalry between Croatia and Zagreb on the one hand and Serbia and Belgrade on the other.

Even though in comparison with Poland and Hungary, let alone the Soviet Union, the Croatian tradition of neo-constructivism was not very impressive (in fact dating back only to a small group centered before World War II around the journal *Zenit*), its development in Zagreb was most dynamic. Moreover, Zagreb had an active international center – the only one of its kind in Europe – which was open to neo-constructivists of both the East and the West: an exposition called “New Tendencies,” organized continually since 1961 through the late seventies.<sup>8</sup> The “New Tendencies” were definitely one of the key points of reference as regards Central European neo-constructivism. Their immediate chronological predecessor was the EXAT-51 group founded in Croatia in 1951 – indeed the first modernist initiative in the postwar Yugoslavia<sup>9</sup> – which came

<sup>6</sup> *Enformel u Beogradu*, ed. L. Trifunović, Beograd: Umetnicki Paviljon Cvijeta Zuzorić, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> M. B. Protić, “Slikarstvo šeste decenije u Srbiji”, in: *Jugoslovensko slikarstvo šeste decenije*, ed. M. B. Protić, op. cit., p. 42; J. Denegri, „Kraj šeste decenije: enformel u Jugoslaviji”, in: *ibid.*, p. 135; The author refers the former Protić’s text: M. B. Protić, *Enformel: apstraktna umjetnost*, in: *Srpsko slikarstvo XX veka*, Beograd: Nolit, 1970, p. 504.

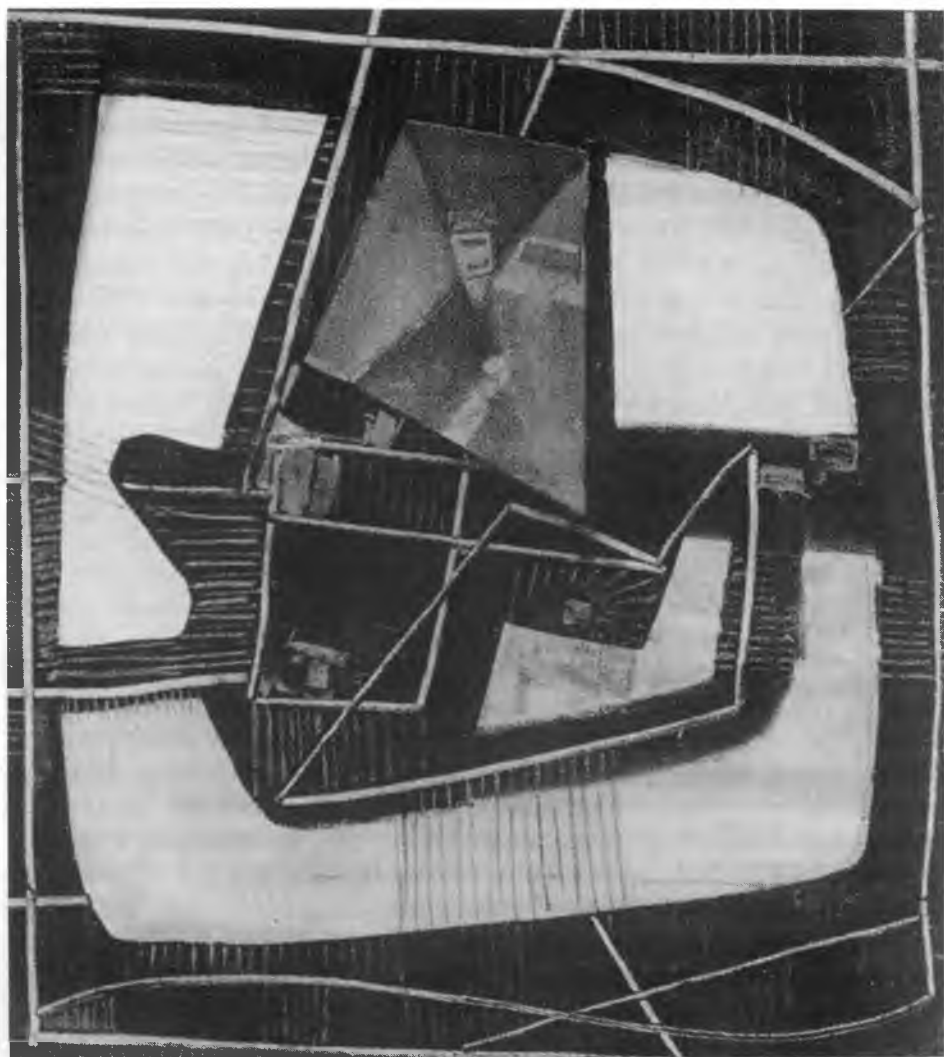
<sup>8</sup> *Konstruktivizam i kinetička umjetnost: Exat 51, Nove tendencije/ Konstruktivism and Kinetic Art: Exat 51, New Tendencies*, ed. M. Susovski, Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti/ Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1995. Cf. *Zentrum Zagreb. Skulptur in Kroatien, 1950-1990*, ed. Z. Košević, cooperation: C. Brockhaus, Duisburg: Lehmbruck Museum, 1994. On abstract art in Croatia only cf. a series of books: Z. Rus, *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj. 1: Slikarstvo, egzistencija, apstrakcija*, Split: Logos, 1985, J. Denegri, *Apstraktna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj. 2: Geometrijske tendencije u Hrvatskoj umjetnosti*, Split: Logos, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> J. Denegri & Z. Košević, *EXAT 51*, Zagreb: Galerija Nova, 1979; cf. V. Richter, *Exat 51: a Contribution to Historical Facts Related to „Art & Ideology” Conference*, Zagreb 1999.



3. Ivan Picelj, "Composition XI-1", 1952/ 1956, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

into being only a few years after Tito's secession from the Soviet bloc, still in the tense atmosphere of the Stalinist methods of control over artistic culture. Those several years in the late forties and early fifties demonstrated that an act of secession on an international political arena did not necessarily imply liberalization of the cultural policy. Such libe-



4. Božidar Rašica, "Composition", 1952, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

ralization came later as an effect of a different strategy, stemming primarily from economic calculation and not from the acceptance of artistic liberty. At that time, i.e. in the early fifties, the Yugoslav authorities, just as the authorities of all the other Eastern European countries, had no intention to tolerate "formalism," hence such artists of EXAT-51 as Ivan Picelj, Božidar Rašica, and Alexander Srnec exhibited their works at the Paris "Salon des Réalités Nouvelles" quite unofficially, i.e. without

Tito's government's support.<sup>10</sup> At any rate, that was the first significant show of the modern artists from the other, Eastern side of the iron curtain" at a major international event organized by the postwar avant-garde, and as such, "official" or not, it meant that Yugoslavia would be the first to reject the Stalinist doctrine in its cultural policy. In fact, in the first exhibition of the group in Yugoslavia was also "unofficial," for it was organized in Ivan Picejl's private apartment in 1952. The first official exposition of EXAT-51 took place early in 1953 on the premises of the Association of Architects of Croatia, since some members of the group (e.g. Zdravko Bregovac and Vjenceslav Richter) were actually working architects. Besides, it should be mentioned that other members (Vladimir Kristl and Alexander Srnec) worked at the famous School of Animated Film in Zagreb.<sup>11</sup>

The program of EXAT-51, presented on December 7, 1951 at the Association of Visual and Applied Artists of Croatia (ULUBUH) was not very sophisticated. It included the postulates of artistic liberty and the freedom of experimenting, and called for the artistic activity aiming at a synthesis of all plastic arts in struggle with all the obsolete ideas and actions which thwarted the development of modern art. That negative frame of reference, writes Želimir Košćević, was – obviously enough – the socialist realism and the traditional Croatian realistic painting, popular among the local artists.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the program contained some elements which referred directly to the current artistic life in Croatia, stressing the need to voice different opinions, which should be interpreted as a call for the pluralization of art and against the party monopoly in that field. Besides, the EXAT-51 artists emphasized some positive and far-reaching aspects of their stand: namely, they claimed that the effort put in the study of the principles of non-representing art would develop and enhance and artistic culture of their country.<sup>13</sup> No doubt, they turned out right, since their unusual activity, a large number of exhibitions and projects in architecture and interior design, and particularly the regular "New Tendencies" shows made Zagreb one of the most interesting centers of neo-constructivist art. Of course, in many cases, the works of individual EXAT-51 members were either far from the neo-constructivist

<sup>10</sup> J. Denegri, "EXAT-51", in: J. Denegri & Z. Košćević, *EXAT 51*, op. cit., p. 99; M. Susovski, *Hommage to EXAT 51* [a leaf-let accompanying the exhibition], Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Z. Košćević, "Introduction", in: J. Denegri & Z. Košćević, *EXAT 51*, op. cit., p. 33; [M. Susovski, in:] *Konstruktivizam i kinetička umjetnost*, op. cit., p. 115-116.

<sup>12</sup> Z. Košćević, "Introduction", in: J. Denegri & Z. Košćević, *EXAT 51*, op. cit., p. 42-44.

<sup>13</sup> "Manifest 1951. Godine/ Manifest of 1951", in: *Hrvatska likovna kritika 50ih. Izobrani tekstovi / Croatian Art Criticism of the 1950s. Selected Essays*, ed. L. Kolečnik, Zagreb [no publisher shown] 1999, p. 105-106, 385-386.

orthodoxy or their relations with pure neo-constructivism remained quite vague and loose. This, however, is not the point here, and, as we will see, such a situation was by no means unique in the eastern part of Europe. On the contrary, it indicates a much more general problem of specific artistic syncretism typical at that time of the avant-garde of Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, and of an unorthodox approach to tradition which is that case (unlike in other countries of the "Other" Europe) was found "outside" – mainly in the artistic milieu of Paris.

According to Želimir Košćević, the roots of the EXAT-51 group included three elements: first, the Croatian heritage of the avant-garde, i.e. the journal *Zenit* published in the early twenties; second, the modernist tradition of architecture, still relevant for the local architects some of whom had a chance to study before World War II with the most outstanding European masters; and third, the tradition of the revolutionary Soviet art – particularly its utilitarian programs exciting the imagination of the Zagreb artists.<sup>14</sup> Both those elements and the favorable political situation, i.e. the secession of Yugoslavia from the Big Brother, determined the power of EXAT-51 and its impact on the artistic culture of Croatia. One result of that situation was the opening (in 1961) of the Zagreb "New Tendencies," the most significant international enterprise as regards neo-constructivism in Central Europe.

The role of neo-constructivism in the art of Yugoslavia, and particularly of Croatia, cannot be overrated. As a matter of fact, it soon became a kind of official style, marking the exhibitions and public and industrial projects of the country, as well as its monuments and official shows to the detriment of the socialist realism which, after an abortive attempt at restitution in 1963, lost all its adherents not only among artists, but also in the political establishment. Bojana Pejić writes that almost all the Yugoslav monuments of the glory of revolution and liberation had a modernist, and not socialist-realist character, which, however, did not mean the elimination from the public iconosphere of the images of the communist leaders: Lenin, Marx, and – in particular – Marshall Tito.<sup>15</sup> The question of appropriation of modernism in Yugoslavia, and its incorporation into the structure of official cultural politics is broader than neo-constructivism, however, what is particularly important for us in this essay,<sup>16</sup> there is no doubt, of all the countries of the Eastern Bloc, in

<sup>14</sup> Z. Košćević, "Introduction", in: J. Denegri & Z. Košćević, *EXAT 51*, op. cit., p. 34-36.

<sup>15</sup> B. Pejić, "Post-communism et réécriture de l'histoire (de l'art)/ Postcommunism and the Rewriting of (Art) History", w: *Art Press*, No. 192, Juin 1994, p. 38/ 39.

<sup>16</sup> B. Pejić, "Sozialistischer Modernismus und die Nachwehen", in: *Aspekte/ Positionen. 50 Jahre Kunst aus Mitteleuropa, 1949-1999*, ed. L. Hegy, Wien: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1999, p. 115-124.

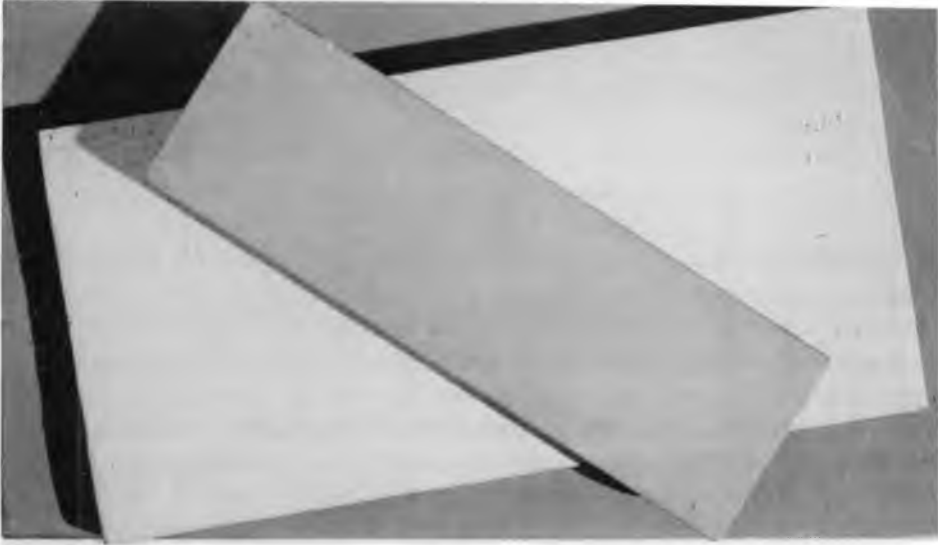
Yugoslavia neo-constructivist art had the greatest institutional career, greater even than in Poland where neo-constructivism could appeal to its genuine historical tradition, continued by the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (one of the oldest museums of modern art in the world). Yet, the Yugoslav regime began tolerating neo-constructivist initiatives much earlier than Polish communists, which was not so much a result of a consciously implemented cultural policy, but of a kind of “laissez-faire” leniency.

