



NUDE/MODEL – exhibition and performance by Orsolya Drozdik (photo courtesy of Orsolya Drozdik, tranzit.org)

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Bodies and Spaces of Resistance: The Untold Social History and Lessons from Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe

This co-led seminar focuses on the social history of contemporary art in the Eastern Bloc and post-socialist Eastern Europe as a history of resistance, with particular emphasis on the contributions of feminist and queer artists. Emerging in the late Stalin era, early contemporary art existed underground and is known for its tactics of resisting the official Soviet regime (often referred to as 'unofficial art', Sjeklocha and Mead 1967; Stuart 1977, Groys 2010). In Ukraine, this resistance took on distinct forms, with artists like Feodosiy Humenyuk and Alla Horska, pioneering the Ukrainian Sixtiers movement, which sought to revive Ukrainian national culture within the constraints of the Soviet regime. In Hungary, the official promotion of Socialist Realism led to the birth of both the Szürenon group, which tried to find its way back to the traditional Catholic and national values, and the Iparterv group, looking to the West and specifically to New York for artistic influences, on the fringes of the cultural sphere (Forgacs 2008). Unlike in the West, feminist and queer art emerged in isolation through the work of a few artists, such as Orsolya Drozdik, Katalin Ladik, or El Kazovszkij in Hungary, and the New Artists in Russia. Their work often remained unrecognized for decades. The famous apartment exhibitions or attempts to take art elsewhere (Collective Actions performances in non-sites and the Bulldozer Exhibition in Russia, Fluxus concerts in culture houses, and exhibitions in the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio in Hungary), DIY publications (samizdat) were unusual ways to gain freedom of expression in a highly controlled context. The first part of this course explores these spaces and channels often referred to as “the second public sphere,” a realm of uncensored and autonomous actions existing in parallel to the official, state-controlled public sphere (Knoll 2002).

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the cancellation of censorship led to new opportunities for the recognition and visibility of contemporary art. The radical political

actionism of the 1990s became not only an art-scene phenomenon but a vocal part of the public sphere, with radical performance groups like the REP or ETI groups at the forefront. For several countries, however, freedom of artistic expression and visibility were granted only for a short time. The authoritarian regimes, like Vladimir Putin's in Russia (since 2000) or Viktor Orban's in Hungary (since 2010), brought back censorship, oppression, and full control over the cultural scene. This not only limits the possibility of political expression and criticism through art but also erases the history of creative resistance and its heroes. In particular, women and queer artists are doubly oppressed. The second part of the course will focus on the parallel tactics of the elimination of the independent cultural sphere in Russia, Hungary, and Belarus, and on the lessons we can learn about artistic resistance in 21st-century authoritarian regimes. A special emphasis will be placed on the role of visual art in Ukrainian resistance.

Course schedule

1. Introduction to the Course Content. Art and Politics

Class date: October 8, 2025

In this course, we will use the lens of art history, art theory, and art sociology to explore the post-war and post-transition art worlds in Eastern Europe up to the most recent years. In the first class, we explore and define some of the most important concepts specific to this course, such as the “neo-avant-garde,” “state socialism,” Eastern Bloc, and discuss some common misconceptions regarding state socialism in the Eastern Bloc.

Required reading: Piotrowski, Piotr, ‘Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde’, in Sasha Bru et al. (eds), *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent* (London: De Gruyter, 2009), 49-58.

2. Soviet Avant-garde: Grand Inventions, Politics, and Controversial Heritage

Class date: October 15, 2025

This class focuses on understanding Soviet Avant-garde and its heritage as essential yet problematic for exploring Eastern European art as an art movement championed in radical artistic innovation while serving as propaganda tools for an authoritarian regime that would eventually suppress the very creativity it initially fostered. The class also includes a discussion of constructivist heritage and its cultural value in the US.

Required reading: Müller, Pablo, 'Shaping the Avant-Garde: The Reception of Soviet Constructivism by the American Art Journal October', in Aga Skrodzka, Xiaoning Lu, and Katarzyna Marciniak (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures*, Oxford Handbooks (2020).

3. Social History of the Underground

Class date: October 22, 2025

In this class, we discuss the dynamics of the official public sphere and the underground networks that existed throughout the Eastern Bloc, often referred to as the “second public sphere.” We explore the role and place of the neo-avant-garde in maintaining a forum for discourse and uncensored circulation of ideas in this semi-public or private sphere.

Required readings: Zdravomyslova, Elena, ‘The Cafe Saigon Tusovka: One Segment of the Informal Public Sphere of Late Soviet Society.’ *Biographical research in Eastern Europe: Altered lives and broken biographies* 141 (2003): 80.