Quite different was the situation of neo-constructivism in the GDR. In fact, East Germany was a unique case in many respects, particularly as regards the question of artistic traditions. While after 1945 West Germany (i.e. the zones occupied by the Western allies) started a reconstruction period from scratch, making an effort to reestablish the continuity of modern art broken by the Nazis, in the eastern part of the country the situation was much more complex.<sup>17</sup> There the primary frame of reference was the German revolutionary tradition, including the heritage of expressionism and realism connected with various leftist organizations. That selective approach to the past, according to the doctrine of the Soviet socialist realism, resulted in the elimination from the East German cultural policy of all the influences of the avant-garde and modern art, including those of constructivism and dadaism. One may claim without much exaggeration that the only East German artist who in the fifties and sixties continued the modernist tradition was Hermann Glöckner. Glöckner was indeed a unique figure in the history of European art, even though he never made the front pages of art history books published in the West. Only in the nineties, after his death at 98, his work became a subject of several studies.<sup>18</sup> Its beginning dated back to the times before World War I, while the end came almost on the eve of Glöckner's demise – constructivism and neo-constructivism were just two of its many strains, as distinct and significant as they proved. The artist him-

<sup>17</sup> Among a large number of publication cf. *The Divided Heritage. Themes and Problems in German Modernism*, ed. I. Rogoff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 1- 85; E. Gillen, “Tabula Rasa and Inwardness. German Images before and after 1945”, in: *German Art from Beckmann to Richter. Images of a Divided Country*, ed. E. Gillen, Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1997, p. 16-22 [translated from German, the catalogue published by the same publisher and accompanying the exhibition *Deutschlandbilder. Kunst aus einem geteilten Land*]. Also cf. *Kunstdokumentation SBZ/ DDR, 1945-1990. Aufsätze, Berichte, Materialien*, ed. G. Feist, E. Gillen, B. Vierneisel, Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> *Hermann Glöckner, 1889-1987*, ed. W. Schmidt, Wien: Museum Moderner Kunst, 1992; *Hermann Glöckner, 1889-1987*, ed. D. Honisch, Berlin: Nationalgalerie, 1992. *Hermann Glöckner. Die Tafeln, 1919-1985*, red. Ch. Dittrich, R Mayer, Dresden: eikon-Presse, 1992.

self would often say: "Above all and in principle I am not a constructivist."<sup>19</sup> Writes Lóránd Hegyi: "Glöckner [was] a constructivist without any real possibility to develop his constructing, an experimenter with no chance to proliferate his experiments."<sup>20</sup>



5. Hermann Glöckner, "Red and Yellow Rectangle on the Blue Rectangle", 1955, private collection

Glöckner was a truly charismatic figure of unusual prestige in the so-called independent artistic circles of the GDR, nevertheless, (and perhaps exactly for that reason) the state with its official cultural policy ignored him altogether. The only institution which showed some sustained interest in Glöckner's art was the Kupferstich-Kabinett of Dresden, and that was because of personal commitment of its director, Werner Schmidt. The artist's experiments focused not only on the visual construction of the picture, but also on the matter of his art, incorporating banal objects of everyday use (e.g. boxes of matches), as well as on the development of spatial forms, etc. for which the constructivist tradition was just a kind of general background, usually treated in a very individual manner. The size of Glöckner's works was of importance, too –

<sup>19</sup> H. Glöckner, "Meine Arbeit ist mein Leben", after: H. Köstner, "Herman Glöckner's Board Work", in: *German Art from Beckmann to Richter*, op. cit., p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> L. Hegyi, "Poesie der Geometrie. Bemerkungen zur Situation von Herman Glöckner", in: *Hermann Glöckner, 1889-1987*, ed. W. Schmidt, Wien, op. cit., p. 6.

they were often small, which highlighted their private and delicate character, having little to do with the civilizing mission of modernist art, so frequently referred to by neo-constructivists (e.g. members of the Croatian EXAT-51 group). Glöckner's art explicitly denied that ideology: low-pitched and personal, it was developing on the margin of the totalitarian state without any claims to reconstruct the world. Its only aim was work itself – the making of those refined and delicate paintings and objects. Work made the whole life of that long-lived artist.

In Romania, which unfortunately in many respects resembled the GDR, neo-constructivist art could still develop somewhat more freely than in East Germany. The Romanian artistic culture took full advantage of a few years of thaw introduced in the mid-sixties by Nicolae Ceaușescu who was originally quite liberal as a political leader. Even though more than a dozen Romanian artists were actually interested in the neo-constructivist experiments, at first everything took place in a closed circle of the artists of Timișoara.<sup>21</sup> There were probably many reasons for that state of affairs: one was the end of the thaw which came quickly, as Ceaușescu, who changed into one of the most horrifying dictators of Central Europe, adopted a much more strict cultural policy. Another, related reason was the emigration of Romanian artists, including also an outstanding neo-constructivist Roman Cotosman. Moreover, Romanian art had no significant constructivist tradition – the local interest in constructivism began only in the late sixties, at the moment when the Western art scene (always a major frame of reference for Eastern Europe) was dominated by quite different tendencies related to the revision of the modernist (i.e. also constructivist) model of art, triggered by the appropriation of constructivism by the academia. In other words, the history of Romanian constructivism is not very long.<sup>22</sup> It starts in 1963, when Roman Cotosman returns from Paris and, inspired by the French Group de Recherche d'Art Visuel, founds in Timișoara – together with Stefan Bertalan and Constantin Flondor – Group 111. At first, the group was rather informal, being a kind of “society of friends for self-education,” discussing basic ideas of modernist abstractionism and experi-

<sup>21</sup> *Creatie și sincronism european. Mișcarea artistică timișoreană (anii 1960-70): Constructivism, Cinetism, Op-art, Ambientă-obiect, Performanță, Cercetare-pedagoge, Fotografie-film*, ed. I. Pintilie, Timișoara: Ministeriul Culturii, Muzeul de Artă, 1991; I. Pintilie, “The Cardinal Points of the Artistic Movement in Timișoara, 1960-1996/ Punctele cardinale ale mișcării artistice timișorene, 1960-1996”, in: *Experiment in arta românească după 1960/ in Romanian Art since 1960*, ed. M. Cârnelci, București: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1997, p. 30-41.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. A. Pintilie, “Tendances constructivistes dans l'art roumain contemporain”, in: *Revue roumaine d'histoire de l'art. Série Beaux-Arts*, No. XX, 1983, p. 21-48.



6. Sigmund Freud, "Information Tower", 1971 (after: *Experiment in Romanian Art since 1960* / *Experiment in Romanian Art since 1960*, ed. M. Cârneli, București: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1997, p. 236)

menting with their own visual art. Since 1966 its members started showing their works to the public, which was, as it were, an official beginning of the group. In 1968, after their first exhibition in Bucharest, they were joined by two other artists interested in neo-constructivism: Zoltan Molnar and Diet Saylor. In 1968 Group 111 earned some international reputation, having taken part in a biennale of constructivist art in Nuremberg. In 1970 several younger artists, gathered around Bertalan and Flondor, founded another group called Sigma which in the early seventies became their official platform to organize shows both in Romania and abroad. In the same year they completed a collective work epitomizing their artistic experiments – the famous *Information Tower* which was quite an eclectic, geometrically shaped metal structure. However, in the mid-seventies the group was dispersed and each of its members began to work on his own.

A relatively poor development of Romanian neo-constructivism might have been caused by the specific character of the local avant-garde. In the twenties, constructivism in Romania was intertwined with a number of other parallel trends promoted by two journals: *Contimporanul*, founded in 1922 by Marcel Janco and Jon Vinea, and *Integral*, founded by Max Herman Maxy, which was focused on constructivism more exclusively.<sup>23</sup> At that time Bucharest was an artistic center of an international reputation, with such notable artists as Victor Brauner, Hans Mattis-Teutsche, Corneliu Mihilescu, and Tristan Tzara, yet, while some of them soon left the country, others were marginalized, and finally, after World War II a very long period of Stalinist terror resulted in the discontinuation of the Romanian tradition of modern art. On the other hand, what prevented the development of neo-constructivism in Romania as well was the totalitarian cultural policy of the fifties and early sixties, put into operation when elsewhere in the world the interest in that kind of art had its virtual climax, as for instance in Yugoslavia where otherwise the constructivist heritage was not very rich. The most important in this respect were two Yugoslav journals: *Zenit*, founded in 1921 in Zagreb by Ljubomir Mincić, and *Tank*, established a few years later in Slovenia. As a matter of fact, the very status of modern art in Romania and Yugoslavia was quite different, since, according to Steven Mansbach, in Bucharest, contrary to the Balkans, it had nothing to do with the expression of ethnic and national identity.<sup>24</sup> Anyway, in spite of its

<sup>23</sup> Cf. one of a few studies on Romanian avant-garde: *București, anii 1920-1940: între avangardă și modernism / Bucharest in the 1920s-1940s: between Avant-Garde and Modernism*, ed. A. Beldiman, M. Cârneli, București: Uniunea Arhitecților din România, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> S. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe. From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 243.

meager historical background, but because of the favorable political situation in the mid-sixties, in Yugoslavia neo-constructivism had a chance to thrive.

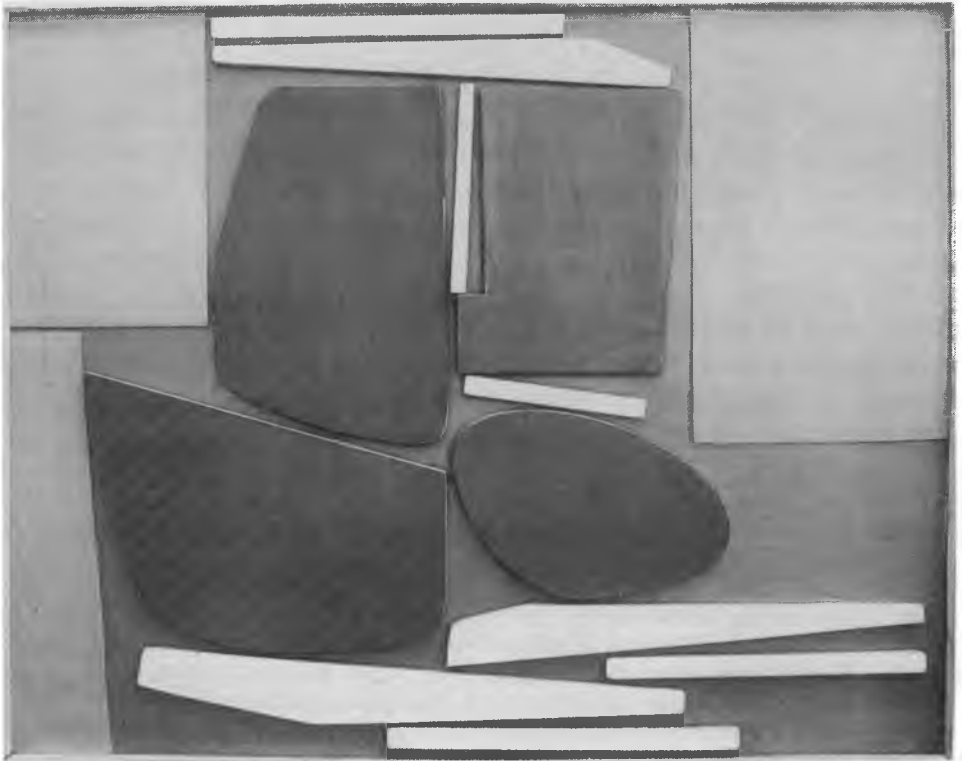
In contrast to Romania and Yugoslavia, Poland not only had its strong and well-defined tradition of constructivist art, but also that tradition was practically continuous, which increased its impact on Polish artists after World War II. As will be demonstrated below, the influence and role of the constructivist tradition in Poland were quite different than in Romania and Yugoslavia. On the other hand, as regards the political framework of modern art, the post-Stalinist Poland, all the restrictions imposed by the communist party notwithstanding, was much closer to Yugoslavia than to Romania (let alone the GDR), although it should be remembered that in Yugoslavia the economic infrastructure was superior, the freedom of traveling abroad was a fact, and the official indifference to ideology was considerable.

Even though in Poland there were no prestigious initiatives that could be compared to the Zagreb "New Tendencies," in the late sixties constructivism (both its past and present manifestations) became, as it were, an internationally recognizable trademark of Polish artistic culture. A key role in this respect was played by the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, managed since 1966 by Ryszard Stanisławski, which continued the tradition of the Artists' Collection, founded in the late twenties by the "a.r." group and in 1931 handed down to the city authorities by Władysław Strzemiński.<sup>25</sup> Stanisławski's policy was then followed in the nineties by his immediate successor, Jaromir Jedliński.<sup>26</sup> Thus, constructivism became one of the most significant currents in the Polish artistic culture of the modern times, and as such it exerted an enormous influence on contemporary art. Though both Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński died in the early fifties, their influence (particularly that of Strzemiński) on a few generations of Polish artists is hard to overestimate, especially that

<sup>25</sup> *Kolekcja sztuki XX wieku w Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi*, Warszawa: Galeria Zachęta, 1991.

<sup>26</sup> Among a large number of studies on Polish constructivism cf. *Constructivism in Poland, 1923-1936: Blok, Praesens, a.r.*, ed. R. Stanisławski, Essen: Museum Folkwang/ Otterlo: Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, 1973; *Presences polonaises. Lart vivant autour du musée de Łódź: constructivism, Witkiewicz, les contemporains*, ed. D. Bozo, R. Stanisławski, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983; *Vision and Unity. Strzemiński, 1893-1952, and 9 Contemporary Polish Artists*, ed. R. Stanisławski, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki/ Apeldoorn: Von Reekum Museum, 1989; *Władysław Strzemiński, 1893-1952. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, ed. J. Jedliński, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994; *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, red. J. Jedliński, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1995; *Katarzyna Kobro, 1898-1951. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, ed. J. Ładnowska, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1998.

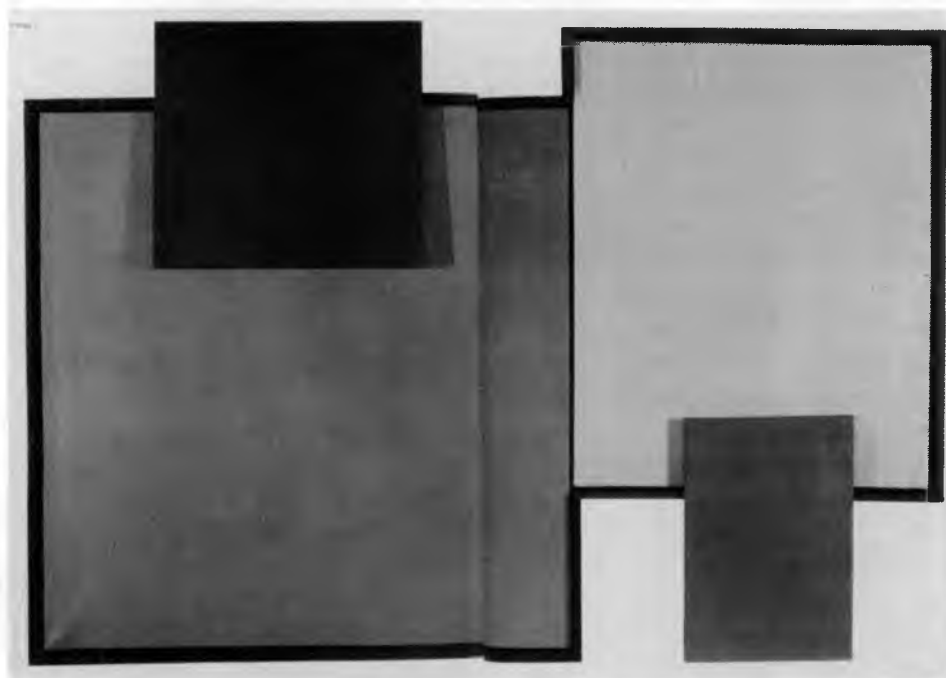
another major and highly influential figure of Polish constructivism, Henryk Stażewski, who began his career long before World War II, lived almost through the eighties. Still another founding father of Polish constructivism, Henryk Berlewi, who died in 1967 as an émigré, did a lot to promote the trend particularly in France, where in the Paris gallery Denis René an exhibition called “Précurseurs de l’art abstrait en Pologne” was organized in 1957 to recapitulate the achievement of the Polish modernist movement. Mainly thanks to its living tradition, the Polish version of neo-constructivism proved relatively distinct and different from other varieties of abstract art in the fifties, e.g. the *informel*, which was by no means a rule in other Central European countries. Alarmed by an invasion of abstractionism, *tachisme*, action painting and painting of matter, the poet Julian Przyboś, connected with the constructivists, wrote in 1957 an essay called “Abstract Art – How To Get out of It?” in which he made an effort to defend the local heritage of modern art, associated with the constructivist tradition exhibited almost at the



7. Henryk Stażewski, “Composition”, 1960, National Museum, Kraków

same time in Paris, against the shallow (in his opinion) yet widespread reception of the *informel* among Polish artists.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, the main figure of Polish constructivism was Henryk Stażewski, whose name has already been mentioned above. His retrospective exhibition organized in the mid-nineties in Łódź showed that al-



8. Kajetan Sosnowski, "Fourfold Picture", 1968, National Museum, Warsaw

though he tried various directions, including also – in the forties – representing art, his proper metier or personal paradigm was the constructivist tradition.<sup>28</sup> Monochromatic color surfaces and flat and spatial geometrical forms distinctly place Stażewski's achievement in a neo-constructivist perspective. Even when occasionally the harmony of the elements of composition seems violated (or perhaps exactly because of that), there is no doubt as to the provenance of his art. Stażewski's talent

<sup>27</sup> J. Przyboś, „Sztuka abstrakcyjna – jak z niej wyjść?”, in: *Przegląd Kulturalny*, No. 45, 1957. Polemics: M. Porębski, „Jak nie wychodzić”, in: *Przegląd Kulturalny*, No. 46, 1957; T. Kantor, „Abstrakcja umarła – niech żyje abstrakcja”, in: *Zycie Literackie*, No. 50, 1957 [appendix *Plastyka*, No. 16]. Cf. *Odwilż. Sztuka ok. 1956*, ed. P. Piotrowski, Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe, 1996, p. 18-19.

<sup>28</sup> *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, op. cit.



9. Zbigniew Gostomski, "Optical Object XXXIV", 1965, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź

might have consisted in his ability to manipulate geometrical forms lightly, to use the aesthetic schemes of constructivism in an unorthodox way. Naturally, he was not the only Polish neo-constructivist – there were many of them, just to mention Kajetan Sosnowski who in the late sixties painted long series of related canvases. Each element of a larger structure pertained to a problem of a single color. Arranged in geometrical sets, the elements made colorful combinations of different surfaces. What is, however, most interesting is that his neo-constructivist explorations resulted from quite different artistic experiments with color in the late fifties and early sixties. Originally, his work was inspired by non-geometrical abstraction. The *Empty Pictures* dealt with the problems of color and surface without any references to geometry.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, in contrast to Stażewski, the neo-constructivist art of Sosnowski stemmed from quite a different experience of modernity. As we will see, such a process was not at all unusual – the same can be identified in other countries of Central Europe, such as Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Still another artists, Zbigniew Gostomski, made in the sixties geometrical *Optical objects* in which light and forms, pervading each other, contributed to a monochromatic, aesthetically pure structure of the surface and space, based on the rules of equilibrium, contrast, and harmony. It should be added that both the nestor of Polish constructivism, Henryk Stażewski, and a geometrico-optical continuator of that tradition, Zbigniew Gostomski, were connected with the Warsaw Foksal Gallery, founded in 1966, which became a legend of all Central Europe, since under (to put it mildly) unfavorable political circumstances it functioned as a symbol of persistence and development of the avant-garde values.

Another artist connected with the Foksal Gallery was the totally unorthodox (yet also somewhat akin to Stażewski) Edward Krasiński. Even mentioning Krasiński's name in the context of neo-constructivism may seem dubious, since he defined himself as a "surrealist in life and near-dadaist in art."<sup>30</sup> Still, if we realize that the focus of Krasiński's art has been a blue line running through space ad infinitum, a line that is absolutized and totally autonomous,<sup>31</sup> it turns out that we are quite close to the constructivist origin of such a way of thinking. Both for the artists of the East (Rodchenko) and of the West (Mondrian) line was a basic means

<sup>29</sup> Cf. B. Kowalska, *Kajetan Sosnowski – malarz niewidzialnych światów*, Warszawa: Galeria „Zachęta”, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> S. Cichowicz, „Z historii niebieskiego humoru”, in: *Edward Krasiński*, ed. J. Ładnowska, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1991 (no pagination).

<sup>31</sup> [Interview by J. Mytkowska] „Rozmowa z Edwardem Krasińskim”, in: *Edward Krasiński*, ed. J. Mytkowska, Warszawa: Fundacja Galerii Foksal, p. 66.



10. Edward Krasiński, "Lance", 1963 (after: *Edward Krasiński*, ed. J. Ładnowska, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1991 (no pagination))

of expression, and its analysis was a major task of art. Krasiński took up the same task and he got far with it, even though he chose a direction which differed from that of constructivism. Julian Przyboś explicitly identified the origin of Krasiński's art in what he called in the mid-sixties "sculpture reduced to line." Przyboś made an analysis of the artist's *Spear* shown in Osieki in 1963 – it hung in the air as if in motion (the fastening strings remained invisible); a line which was "covering," as it were, distance in space. In the poet's opinion, Krasiński developed an idea of Katarzyna Kobro – whereas Kobro in her *Spatial Compositions* dematerialized sculpture by depriving it of its solidity, Krasiński de-



11. Edward Krasiński, "Stażewski's Studio", Installation at the exhibition "Der Riss im Raum", in Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin 1994

prived it of its space. Writes Przyboś: "Katarzyna Kobro opened the prison of the sculpted solid, she liberated space in art. Her composition, formulating vacuum, were based on an assumption that space is continuous. They implied some infinite continuum... Krasiński's spears have a certain girth, therefore they may be considered as sculpted solids... But their polychromy makes them appear in our eyes as volume, as mass of

an elongated, rounded solid. We do not see staffs and points, but lines in a hurry, speared into space.”<sup>32</sup> The artist approached that problem using many lines (straight and curved) in his *Linear Sculptures* shown in the Foksal Gallery in the sixties (1966), as well as “finding” a straight line in ready-made objects, such as a piece of telephone wire painted blue in a performance called *Winter Assemblage – J’ai perdu la fin* shown in the Foksal Gallery in 1969 (it resembled the surrealist *objet trouvé*). The color of the wire turned out prophetic. When Krasiński’s work, sent by ship, did not make it to Tokyo in time to be displayed at the local biennale, the artist sent from Warsaw a telex in which he repeated 5000 times the [English] word “blue” and which (here comes the motif of dadaist chance) determined his art for many years to come, if not forever. Krasiński remembers: “I was unable to do anything else then, because it was so radical that I couldn’t make a step back to try some bullshit. I was helpless and all of a sudden I got that blue strip. That really saved me.”<sup>33</sup> When many years later, after the death of Henryk Stażewski with whom he shared a studio, he reconstructed its interior in the Foksal Gallery, intersected, as it were, at the height of 130 cm with a strip of blue scotch, he said: “I don’t know if this is art. But without any doubt this is scotch blue: width – 19 cm, length – unknown.”<sup>34</sup> By the same token, as it were, the constructivist tradition in Poland was fulfilled; both through Henryk Stażewski, the subject of the exhibition, and through Edward Krasiński’s art in which the dreams of the constructivists came true – a line, the basic element of the image, became a pure thing stripped of all symbolic meanings. Is such reification, in a theoretical as well as historical sense, possible, or it is just one of modernist myths? We will return to this question in the closing part of the present text.

Another myth of modernism is the fusion of art and life – erasing of the boundary between them, so often discussed by the classics of Polish and Russian constructivism. That challenge has been taken up in a highly original and coherent way by one of the most fascinating artists of Central Europe, Roman Opałka. Before he painted his first *Detail* from the series “1965/1 – ∞,” Opałka turned to graphic arts and paintings interpreted in terms of Strzemiński’s unism, though he himself did not always approve of such a label.<sup>35</sup> His *Chronomes* or the series called *De-*

<sup>32</sup> J. Przyboś, „Rzeźba napowietrzna”, in: *Poezja*, No. 1, 1966, after: *Edward Krasiński*, ed. J. Ładnowska, op. cit. (no pagination).

<sup>33</sup> [J. Mytkowska] „Rozmowa z Edwardem Krasińskim”, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> After: *Galeria Foksal, 1966-1994*, ed. W. Borowski et al., Warszawa: Galeria Foksal, 19994, p. 137.

<sup>35</sup> B. Kowalska, *Roman Opałka*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976, s. 21.



12. Roman Opałka, "1965/1 - ∞, Detail 1-35327" (detail), Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź

*scription of the World* referred to the problem of the unification and minimization of planar division. Moreover, the “counted paintings,” which he started making in 1965 – at first just one of Opałka’s modes of artistic production, then the only one – have been approached by some art historians as an effect of his “dialogue” with Strzemiński.<sup>36</sup> Giving up the “counted paintings – in color” in which numbers were placed against a colored background seems to validate such an observation. Following this direction, one might say that a decision taken in 1972 to keep whitening the painting by adding in each new one 1% of white paint to the original black backdrop of the numbers painted in white leads towards “white on white”; a kind of update of Malevich’s suprematism. Thus, in its visual aspect, Opałka’s art appears to belong to the analytical tradition of picture-making – the tradition of constructivism/suprematism.

However, this observation is valid only in part, since the meaning of Opałka’s painting, unlike that of the unist (though not suprematist) one is not limited to its frames, but can be explained by the continuum. The “counted paintings” of Opałka, measuring away subsequent fragments of the artist’s life, are, according to Andrzej Turowski, “an attempt to visualize time by simultaneous conceptualization of the picture.” The art historian claims that the gradual whitening of the background towards a “white picture” (white numbers on white) is a prefiguration of death: “There the visualization of time overlaps with the conceptualization of the picture.” Hence, Turowski concludes, “what shines through the infiniteness of Duration is the utopia of art which replaces the illusion of life. The Finite in the Infinite. In this utopia a never to-be seen reality will exist as in an untold dream.”<sup>37</sup> Opałka’s painting or, in fact, his paintings, for one should rather use the plural, are very close to life, parallel to its course – not as metaphors, but due to a kind of horizontal contiguity or, as Lóránd Hegyi has put it, “by an absolute tautology.”<sup>38</sup> Consequently, the work of art has become totally transparent to life, which stands in opposition to the ideas of unism, but which can be placed in the context of yet another (non-constructivist) avant-garde mythology of the identity of life and art. The painting (paintings) or, to be precise, the figures-numbers written on the background do not refer to the absolutized surface of the canvas, but to existence itself; they are, one might

<sup>36</sup> J. Jedliński, “Zakład. Romana Opałki życie w sztuce”, in: *Roman Opałka. Opałka 1965/1 – ∞*, ed. J. Świercz, Warszawa: Galeria “Zachęta”, 1994, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> A. Turowski, “Uwaga: przełomy”, in: *Magazyn Sztuki*, No. 4, 1994, p. 88-89. Cf. A. Turowski, “Skończone w Nieskończonym”, in: *Roman Opałka. Skończone w Nieskończonym*, Warszawa: Galeria Foksal, 1992, no pagination.

<sup>38</sup> L. Hegyi, “Metafora poznania”, in: *Roman Opałka...*, ed. J. Świercz, op. cit., p. 26.

say, *par excellence* existential. Approached in this way, Opałka's work reaches beyond the utopia of the unist picture and, by the same token, beyond the constructivist paradigm of abolishing the boundary between life and art. Perhaps closer to that tradition is a work of the nestor of



13. Henryk Stażewski, "Vertical Unlimited Composition: 9 Streams of Color in the Sky", Wrocław 1970

European constructivism, Henryk Stażewski, called *Vertical Unlimited Composition: 9 Streams of Color in the Sky* executed during the famous Polish symposium "Wrocław '70." It was a composition of streams of color light projected against the background of the evening sky by means of powerful army searchlights. One might say that Stażewski transferred

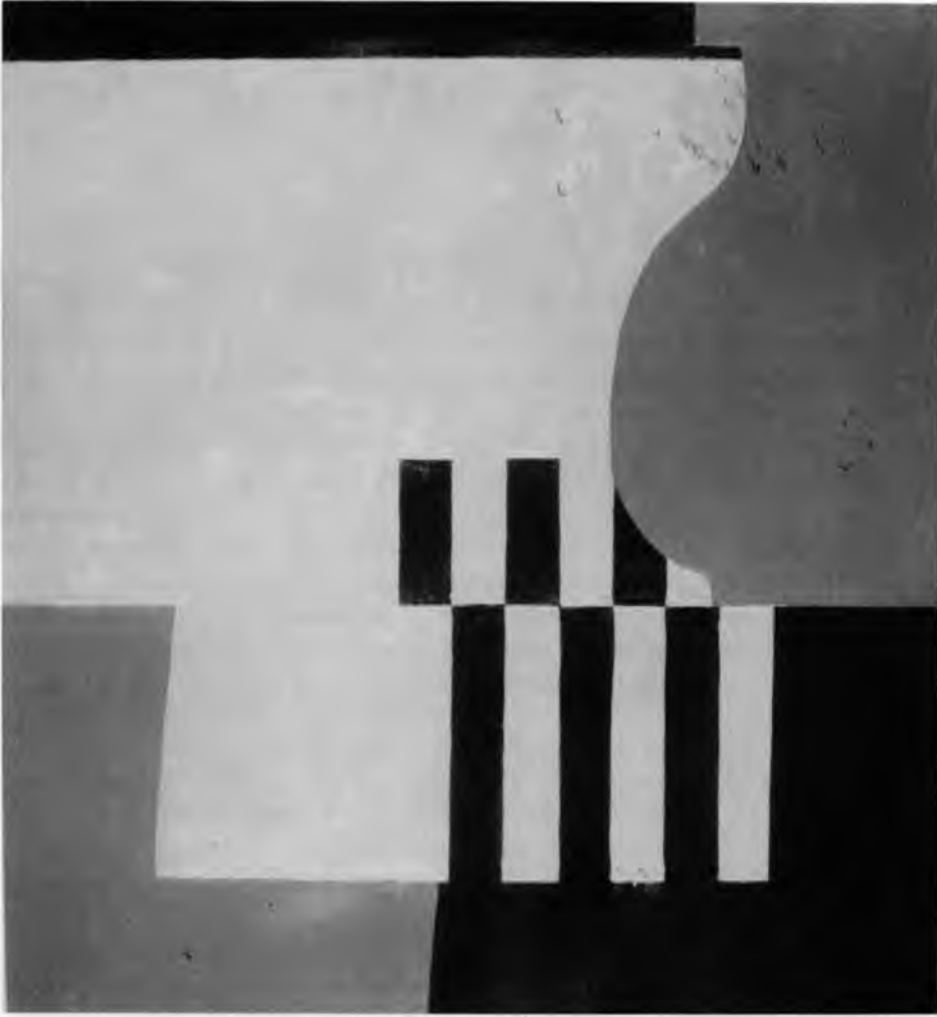
the rules of geometrical composition from the painters canvas onto real space, thus, as it were, crossing the physical threshold of the artwork's autonomy – its frames. A much more radical move – rooted, in a sense, in the heritage of geometrical art – was made, however, by Zbigniew Gostomski. His *It Begins in Wrocław* was a project of regularly disposing, with a starting point somewhere in town, small standard objects which would eventually constitute a network covering the globe – the grid, that truly mythical constructivist scheme of composition. Of course, Gostomski's project was never put into practice – in fact, it was not even intended for implementation; an impossible work of conceptual art, so popular at the companion exhibition, which justifies a belief that “Wrocław '70” marked in the postwar Polish art a watershed between modernism and the neo-avant-garde (even though the latter definitely stemmed from a modernist, i.e. constructivist and neo-constructivist legacy).<sup>39</sup> As we will see, in other countries of Central Europe – for that matter, in Czechoslovakia and Hungary – one could see more or less at the same time similar exhibitions indicating analogical divisions.