Bátorová, Andrea, Interview with Katalin Cseh and Adam Czirak About the Second Public Sphere in the former Eastern Bloc. *ARTMargins Online: Interviews*, 2014, <https://artmargins.com/interview-with-katalin-cseh-and-adam-czirak-about-the-second-public-sphere-in-the-former-eastern-bloc/>

Recommended reading: Forgacs, Eva, ‘Does Democracy Grow under Pressure? Strategies of the Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s,’ *Centropa*, 2008 Vol.7 (1)

4. Women Artists in Socialism

Class date: October 29, 2025

The class centers on the paradox that despite the Soviet Union's official rhetoric of gender equality and women's liberation, female artists remained largely marginalized and invisible within the art world, often relegated to supporting roles or excluded entirely from major exhibitions and debates.

Required reading: Baigell, R., Baigell, M, ‘Peeling potatoes, painting pictures: women artists in post-Soviet Russia, Estonia, and Latvia: the first decade’ (Rutgers University Press, 2001)

Recommended reading: Hock, Beata, ‘Women Artists’ Trajectories and Networks within the Hungarian Underground Art Scene and Beyond,’ in Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, Piotr Piotrowski (eds) *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* (Central European University Press, 2016)

5. Artists and Agents

Class date: November 5, 2025

As an act of reconciliation with the communist past, secret police files became open and freely available in many post-communist countries. In some other countries, the availability is

still limited. Other than recognizing the secret police as a constant reminder of state surveillance, control, and a tool of blackmail of the communist state, the reports of secret agents became an unlikely source for history writing. In this class, we will discuss some examples.

Required reading: Krasznahorkai, Kata, 'Heightened Alert: The Underground Art Scene in the Sights of the Secret Police—Surveillance Files as a Resource for Research into Artists' Activities in the Underground of the 1960s and 1970s,' in Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, Piotr Piotrowski (eds) *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* (Central European University Press, 2016)

6. Center and Periphery - I

Class date: November 12, 2025

In the years since the end of the Cold War, the post-socialist countries of the former Eastern Bloc have reintegrated into the global system that Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system theory describes as a complex relationship between the center and the periphery. In this two-part class, we set out to understand the legacy of state socialism in relation to the position of these countries on the semi-periphery.

Required reading: Szanyi, Agnes, 'Go West! –Re-Internationalization of the Contemporary Art Scene of a former Eastern Bloc Country,' 2017, Manuscript.

7. Center and Periphery - II

Class date: November 19, 2025

Required reading: Çolak, Erdem, 'Globalization, Manifesta and the 'East of the West' In Manifesta, Art, Society and Politics: Creating a New Europe through Contemporary Art (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024) Bloomsbury Collections.

8. Circulation of queer ideas during state socialism, and the Eastern European queer art scene

Class date: November 26, 2025

Until recent years, it was commonly accepted that queer art, queer discourses, queer communities were largely or completely absent from the public life of the societies of the Eastern Bloc. And even the emerging discourses after the Fall of Communism were often depicted as mere translations and reflections of the discourses in the Western centers. In this class, we problematize this understanding by exploring the circulation of queer ideas in the public or semi-public spheres, and discuss examples of the specifically Eastern European queer art.

Required reading: Benedek, Kata, 'Circulation of Queer Ideas in State Socialist Hungarian People's Republic,' IKONOTHEKA 32, 2022.

Recommended reading: Muskovics, Gyula, 'Bodies Coming Out: Open Geometry from the Queer Eye,' 2024.

9. Contemporary Art Institutions and Their Governance

Class date: December 3, 2025

The class explores the meaning of the new cultural institutions in post-Communist societies. Appearing in the late 2000s-2010s, these oases of urban culture offered not only exhibitions and events, but a Western-like lifestyle, and a freer public space, where dissonant identities and open political dialogue were possible.

Required reading: Kuleva, M. I., '[Turning the Pushkin Museum into a 'Russian Tate': Informal creative labour in a transitional cultural economy \(the case of privately funded Moscow art centres\)](#)' International Journal of Cultural Studies, 2019, 22(2), 281-297.

10. Art and Resistance

Class date: December 10, 2025

In the past two decades, authoritarian regimes have taken over several Eastern Bloc countries. While the ideological framework today is different from that of state socialism, the methods of control and censorship are similar. We discuss contemporary strategies of resistance in light of the lessons learned from the past.

Required reading: Kovtiak, Elizabeth, 'Belarusian Artivism: How and Why Art and Activism Merged in the Belarusian Protests of 2020,' Mezosfera, 2022. <http://mezosfera.org/belarusian-activism-how-and-why-art-and-activism-merged-in-the-belarusian-protests-of-2020>