While in Poland the constructivist tradition and its influence on modern art seem to be quite distinct, in Hungary, according to Laszlo Beke, it was a more complex issue. The critic maintains that it is difficult to define precisely the essence of that movement and its significance in the history of Hungarian art.<sup>40</sup> Even though Lajos Kassák, the most outstanding figure of the prewar Hungarian avant-garde, was still alive after World War II, and there were artists (such as János Fajó) who explicitly referred to his achievement, the ways on neo-constructivism in Hungary are quite labyrinthine. One should perhaps remember that the local tradition of the avant-garde did not develop smoothly. Between the world wars, right after the fall of the Soviet Republic of Hungary, whose cultural policy was not approved by some artists, including Lajos Kassák, so that the revolutionary authorities discontinued an equally revolutionary journal *MA*, founded in 1916, the left-wing avant-garde (again, including Kassák) emigrated to Vienna, where the publication of *MA* was soon resumed. It was, writes Lóránd Hegyi, the “Viennese period” of Hungarian constructivism – the first of three stages of the development of that movement in Hungary or, in fact, the “Viennese” end of the first, heroic period of the Hungarian avant-garde.<sup>41</sup> There Kassák advanced

<sup>39</sup> *Symposium Plastyczne Wrocław '70*, ed. D. Dziedzic, Z. Makarewicz, Wrocław: Ośrodek Teatru Otwartego Kalambur”, 1983.

<sup>40</sup> L. Beke, “From the Picture Architecture of Kassák to Post-Geometry and Beyond”, in: *Fodor*, No. 4, 1987, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> L. Hegyi, “Konstruktivistische Tendenzen in der ungarischen Kunst”, in: *Ungarische Konstruktivistische Kunst, 1920-1977*, München: Kunstverein, 1979.



14. Lajos Kassák, "Monumental", 1966, National Gallery of Art, Budapest

his significant idea of *Bildarchitektur*. Although after several years some of the émigrés returned (with the exception of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy) and resumed their artistic careers in Hungary, Admiral Horthy's regime would often interfere with their pursuits, particularly that their art became much more directly political. That was, according to Beke, the beginning of quite a long phase two of the development of constructivism in Hungary.<sup>42</sup> For a younger generation of artists, Kassák, who came back from Vienna in 1926, became a paragon of moral virtue and social

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

commitment.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in the atmosphere of conservative reaction the avant-garde was deeply involved in political debates, and in the late twenties Kassák himself started publishing *Munka*, a journal of a distinctly political character. In the thirties, the dominant tendency in Hungarian art was a kind of avant-garde syncretism; a combination of different varieties of modernism with the national and folk revival propagated by the popular ideology of Bela Bartók. Right after World War II, when the most significant artistic phenomenon was a relatively eclectic European School – for the most part, painters who belonged to an artistic colony from a small town of Szentendre near Budapest (one of its leaders, Lajos Vajda, who died in 1941, had his studio there) – constructivism did not play any significant role. In the other major center of Hungarian art, Pécs, where the main figure was another master, Ferenc Martyn, there were no traces of that tradition either, even though much later that small town in the south of the country would generate a strong movement which proved quite close to neo-constructivism: “Mozgás ’70” (“Movement ’70”). In Lóránd Hegyi’s opinion, “Mozgás ’70” belonged already to the third phase of Hungarian constructivism which began in the late sixties, shaped not so much by the local heritage, but by the influences from abroad, such as hard-edge, minimal art or color-field.<sup>44</sup> Phase three, however, should be placed in a different historical perspective, called usually “goulash communism,” introduced by the Hungarian leader János Kadar. It was a period of an intense development of various neo-avant-garde trends, such as happening, objective art, conceptual art, etc. for which neo-constructivism was just one point of reference, and not the only, obligatory historico-artistic frame.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, all the historians of the postwar Hungarian art agree that the late sixties brought also an important generation change.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> L. Beke, “From the Picture Architecture of Kassák...”, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> L. Hegyi, “Konstruktivistische Tendenzen in der ungarischen Kunst”, op. cit. Cf. L. Hegyi, “Struktúraelvi és geometrikus művészet Magyarországon 1968-1980 között”, in: *Ars Hungarica*, No. 1, 1991, p. 3-14. Typical of Central European constructivism were the open-air exhibitions organized by the industrial enterprises, which in Hungary have probably the largest scale. Cf. *Művészeti szimpozionok eredményei*, Budapest: Műcsarnok, 1983.

<sup>45</sup> At the beginning of the next decade a series of exhibitions at the Óbuda Galéria devoted to the art of the 1970s has been organized. One of them was focused on neo-constructivism: *Tendenciák, 1970-1980*, III: Geometrikus és strukturális törekvések”, Budapest: Óbuda Galéria, 1980. Cf. P. Sinkovits, “Tendencies, 1970-1980. A Series of Exhibitions”, in: *New Hungarian Quarterly*, No. 84, 1981, p. 196.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. L. Beke, “The Hidden Dimensions of the Hungarian Art of the 1960s”, in: *Hatvanas Évek. Új Törekvések a Magyar Képzőművészetben*, ed. L. Beke, et al., Budapest, Magyar Nemzeti Galéria 1991, p. 313; I. Hajdu, “A Brief View of the Situation”, in: *Les Ateliers de Budapest! The Studios of Budapest*, ed. I. Hajdu, Paris: Editions Enrico Navarra, 1990, p. 21; M. Kovalovsky, “Hungarian Art in the Last 25 Years”, in: *Contemporary Visual Art in Hungary. Eighteen Artists*, Glasgow: Third Eye Center/ Székesfehérvár: The King Stephen Museum, 1985, p. 19.



15. Dezső Korniss, "Blue, Yellow, Green", 1954 (after: *Reduktivismus. Abstraction in Polen, der Tschechoslowakei, Ungarn, 1950-1980*, ed. L. Hegyi, Wien: Museum moderner Kunst/ Stiftung Ludwig, 1992, p. 203).

In that respect, the symbolic events were almost legendary “IPARTEV” exhibitions organized in 1968 and 1969 by Péter Sinkovits on the premises of the Office of Architectural Planning in Budapest (the title of the shows is a Hungarian acronym of that institution). Just as in 1970 in Wrocław, one could find there (at the second exhibition, 1969) not only works referring to constructivism, but also (as in the case of Tamás Szentjóbby) to the categories of conceptual art.<sup>47</sup> This aspect, however, does not belong to the subject matter of the present essay.

Coming back to the beginning of the postwar Hungarian constructivism, one should pay close attention to the followers of a key figure of Hungarian art history, Dezső Korniss. Among them were such outstanding artists as Endre Tót and Tamás Hencze. In fact, at a certain moment of his multi-faceted artistic evolution Korniss himself was quite close to neo-constructivism which, next to surrealism understood in an unusual way, was for him one of the main modernist points of reference.<sup>48</sup> Eclecticism and syncretism marked the whole career of the artist, connected to the European School both in its first (late forties) and second (after 1955) period of his activity. Korniss made semi-abstract, lyrical, and sometimes “calligraphic” paintings resembling, on the one hand, the art of Mark Tobey, and on the other, Jackson Pollock. More or less at the same time, i.e. in the late fifties, he would come closer to constructivism, preferring large, regular, and geometrically ordered surfaces of pure color. That direction was then continued in the sixties, along some drawings in the convention of action-painting. In the fifties Korniss tried also photomontage, referring to the tradition of surrealism, while in the early sixties he painted quite unusual, unreal landscapes and cityscapes – mimetic and decorative pictures evoking vaguely fantastic atmosphere. Some time later he turned to animated movies, and in the seventies – at the end of his career – to the legacy of Malevich.

Such avant-garde syncretism – free floating between various trends which in the West have been considered opposite – seems to be quite characteristic of many Central European countries, since the true meaning of an artistic choice consisted there in general allegiance to modernism, and not in taking any specific option. Most likely, really important must have been a negative aspect of selection, i.e. the refusal to accept the official art of the state in favor of the modernist and avant-garde tradition *tout court*. Another significant factor may have been specific absolutization of culture as a field of resistance against the regime and expression of social and national ambitions. The history of Central Europe,

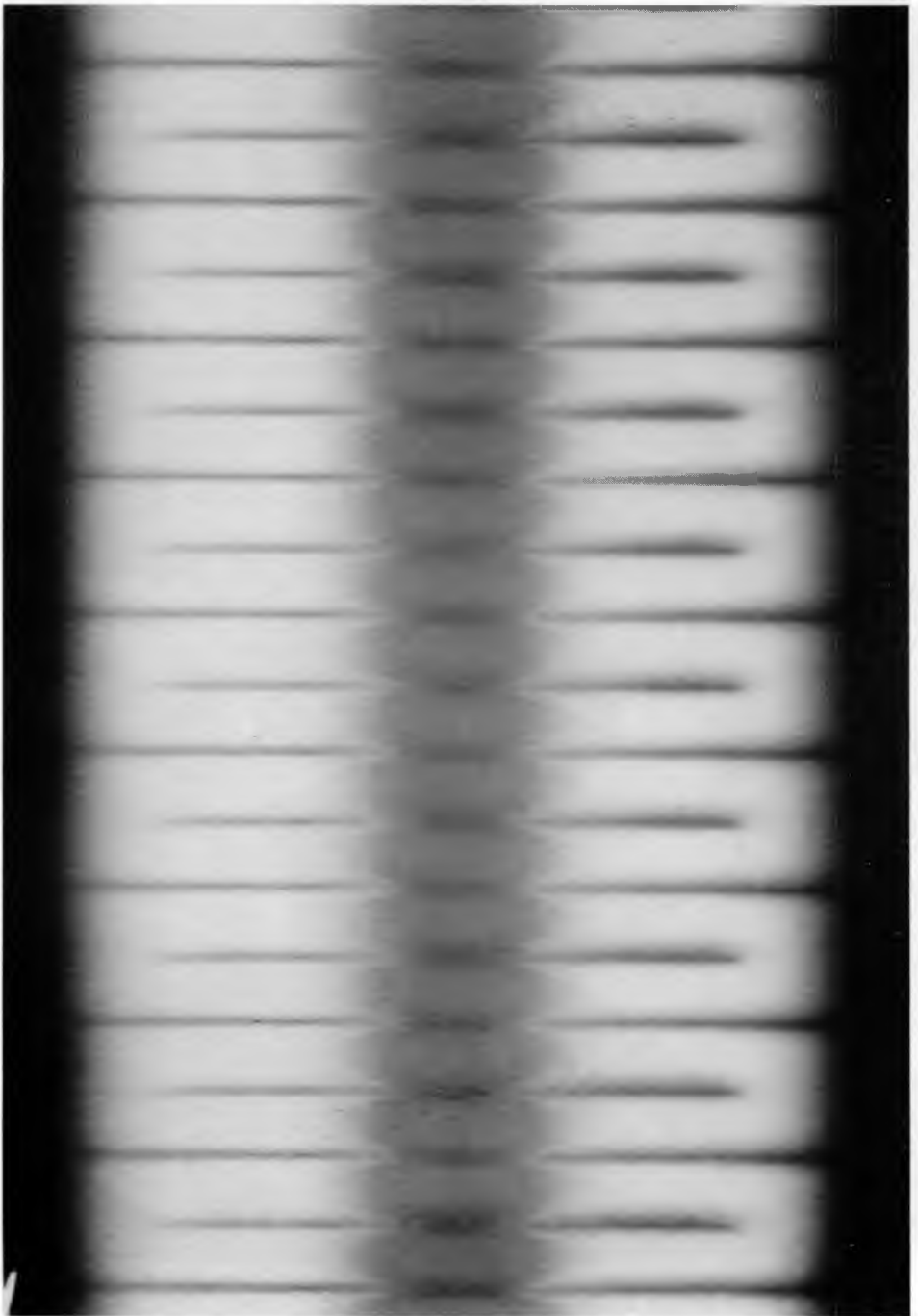
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<sup>47</sup> Cf. *IPARTEV, 1968-80*, ed. L. Beke, L. Hegyi, P. Sinkovits, Budapest: IPARTEV, 1980.

<sup>48</sup> L. Hegyi, *Korniss Dezső*, Budapest: Képzőművészeti Kiadó, 1982.



16. Tamás Hencze, "Description", 1965, National Gallery, Budapest



17. Tamás Hen cze, "Horizontal Structure", 1969, National Gallery, Budapest

where particularly in the 19th century specific nations and ethnic groups did not enjoy the liberty of expressing their political aspirations in a direct manner, provided a good background for such a definition of culture. Almost everywhere in the central part of Europe culture was that area where society could express itself much more freely than in politics *par excellence*.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the declaration of modernity was primarily of a moral character, since it meant resistance against the regime which imposed limitations on artistic freedom, and only in a secondary sense it expressed some particular artistic interests. The chronological and biographical distance from any specific – in this case, constructivist – tradition could probably make such an attitude easier to adopt. Hungary (as well as Czechoslovakia, although, as we will see, for different historical reasons) was a classic example of such a situation, unlike Poland, where the contact with the constructivist heritage remained relatively close so that the decisions to move from the *informel* and surrealism to neo-constructivism were much less frequent. What is more, to refer to Julian Przybos's defense of the "vernacular" tradition of abstract art against the French *informel* imports, one might say that the boundaries separating the opposite "wings" of modern art were quite distinct. In Hungary the reverse was the case: the art of Korniss can be treated as a supreme example of a general tendency. When in the early sixties the younger followers of Sándor Molnár from the "Zuglói kör" ("Zuglói Circle") initiated resistance against the conservatism of the European School, they did not choose any particular orthodoxy, drawing from the so-called Paris School, *informel* painting, or American abstract expressionism, as well as from constructivism, and the interest in Kandinsky paralleled that in Mondrian and Malevich.<sup>50</sup> More or less at the same time, i.e. in the mid-sixties, Tamás Hencze followed, on the one hand, the path of action painting, putting paint on the canvas with wide, sweeping strokes, virtually imitating Hans Hartung, while on the other, he approached through his luminous, cool, illusionist, and almost metallic poetics of op-art the work of the Polish artist, Zbigniew Gostomski.<sup>51</sup> Another artist, a major figure of Hungarian constructivism, Imre Bak (incidentally, a member of the "Zuglói kör"), showed a similar attitude in the sixties, painting, on the one hand, loosely ordered expressive compositions, and on the other, disciplined, geometrical, and decorative can-

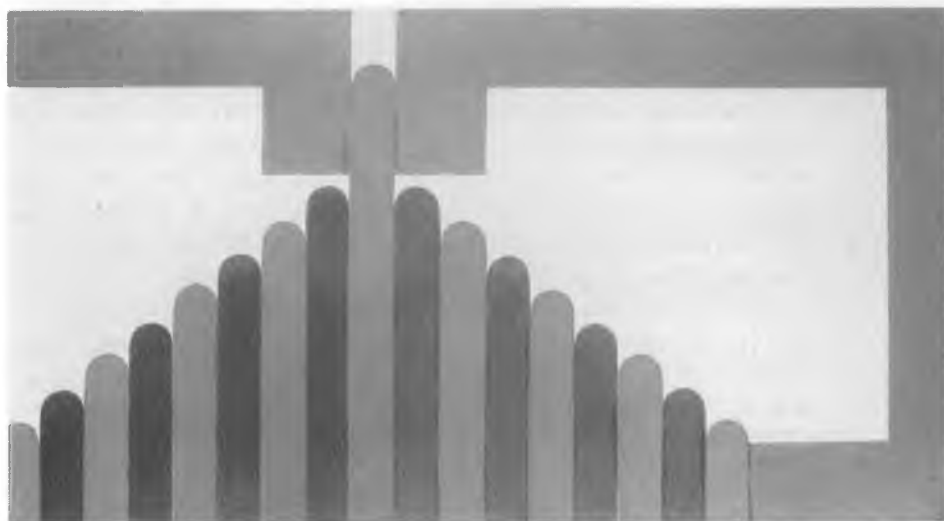
<sup>49</sup> C. Hargittay, "Catalysts of Changes", in: *Free Worlds: Metaphors and Realities in Contemporary Hungarian Art*, ed. R. Nasgaard, C. Hargittay, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1991, p. 21-22.

<sup>50</sup> G. Andrási, "A 'zuglói kör' (1958-1968). Egy művészcsoporthatvanas évekből", in: *Ars Hungarica*, No. 1, 1991, p. 47-64.

<sup>51</sup> L. Beke, "Hencze among the Contemporaries", in: *Hencze Tamás. Festmények / Painting*, Budapest: Műcsarnok, 1997, p. 29.



18. Imre Bak, "Tache", 1965, private collection



19. Imre Bak, "Blue Frame", 1968, National Gallery, Budapest

vases of a markedly different kind. In fact, the habit of free switching various stylistic options became in Hungary rather permanent. For instance, in the early sixties István Nádler followed abstract expressionism, only to turn in the other half of the decade to neo-constructivism, and then, in the eighties, to the poetics suggestive of the so-called new expression.

The avant-garde traditions in the history of art in Czechoslovakia (and particularly in Czechia) have been evolving in a unique way. Between the world wars Prague was no doubt one of the most interesting artistic centers of Europe – still virtually ignored today despite the efforts of Czech art historians.<sup>52</sup> Modern Czech art started acquiring its identity at the beginning of the 20th century, and the most recent models came from Western Europe (France) to counterbalance, as it were, the conservative capital of the Habsburg empire, Vienna, dominated by Secession. Seeking inspiration in the Paris of the first decade of the century, in conscious opposition to Vienna, marked the Prague artistic geography for many years to come. Besides, another factor favoring such interests was modern social structure, and particularly a rich and well educated middle class which provided an audience and market for the Czech cubism, a phenomenon that had no analogues in Central Europe. Later on, in the late twenties and early thirties, the reception of French art in Czechia included surrealism – as original as cubism in that part of the continent. As far as constructivism is concerned, in the Czechoslovakia of the twenties and thirties its status was quite specific. Czech constructivism was primarily practiced by the Devetsil group, yet not so much by its painters, as – according to local art historians – by the section of architecture as well as the arts of typography, stage design, photography, and a unique kind of kinetic sculpture (made by a most original artist, Zdenek Pešánek, working also after World War II).<sup>53</sup> The key figures of the Czech avant-garde, such as Karel Teige who died in 1951, for the most part worked outside the classic constructivism. In other words, there was no Czech equivalent of Henryk Stażewski or Lajos Kasák who after World War II would share their constructivist experience with the younger generations. František Kupka, a Czech artist of an in-

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Czech Modernism, 1900-1945*, red. J. Anděl, Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1989; *Český kubismus, 1909-1925*, ed. J. Švestka, Tomáš Vlček, Düsseldorf: Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 1991; *Český surrealismus, 1929-1953*, ed. L. Budžovská & K. Srp, Praha: Argo/ Galeria hlavního města Prahy, 1996. V. Lahoda, *Český kubismus*, Praha: Brana, 1996; *Dejiny českého výtvarného umění, 1890-1938*, ed. V. Lahoda, et al., Praha: Ústav dějin umění, Akademie věd České republiky, 1998, vol. IV (1,2).

<sup>53</sup> F. Šmejkal, "Czeska awangarda artystyczna lat dwudziestych", in: *Devetsil. Czeska awangarda artystyczna lat dwudziestych*, ed. U. Czartoryska, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1989, p. 44-53. Cf. F. Šmejkal, "Český konstruktivismus", in: *Umeni*, No. 3, 1982, p. 214-243.

ternational reputation, whose art was connected in the early thirties with the Abstraction-Création group – the “hard core” of European constructivism after the fall of the Soviet avant-garde and the closing of Bauhaus – spent all his mature years in France. At the same time, his work, particularly that related to constructivism, in Czechia remained virtually unknown. His first retrospective exhibition in his homeland was organized only in 1946, on his 75th birthday, in the Prague Manege, and after that the government purchased for museum collections about forty of Kupka’s paintings.<sup>54</sup> Right after the war the situation of Czechoslovakia was quite unique, since communists seized power as “late” as in 1948 in result of a coup. Consequently, for the first three years Czech culture could develop much more freely than in Poland (not to mention Hungary or Romania which formally were Hitler’s allies captured by the Red Army) or Yugoslavia, starting at the turn of the decade a more liberal cultural policy. That short period of freedom and the traditional interest (again) in the artistic scene of Paris determined a turn toward the *informel* as soon as in the late fifties the conditions became more favorable to the development of the arts.<sup>55</sup> Some interest in the constructivist legacy appeared only in the early sixties (in the late fifties it was practically quite marginal) when Czech and Slovak neo-constructivism could finally come to light.<sup>56</sup>

In 1963 several outstanding Czech artists, such as Jiří Kolář, Karel Malich, and Zdenek Sýkora, co-founded the Křižovatka group. A year later Václav Boštík and Stanislav Kolibal became members of the Umelecká Besada. At that time the Křižovatka had their first exhibition in the famous Prague gallery of Vaclav Špála. The subsequent stages of the development of Czech constructivism included the founding of the Synteza group in 1965 by Dušan Konečný, and – in 1967 – the rise of the Club of Concretists,<sup>57</sup> including also some Slovak neo-constructivists: Milan Dobeš, Alojz Klimo, and Miloš Urbásek.<sup>58</sup> Kinetic art was also very popular here, and its most important protagonists were Zdenek Pešánek, particularly his above mentioned post-war activity, and the Dviženije

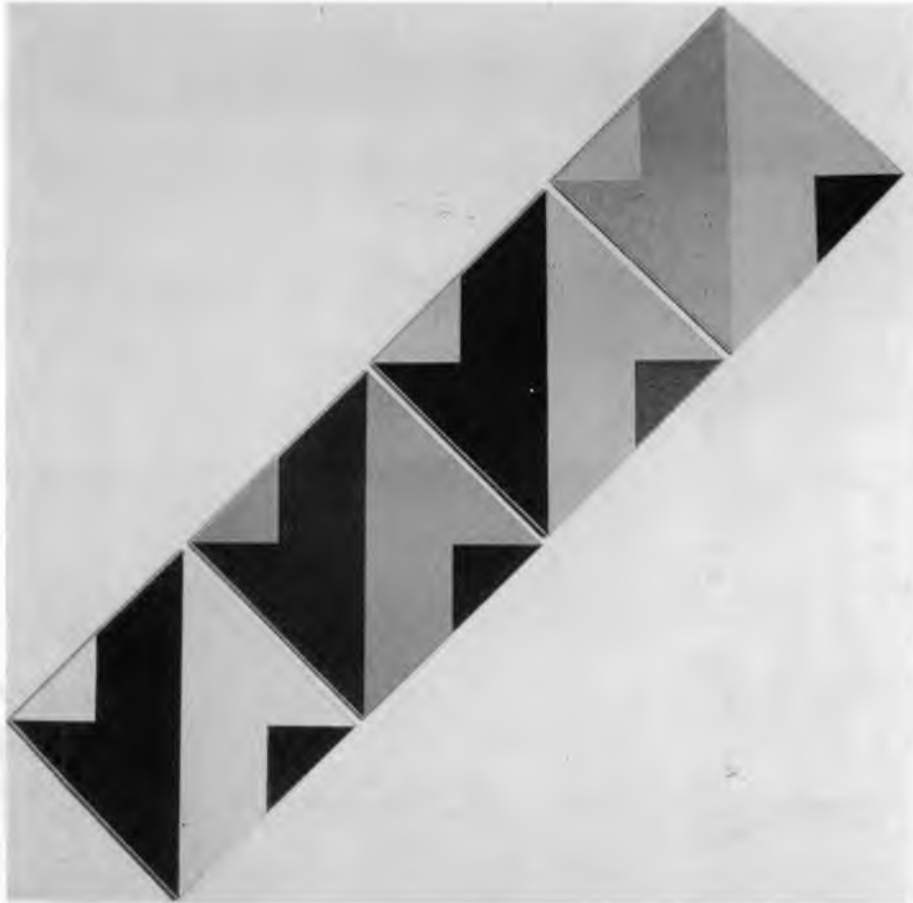
<sup>54</sup> H. Rousová, “Abstrakce třicátých let”, in: *Dejiny českého výtvarného umění, 1890-1938*, op. cit. p. 301; *Painting the Univers. František Kupka: Pioneer in Abstraction*, ed. J. Anděl, D. Kosinski, Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1997, p. 33.

<sup>55</sup> M. Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu. Pojetí „informelu“ v českém umění 50. a první poloviny 60. let*, Praha: Base/ ARTetFACT, 1997.

<sup>56</sup> J. Hlaváček, “Český konstruktivismus 60. let a jeho vyznění”, in: *Poesie racionality. Konstruktivní tendence v českém výtvarném umění šedesátých let*, ed. J. Sekera, Praha: České Muzeum Výtvarných Umění, 1993, p. 54-113.

<sup>57</sup> *Klub konkrétistů*, ed. A. Pohribný, Jihlav: Oblastní galerii Vysočiny, 1997.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. E. Trojanová, K. Bajcurová, “V ústretu elementárnemu poriadku sveta”, in: *Šest' desiate roky v slovenskom výtvarnom umení*, ed. Z. Rusinová, Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 1995, p. 142.

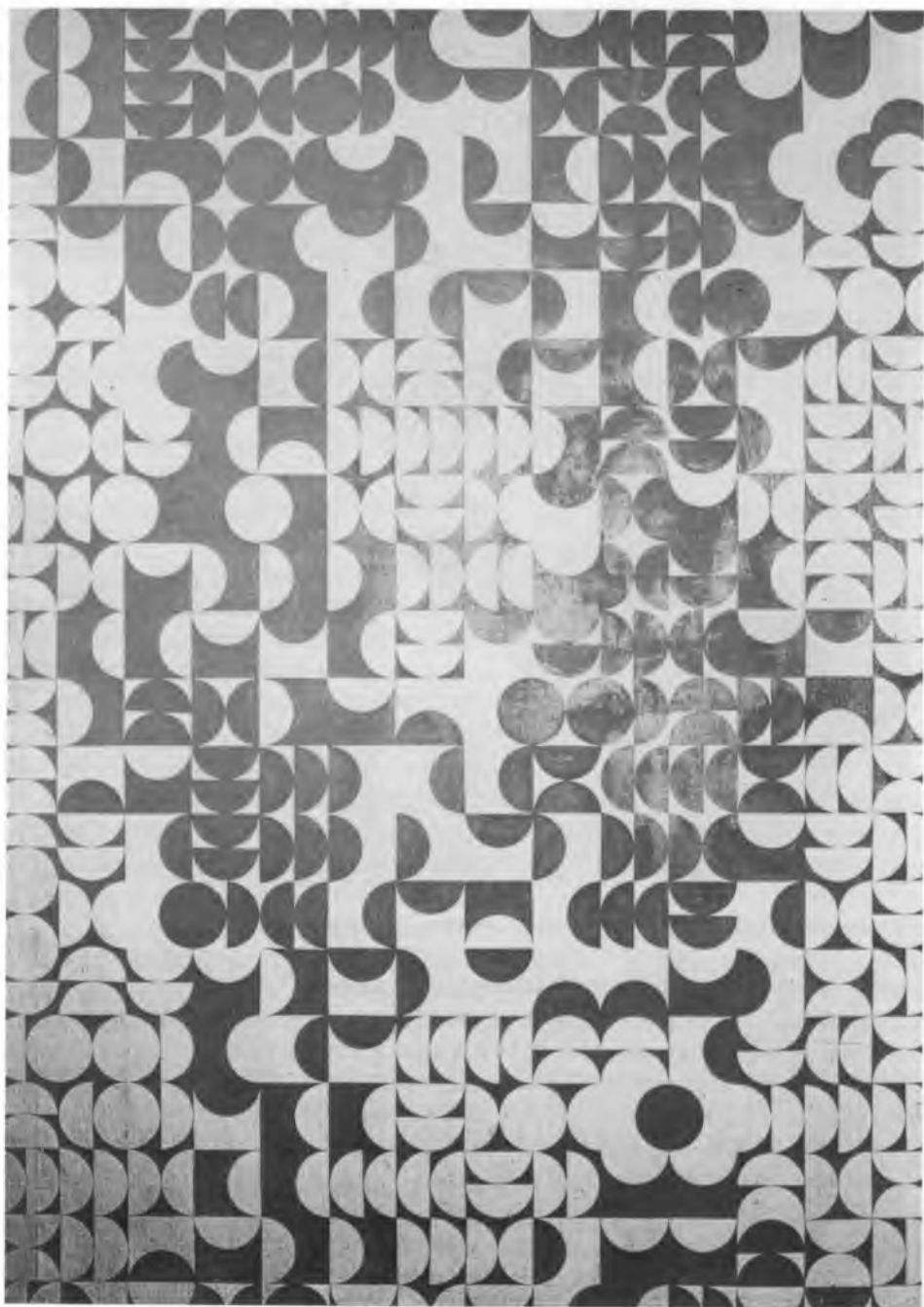


20. Jan Kubiček, "Variableness", 1967, private collection

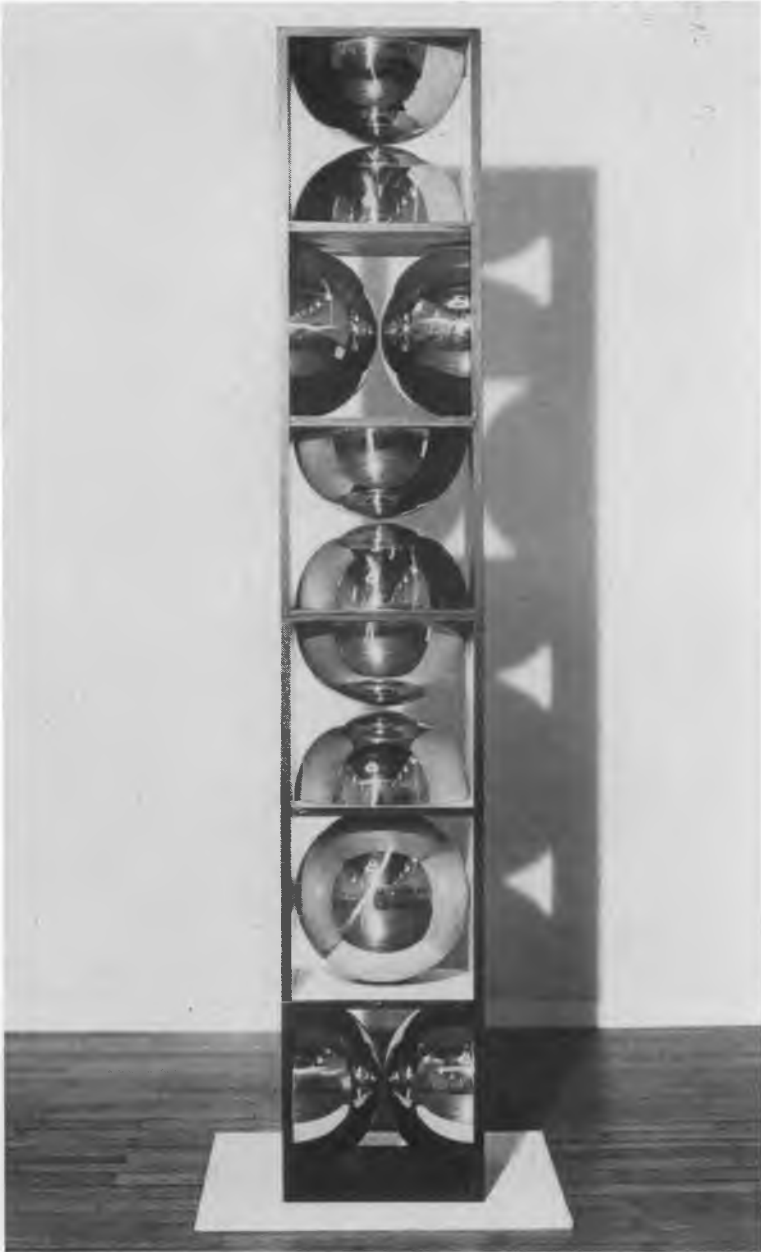
group as well as the Slovak artist Milan Dobeš.<sup>59</sup> In a sense, the final moment of that phase of neo-constructivism in Czechoslovakia (which does not really mean the end of the whole movement, in spite of the suppression of the Prague Spring) was an exhibition called "Nová Citlivost," initiated by Jiří Kolář and shown in the spring of 1968 in Brno and Karlovy Vary, and in the fall of the same year in the Prague Manege. Neo-constructivists played in that exhibition a significant role.<sup>60</sup> That exhibi-

<sup>59</sup> V. Havránek, "Pomijivé a rozptýlené. Kinetické umění v Československu, 1957-1970" [Transient and Dispersed. Kinetic Art in Czechoslovakia, 1957-1970], in: *Akce, Slovo, Pohyb, Prostor / Action, Word, Movement, Space*, ed. V. Havránek, Praha: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1999, p. 078-101 [377-384].

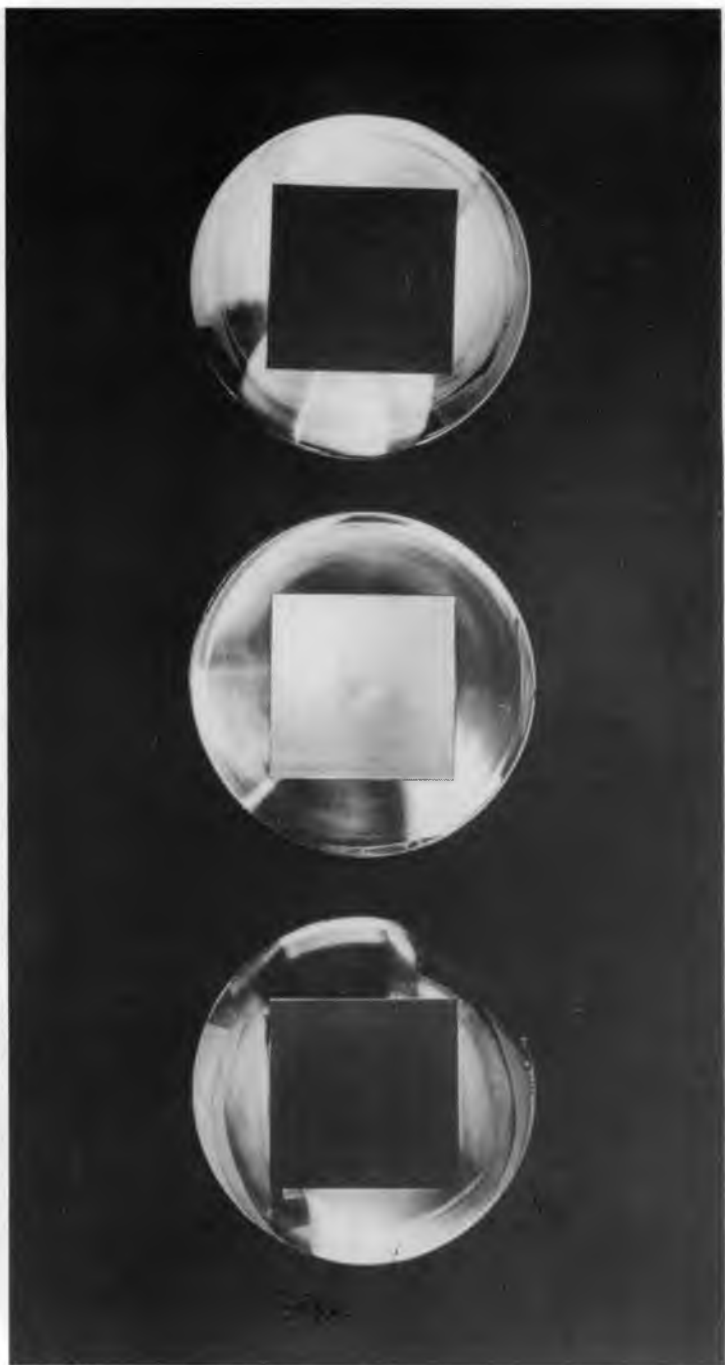
<sup>60</sup> Cf. two-volume catalogue accompanying the reconstruction exhibition: *Nová Citlivost*, ed. J. Hlaváček, Litoměřice: "Galerie výtvarného umění, 1994 [Jiří Valoch, "Výstava Nová Citlivost", p. 3-6, in the texts volume].



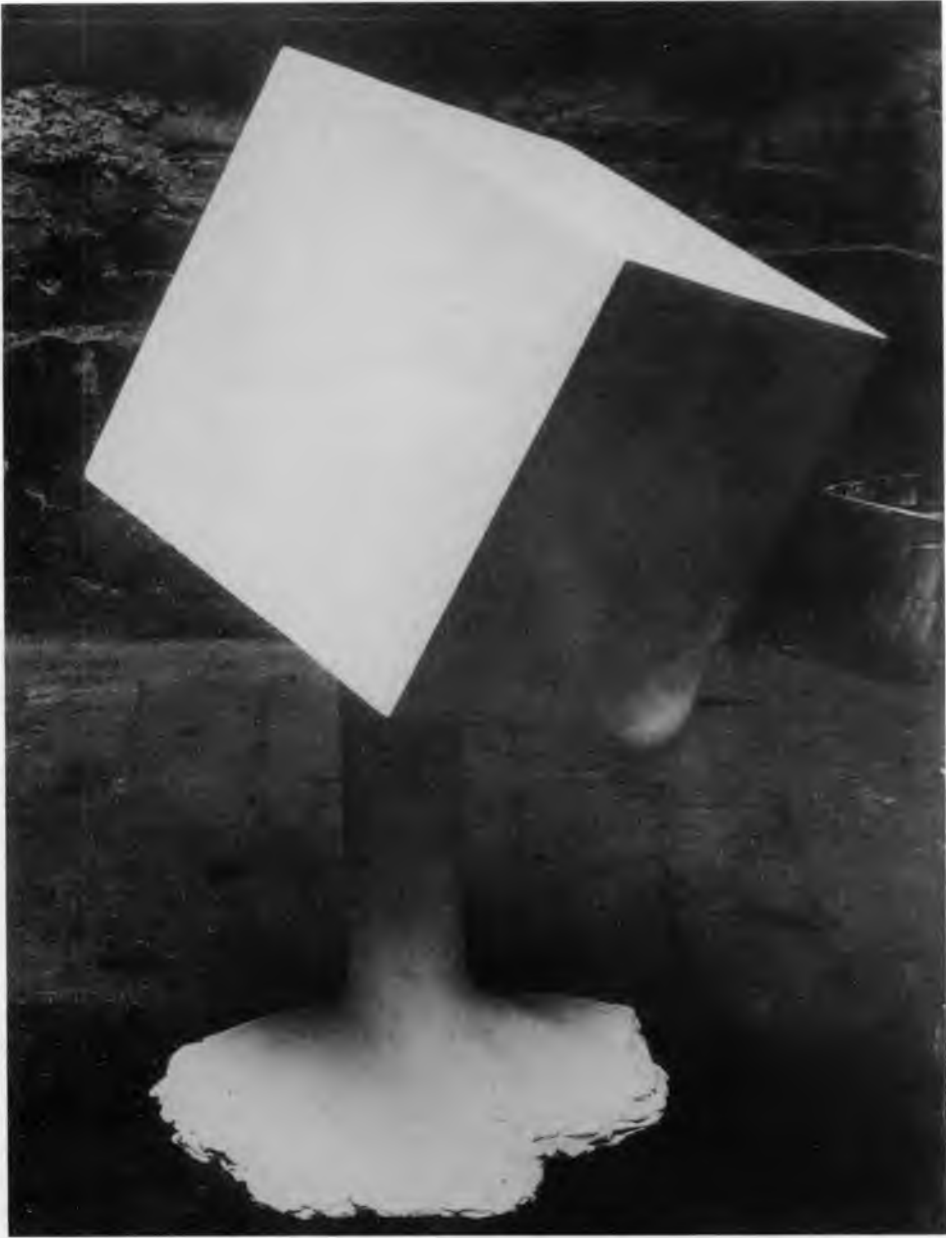
21. Zdenek Sýkora, "Red-Silver Structure", 1967, National Gallery, Prague



22. Hugo Demartini, "Space Variation of a Convex Mirror", 1967, Benedikt Rejt Gallery, Louny

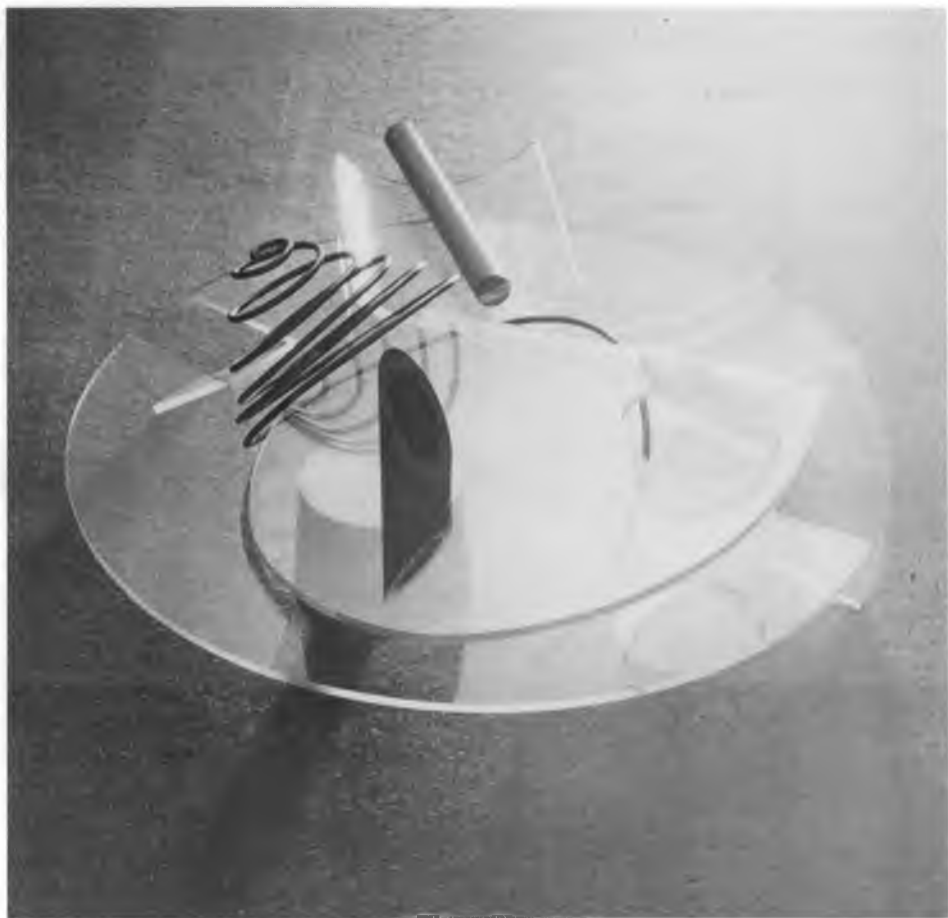


23. Milan Dobeš, "The Pulsating Rhythm", 1968, Benedikt Rejt Gallery, Louny



24. Stanislav Kolibal, "Disappearing Shape", 1968, National Gallery, Prague

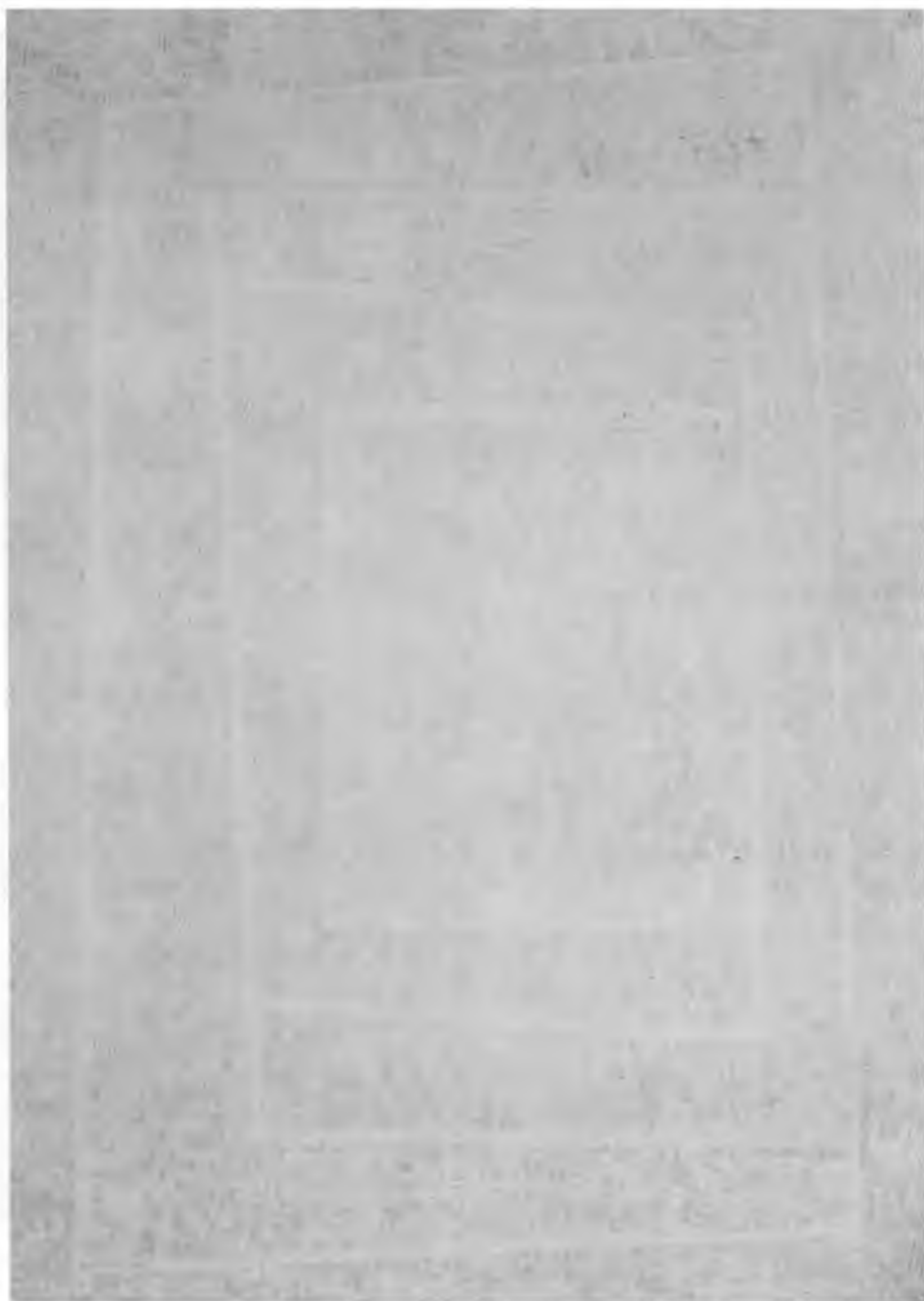
tion seems to have been a key event in the history of the postwar Czech art, becoming a virtual legend, just as "IPARTEV" in Hungary and "Wroclaw '70" in Poland. All the three exhibitions marked local transi-



25. Karel Malich, "The Space Object", 1968-1969, Benedikt Rejt Gallery, Louny

tion points, and in Czechia, similarly to Poland and Hungary, one can also find at that time the traces of the nascent neo-avant-garde in the form of art which was quite close to conceptualism (e.g. the works of Jiří Valoch). Just as its Hungarian and Polish counterparts, "Nová Citlivost" was also – so much more dramatically, though – related to specific political circumstances. In contrast to Gierek and Kadar's liberalization of cultural policies, the so-called normalization which began some time after the suppression of the Prague Spring for the most part pushed the artistic avant-garde of Bratislava, Brno, and Prague into the underground.

It would indeed be rather difficult to systematize the rich experience of Czech and Slovak constructivism in some more persuasive fashion. Suffice to say that among many artists there were some who chose a classic variant of that tendency, such as Jan Kubiček, quite rigorously



26. Jiří Kolář, "Homage to Larrous", 1965-1966, private collection

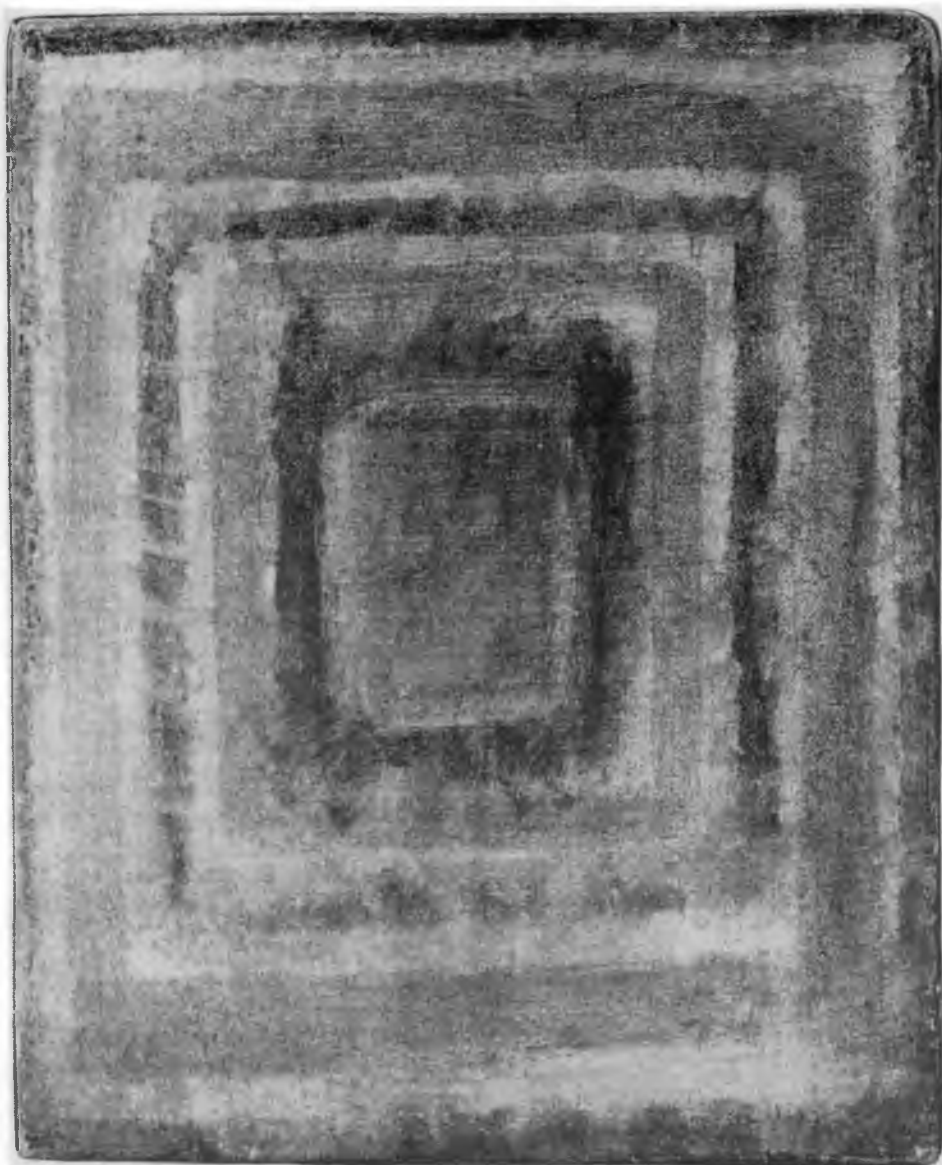
applying geometrical divisions of surface, Miloš Urbásek from Slovakia, or Zdenek Sýkora who constructed the structure of his paintings using a sort of mathematical method and, at the same time, in a somewhat visual less disciplined manner, nevertheless, remaining close enough to the paradigm of the so-called geometrical abstraction. Also the artists who in different ways used light, such as Hugo Demartini or a Slovak kinetic artist, Milan Dobeš, may be placed in the same context, even though Demartini, having experimented with geometrical forms in the late fifties, a decade later tried crossing the traditional boundaries of art by foregrounding the role of chance in constructing the artwork. His processual experiments included scattering “forms” (planks and sticks, i.e. “surfaces” and “lines”) in space in order to photograph their accidental or transient arrangements. Finally, there were artists who referred to the constructivist tradition in a highly unorthodox manner. One of them was Stanislav Kolibal, confronting the apparent stability of geometrical forms (rooted in the mythology of the avant-garde) with its unique negation through distortion, “breaking,” “melting,” etc. Another interesting artist was Karel Malich, experimenting with “sculpted” space by means of open forms constructed of bars, wire, and plastic, creating also a small objects, as if the architecture models, recollecting the similar concepts of the classical Russian avant-garde, among others the architectons” of Malevich, constructed, however, in a quite different non-geometrical style.<sup>61</sup>

In the sixties, quite an original artist, freely drawing from the constructivist heritage, was Jiří Kolář at whose table in the famous café “Slavia” the idea of the “Nová Citlivost” actually came into being.<sup>62</sup> Due to Kolář’s liberal attitude to art, the exhibition could also be liberally placed in the historico-artistic context of modernity. A kind of program of the “Nova Citlivost” was outlined in an essay by Jiří Pádrta called “K situaci,” published in the journal *Výtvarné umění* in 1968 and inspired, according to Hlaváček, by Pierre Restany who at that time was very popular in Czechoslovakia.<sup>63</sup> In fact, Pádrta’s text referred rather to the general atmosphere of the contemporary avant-garde, than to any specific (e.g. constructivist) tradition. To some extent, Kolář’s art validated such an idea of avant-garde, ranging from Restany’s new realism to the heritage of constructivism. His favorite convention was collage: he made replicas of objects lined with pages of illustrated magazines, in which he may have approached the French *nouveaux réalistes*, i.e. ironic

<sup>61</sup> K. Srp, “Prostory nových světů” [Spaces of New Worlds], in: *Akce, Slovo, Pohyb, Prostor/ Action, Word, Movement, Space*, op. cit., p. 146-159 [400-404].

<sup>62</sup> J. Hlaváček, “Ohlédnutí za novou citlivostí” [A Look Back at New Sensibility], in: *Nová Citlivost* [in the pictures volume], op. cit. p. 5 [p. 8].

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5 [p. 9]. Jiří Pádrta’s text reprint: “K situaci”, *ibid.* p. 127-131.

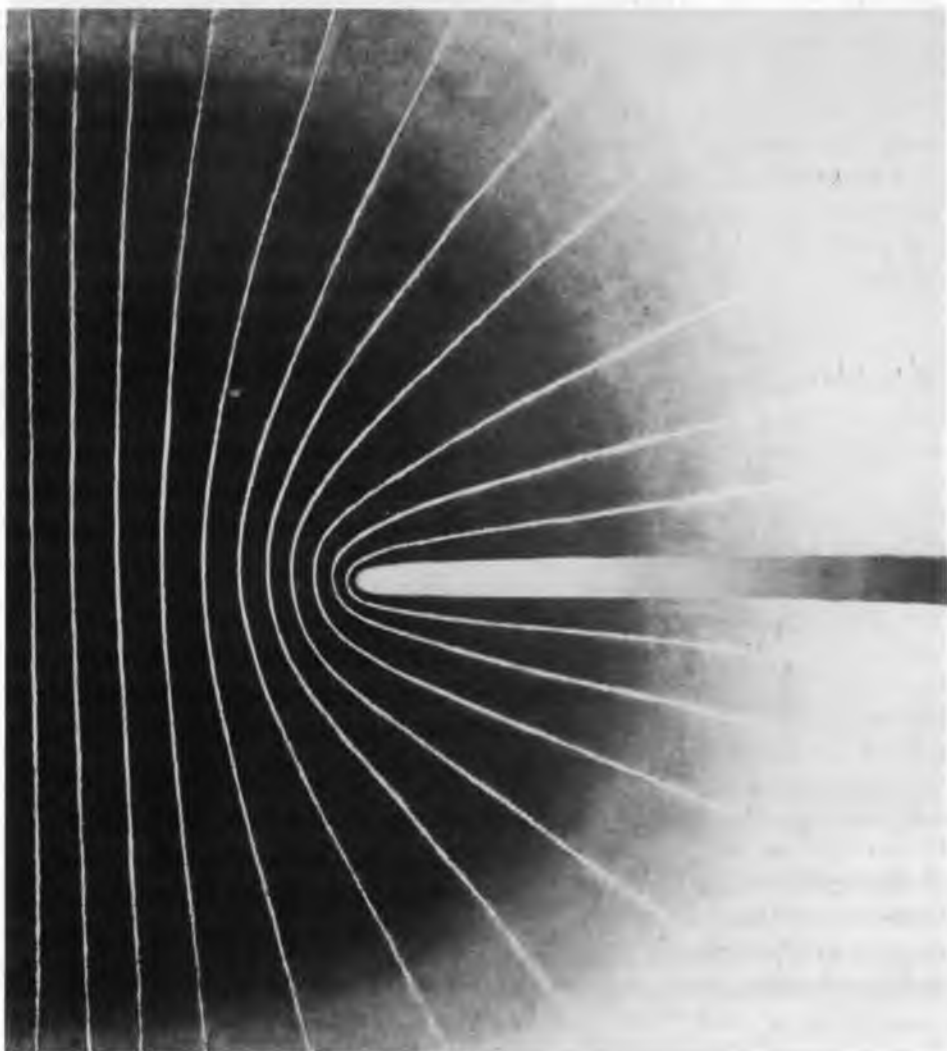


27. Václav Boštik, "Red and Green", 1945, private collection

imitations of children's toys (*Boat* [1964], *Hobby Horse* [1964]); or – what may be of interest in the context of the present essay – geometrical forms constructed of many little pieces of printed paper, called "chiasmages." For instance, *Homage to Larousse* (1965/66) includes overlapping geometrical forms which are only slightly marked on the painting's sur-

face by what looks like rifts in the collage texture. The mutual interpenetration of surfaces makes it impossible to tell form from its background. In a sense, this work may be perceived as an ironic allusion to Malevich's *White Square on White*, however, it is precisely this irony that signifies the characteristic climate of Czech culture, distant enough from the constructivist solemnity.

Another, quite different artist who also liberally referred to the constructivist legacy was Václav Boštik. His paintings, featuring geometri-



28. Stefan Gierowski, "Painting CLV (Stroke)", 1964, National Museum, Warsaw

cal patterns, demonstrate particularly refined pictorial quality – as a result, Boštiks art stems from a very interesting clash of the geometry of forms with the painter's sensitivity to color, tone, and the texture of canvas. Delicate and sensual pictorial matter is quite far from the primacy of reasoning and intellect, allegedly characteristic of the tradition of constructivism, yet – perhaps paradoxically – close to colorism. One might say that the Czech artist first learned an early lesson of the *informel*, with its sensitivity to pictorial matter, in order to combine it with a geometrical inspiration. In fact, doing that, he was by no means alone – particularly in the late fifties and early sixties, when the neo-constructivist trend in Czech art was still undeveloped, the local artists showed a considerable freedom of moving from one historico-artistic point of reference to another.<sup>64</sup> In that respect, the situation was quite different from that of Poland, where the poet Julian Przyboś effectively persuaded artists to keep cultivating the tradition of Polish constructivism. Still, Boštik's way was analogous to that of the Polish painter, Stefan Gierowski, who at more or less the same time could finely and delicately combine the geometry of forms with the pictorial value of his paintings; their luminous color and tone. While in Hungary the achievement of a single artist – in particular Dezső Korniss – could include various conventions of painting, in Czech art various approaches were combined not so much within one artistic biography, but literally within a single artwork. On the contrary, in Poland the boundary between neo-constructivism and other orientations was much more distinct, although the counter-examples of Kajetan Sosnowski and Stefan Gierowski make significant exceptions.

With the exception of Bulgaria, regardless of the history of specific countries and various internal divisions, in the late fifties and sixties neo-constructivism was extremely popular all over Eastern Europe – from the Baltic Sea to the Balkans. In order to provide a general answer to the question concerning the reasons for such a situation, I will now make a reference to a text by Rosalind Krauss who has analyzed the status of geometrical abstraction as a modernist myth or, to be more precise, the mythical function and meaning of “grid” – one of the key concepts of the avant-garde, in the following way: “And just as the grid is a stereotype that is constantly being paradoxically rediscovered, it is, as a further paradox, a prison in which the caged artist feels at liberty. For what is striking about the grid is that while it is most effective as a budge of freedom, it is extremely restrictive in the actual exercise of free-

<sup>64</sup> Cf. L. Bydžowska, K. Srp, “Lingua Angelica. Znak, Předmět, struktura v českém výtvarném umění, 1958-1964”, in: *Ohniska znovuzrozeni: České umění, 1956-1963*, ed. M. Judlová, Praha: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1994, p. 211-239.

dom. Without doubt the most formulaic construction that could possibly be mapped on a plane surface the grid is also highly inflexible. Thus just as no one could claim to have invented it, so once one is involved in deploying it, the grid is extremely difficult to use in the service of invention. And thus when we examine the careers of those artists who have been most committed to the grid, we could say that from the time they submit themselves to this structure their work virtually ceases to develop and becomes involved, instead, in repetition. [...] Structurally, logically, axiomatically, the grid *can only be repeated*. And, with an act of repetition or replication as the original occasion of its usage within the experience of a given artist, the extended life of the grid in the unfolding progression of his work will be one of still more repetition, as the artist engages in repeated acts of self-imitation. That so many generations of twentieth-century artists should have maneuvered themselves into this particular position of paradox.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, Krauss denounces the alleged originality of that kind of art, claiming that its geometrical anchoring virtually implies the rule of repetition. In other words, art which deals with geometry cannot evolve; it can only repeat *ad infinitum* the same schemes of composition. Therefore, such art is condemned to replicate endlessly the same forms which is combined – quite paradoxically, for that matter – with the discourse of originality. Moreover, Krauss argues that another element of the modernist discourse of geometrical abstraction, i.e. the opacity of the modernist painting, is also a myth, if not mere fiction: “If the modernism’s domain of pleasure is the space of auto-referentiality, this pleasure dome is erected on the semiological possibility of the pictorial sign as nonrepresentational and nontransparent, so that the signified becomes the redundant condition of a reified signifier. But from *our* perspective, the one from which we see that the signifier cannot be reified; that its objecthood, its quiddity, is only a fiction; that every signifier is itself the transparent signified of an already-given decision to carve it out as the vehicle of a sign – from *this* perspective there is no opacity, but only a transparency that opens onto a dizzying fall into a bottomless system of reduplication.”<sup>66</sup> This is how another modernist dogma of the “purity” of geometrical art turns out to be subverted – it is not just a self-reflexive and self-contained structure (“pure” painting), but a form open to a wide range of different meanings.

In her text, Rosalind Krauss makes references to Western art only. It is unlikely that – except for the Soviet classics of constructivism – she has any knowledge of the art that is the subject matter of the present

<sup>65</sup> R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1985, p. 160 (cf. also p. 9-22).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

essay. Her occidentalist point of view largely determines her approach, particularly that her study is primarily a critique of modernism, a polemic with its artistic heritage. Of course, one should not ignore (and it is not my intention to do so) Krauss' observations, however, neo-constructivism, especially its Central European variety, seems to deserve more than just charges of inauthenticity and the fictitiousness of its discourse. In Central Europe, the liberty to combine together different paradigms of the avant-garde and contradictory artistic traditions often brought about quite original results, while its historical context made it open to an unusually wide range of meanings. One may perhaps move one step further and claim that what, according to Krauss, proved a weakness of neo-constructivism in the West was its strong point in the East. Let us then ask about the specific meanings of that kind of art in its different historico-geographical contexts.

In fact, some attempts at answering such a question have already been made. Lóránd Hegyi, who organized a comprehensive show of Central European neo-constructivism, called *Reduktivismus*, and edited a companion catalogue, writes that the interest in that kind of art in Central Europe was primarily motivated by the local reaction to the neo-classical and realistic trends in socialist culture enforced by communists, which explains its reduced meanings<sup>67</sup> and – let me add – the syncretism of its artistic points of reference. In a sense, this is obvious. However, the problem is a specific Central European attitude to tradition and to the utopian undertones contributing to the popularity of neo-constructivism. After World War II, its potential was definitely somewhat reduced, particularly as regards its utopian thrust, so characteristic of the original constructivist programs both in the East and in the West. What disappeared from the discourses accompanying the postwar neo-constructivism was the rhetoric of revolution, a new beginning, collectivization, the rationalization of social structures, etc. No doubt, for the most part, the responsibility for that bore the communists who compromised the Great Utopia, although in the fifties and sixties (and sometimes even later) they still used its vocabulary. Yet, to the artists who lived in the East (in the West the issue was much more complex) it was fairly obvious that the progressive rhetoric was a disguise of the totalitarian system of power – the principles of its cultural policy were set out already in the thirties by the Stalinist ideologue Andrei Zhdanov. Consequently, under the circumstances, it did not make sense for the artists inspired by the

<sup>67</sup> L. Hegyi, "Reduktivismus. Epoche der abstrakten Kunst in Polen, der Tschechoslowakei und Ungarn, 1950-1980", in: *Reduktivismus. Abstraction in Polen, der Tschechoslowakei, Ungarn, 1950-1980*, ed. L. Hegyi, Wien: Museum moderner Kunst/ Stiftung Ludwig, 1992, p. 11-15.

constructivist legacy to refer to the revolutionary rhetoric which at that time had quite a different meaning. That was why they created a myth of “blank canvas,” naturally associated with the tradition of the avant-garde but closer to the utopia of the harmony of basic elements of the “non-objective universe” formulated by Kasimir Malevich than to the productivism of Rodchenko.<sup>68</sup> In addition, it should be noted that any reference to the heritage of the Soviet avant-garde (particularly in the Stalinist period and right after it) was politically significant as well, since the avant-garde artists were considered to be Stalin’s victims, while the political leaders of the communist Europe (particularly in the fifties) still perceived the constructivist poetics as a symptom of Western (*sic!*) decadence and formalism, rather than a sign of the new times marked by the revolutionary optimism. Hence, Rosalind Krauss is quite correct when she writes that the idea of “blank canvas” – the self-referentiality of the work of art – proved mere fiction, for the signifier was only seemingly reified and identified with meaningless objectivity. In fact, it meant a lot (i.e., had its definite signified), and not just because, as Krauss puts it, of the “*decision* [emphasis – P.P.] to carve it out as the vehicle of a sign,” but – maybe in the first place – because of the political context in which that decision was taken (consciously or not) by every individual artist. The Polish artist Edward Krasiński, speaking about the neutral character of the blue line in space, made it clear that the “strip is independent of anything and anyone; of People’s Poland, of Solidarity, of all.”<sup>69</sup> Declaring the neutrality of the line in the political sense, he denounced the myth of its “blankness” and “objectivity,” by the same token admitting, as it were, its political significance. Thus, in the simplest terms, “blank canvas” signified solidarity with the persecuted avant-garde and resistance against the cultural policy imposed by Zhdanov. On a more profound level, recognized also by Hegyi, it expressed the ambition to participate in the universal domain of modern culture. These “negative” meanings may have determined the avant-garde syncretism which has been mentioned above, for the resistance to the totalitarian control of the artistic culture was more important than a vision of the world constructed on a geometrical basis. Therefore, it did not matter which kind of abstraction would be chosen, as long as it was abstraction of some kind, associated at that time with universal European culture against the rule of the socialist realism.

A question which still remains to be asked and answered pertains to the critical aspect of this kind of mythologization of geometry. On the one

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> [J. Mytkowska] “Rozmowa z Edwardem Krasińskim”, in: *Edward Krasiński*, op. cit., p. 66.

hand, it signified opposition to the communist internationalism (i.e. the dominance of the Soviet culture) and the socialist doctrine of art, yet on the other – and this fact must not be ignored either – at least in some communist countries adopting more or less liberal cultural policies, such as Poland after 1955/56, Yugoslavia after its declaration of independence from Moscow, Kadar's Hungary of the seventies or Czechoslovakia before the suppression of the Prague Spring, neo-constructivism was not only tolerated by the regime, but actually approved, if not endorsed. In such a context, it becomes quite significant that Henryk Stazewski's *Unlimited Vertical Composition*, executed during the "Wrocław '70" symposium devoted to the 25th anniversary of the so-called "regaining of the Western Territories," i.e., the annexation by Poland in consequence of World War II of the eastern borderland of Germany. Of course, the artists who organized the meeting were following certain deliberate tactics: the regime was willing to finance avant-garde artistic projects on condition that they would become parts of official celebrations. From the opposite point of view, thanks to avant-garde artists the authorities could have the so-called plastic frame for political and ideological rituals. Some light may be shed on this peculiar interdependence by the remarks of Slavoj Žižek concerning the use of ideology in a totalitarian state by at least some of its citizens – quite often, ideology would be cynically used by individuals for their own, private purposes having nothing to do with politics. Paradoxically, both parties could benefit from such a state of affairs: the cynical ideology users achieved some private gain, but – on the other hand – the state founded upon it gained the legitimization of its power, obedience, and the sense of common "vested interests."<sup>70</sup> Thus, the work of Stazewski, as well as neo-constructivism as such, may be perceived as an element of a more general political strategy and tactic stemming from the tradition of constructivism and productivism; the mythology of combining art and life and artistic experiment with political (then Bolshevik) propaganda. In such a context, the work of Hermann Glöckner – his small-scale paintings and objects, so different from Stazewski's project shown in Wrocław 25 years after the annexation of the city to Poland – acquires quite special significance. These and other experiences prove that in some communist countries (those introducing more liberal cultural policies) the mythology of "blank canvas" was recognized as harmless for the culture of real socialism, particularly that most artists took for granted the fictions brought to light by Rosalind Krauss and really believed in the reification of the signifier, while art critics, instead pre-

<sup>70</sup> S. Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London & New York: Verso, 1997 (the chapter: "Love Thy Neighbour? No, Thanks", p. 45-85).

senting a genuine critique of neo-constructivism, accepted the received mythology. In other words, the mythology of geometrical purity was not only harmless for the post-Stalinist regimes, but it contributed to their legitimacy, since after the famous "secret" speech of Khrushchev delivered at the 20th congress of the Soviet communist party in 1955 the new power elites came up with their own critical accounts of Stalinism. It is significant that in the countries where Stalinism was not criticized (such as Bulgaria and the GDR<sup>71</sup>) neo-constructivism did not take any hold. The critical significance of that kind of art was already somewhat belated and because of that – paradoxically – on some profound level of the post-Stalinists communism it overlapped with the policies of the regime.

Another element of the Central European mythology of neo-constructivism – universalism – was also of a somewhat ambiguous character. No doubt, as I have insisted many times, it was a manifestation of resistance in "velvet," but still – prison constructed by the cultural policy of the communist regimes. Painting circles and squares, drawing bars and grids, the artists in Central and Eastern Europe could have a sense of participation in the great movement of the world avant-garde, sharing the domain of art with their colleagues in the West. The "New Tendencies" in Zagreb and the fact that many Central European artists took part in the exhibitions, biennales, and symposia on the other side of the "iron curtain" made that sense even stronger. The bars and grid were a kind of magic guaranteeing their access to Europe from which they were otherwise barred by the Red Army and KGB. The constructivist universalism, functioning as a kind of cultural compensation for the political captivity of Central Europe, was, however, just another myth of the post-war modernism. Not to mention the fact that the ideology of universalism was by itself an instrument of the Western cultural policy founded on its own specific imperialism,<sup>72</sup> the belief that art had a universal dimension, crossing the "iron curtain" and participating in some cultural universals was nothing but a pleasant fiction. Actually both the biographies of artists and the meanings of their works were determined by their specific Central or Eastern European contexts. The local artists could organize only those shows which were approved by the authorities, at times – as, for instance, in 1970 in Wrocław – taking of them their

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<sup>71</sup> The attempt of the so called "liberalization" of cultural politics in the GDR Martin Damus calls "Stalinist de-Stalinization." Cf. M. Damus, *Malerei in der DDR. Funktionen der bildenden Kunst im Realen Sozialismus*, Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1991, p. 123.

<sup>72</sup> S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1983.

own, all too obvious ideological advantage. Their participation in international expositions was restricted: the police would (or would not) issue a passport, the customs did (or did not) allow for the relocation of artworks, and finally, all the per diems, stipends and subsidies in hard or local currency were controlled by the communist officials who could grant them at will. Censorship was just one and by no means the most sophisticated method of political and administrative control. Also on the other side of the "iron curtain" the reception of the Central and Eastern European art was not governed by some universal criteria. The very moment when an artist from the "Other Europe" entered the art market in the West was a test of truth – the alleged universalism of artistic values did not count and quickly it became quite clear who was who. For many Western institutions the work of specific individuals was interesting mainly because he or she came from "elsewhere," and not because of any "universal" dimension. As regards the value in cash and the interest of foreign museums, there was little room for illusions. The "geographical" differences in prices between the East and West were often enormous, and sometimes indeed offensive to the most renowned artists from Central Europe – their works could be purchased for \$100 per item, which is the cost of a modest supper for two. Likewise, the purchases made by Western museums demonstrated that a universal hierarchy of art, supposedly valid on both sides of the "curtain," was just a figment of imagination. In the practice of everyday life the universalism of artistic values would frequently turn out a fragile myth.

There is perhaps one more reason to be suspicious about that mythology of universalism: a kind of strange coincidence of the belief of artists in their participation in the universal (i.e. Western) culture and the strategy of the communist regimes seeking liberal legitimization in the West. This refers in particular to Yugoslavia, Poland, and Hungary. The strategy of survival through credit and economic legitimacy made a liberal tactic indispensable. Limited to culture, and particularly to the painting rooted in the myth of "blank canvas" and hence free of any political commitment, such art posed no danger to the principles of communism, therefore it could be successfully used as evidence of changes. As a result, in those Eastern European states whose authorities rejected the Stalinist doctrine of "building communism in one country" in favor of openness (mostly economic) to the outside world, the approval of the universal trends in art could indeed prove very effective. After all, rejecting the socialist realism (i.e., the Stalinist art as propaganda) and choosing neo-constructivism – an allegedly universal and (Western) European tendency – artists did just the same as the post-Stalinist regimes, rejecting the political economy of Stalinism in favor of the so-called limited market

economy and international commerce. It should be noted – once again – that neo-constructivism came into being mostly in the countries of the “liberal real socialism” and not in those which at best experienced a “Stalinist de-Stalinization.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, the critical functions of geometry turn out to have been just another myth of modernism, however – contrary to the claims of Rosalind Krauss – a myth which was not so much “universal,” but determined by the historico-political context of Central Europe.

*Translated by Marek Wilczyński*

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. M. Damus, *op. cit.*