

**]a[** akademie der bildenden künste wien

Abstract Space –  
**Concrete Media**

Avant-gardes beyond  
Western Modernism

Symposium  
27., 28. Mai 2011

MUMOK Lounge

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Wien

Concept: Sabeth Buchmann and Christian Kravagna

Conceptual and administrative Organisation: Ines Kleesattel and Dagmar Steyrer  
In connection with the exhibition *Abstract Space*,  
curated by Florian Pumhösl and Matthias Michalka

Featuring artistic interventions by Pia Niewöhner, Robert Müller,  
Aino Emilia Korvensyrjä and Jutta Zimmermann.  
All lectures in English.

This conference looks at translocal and transcultural relationships of exchange among the historical avant-gardes that formed in Central and Eastern Europe, Asia and the Americas from the 1910s to the 1940s. These relationships were crucial to the internationalization of avant-garde visual and object languages, often promoting a standardization of exhibition and media practices. Significant cross-connections were made in large number of magazines and journals. While these served to disseminate artistic ideas and political projects beyond conventional art institutions, or even as a substitute where such institutions were lacking (for example in the colonies), they also formed an ideal platform for communication among artists, architects, graphic designers, writers, theorists, and political activists.

This form of networking, expressed in collective projects, mutual invitations to lecture, and in the writing of joint manifestos, was certainly constitutive for the formation of aesthetic and political concepts of the avant-garde. These included the development of geometrical abstraction and concrete art—which those involved saw as nothing less than a model for a new, egalitarian society—as well as anti-imperialist counter-strategies to colonial conceptions of culture and modernism. At the same time, these magazines and journals reveal the tensions and conflicts between the various protagonists and groups that were also expressed in their artistic work and exhibition design. There remained unresolved contradictions between abstraction and figuration, individuality and collectivity, craftsmanship and industrial production, expressiveness and rationality, or regional identity politics and internationalism. While such conflicts can be partly explained by looking at local conditions and geopolitical relations, ambivalence within the avant-gardes themselves also plays a role here, as their critical and liberating potential also can also be seen as bound up with colonialist implications.

The *Concrete Media* conference represents an attempt to sketch out a "socio-geography of the avant-gardes" by looking at exemplary exhibitions, magazines, and journals, and the discourses around them.

Konzeption: Sabeth Buchmann und Christian Kravagna

Konzeptuelle und administrative Organisation: Ines Kleesattel und Dagmar Steyrer  
Im Rahmen der von Florian Pumhösl und Matthias Michalka  
kuratierten Ausstellung *Abstrakte Räume*

Mit künstlerischen Interventionen von Pia Niewöhner, Robert Müller,  
Aino Emilia Korvensyrjä und Jutta Zimmermann.  
Alle Vorträge in englischer Sprache.

Thema der Tagung sind die translokalen und transkulturellen Austauschbeziehungen zwischen den historischen Avantgardebewegungen, die sich in den zehner bis vierziger Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts in zentral-/osteuropäischen und außereuropäischen Ländern, in Asien und den Amerikas formiert haben. Die für die Internationalisierung avantgardistischer Bild- und Objektsprachen maßgeblichen und häufig die Angleichung von Ausstellungs- und Medienpraktiken vorantreibenden Beziehungen manifestieren sich auf signifikante Weise in einer Vielzahl an Zeitschriften. Dienten diese einerseits der über die konventionellen Kunstinstitutionen hinausgehenden öffentlichkeitswirksamen Verbreitung künstlerischer Ideen und politischer Projekte oder als Ersatz für das Fehlen solcher Institutionen (z.B. in den Kolonien), so bildeten sie auch ein ideales Instrument der Kommunikation zwischen KünstlerInnen, ArchitektInnen, GrafikerInnen, SchriftstellerInnen, TheoretikerInnen und politischen AkteurInnen.

Diese Form der Vernetzung, die sich in kollektiven Projekten, in gegenseitigen Einladungen zu Vorträgen und in dem gemeinsamen Verfassen von Manifesten äußerte, muss als konstitutiv für die Herausbildung ästhetischer und politischer Avantgarde-Konzepte angesehen werden – sowohl für die Entwicklung der geometrischen Abstraktion und der konkreten Kunst, von der sich die Beteiligten nichts Geringeres als den Entwurf einer neuen, egalitären Gesellschaft versprochen, als auch für anti-imperialistische Gegenstrategien zu kolonialen Konzepten von Kultur und Moderne. Zugleich legen die Magazine jene Spannungen und Konflikte zwischen den unterschiedlichen AkteurInnen und Gruppierungen offen, die sich auch in den Werk- und Ausstellungsdesigns niederschlugen: Spannungen, die aus den unaufgelösten Widersprüchen zwischen Abstraktion und Figuration, Individualität und Kollektivität, Handwerk und Industrieproduktion, Expression und Rationalität, regionaler Identitätspolitik und Internationalismus resultierten. Lassen sich solche Konflikte zum einen mit lokalen Bedingungen und geopolitischen Verhältnissen erklären, so kommen hier auch Ambivalenzen der Avantgarden selbst zum Tragen, deren kritische und befreiende Potenziale zugleich mit kolonialistischen Implikationen verknüpft sein konnten.

Die Tagung „Konkrete Medien“ stellt somit den Versuch dar, anhand von exemplarischen Ausstellungen, Zeitschriften und den um sie zentrierten Diskursen eine „Soziogeografie der Avantgarden“ nachzuzeichnen.

# Friday, May 27

## Central/Eastern European avant-gardes

Moderation: Sabeth Buchmann & Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen

14:00

Einführung / Introduction

14:15

Krisztina Passuth

### Theater and Utopia: On the MA-Issue “Music and Theater” and the International Exhibition of New Theater Technology”

In 1924, two Viennese publications appeared dealing with the same subject, edited by two figures with quite distinct concepts. Friedlich Kiesler for one organized the International Exhibition of New Theater Technology, and published a catalog to accompany it, while Hungarian emigrant Lajos Kassák edited a special issue of MA entitled “Music and Theater.” In this lecture, I will explore the differences between Kiesler’s theory and its realization and why the problem of theater and utopia was of great relevance for Hungary at the time. In so doing, I will explore both the socio-utopian moments in Kassák’s theory as well as his vision of theater, film, and music and international constructivism. .

Krisztina Passuth is an art historian and Professor Emerita in the Department of Art History at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her books include *Lajos Tihanyi* (Dresden, 1977), *Moholy-Nagy* (London/New York, 1985), *Les avant-gardes de l’Europe Centrale 1907–1927* and *Treffpunkte der Avantgarden: Ostmitteleuropa 1907–1930* (Budapest/ Dresden, 2003) and, most recently, *Beöthy István* (Budapest, 2010). Furthermore, she has curated crucial exhibitions concerning the avant-gardes in, for example, Paris and Budapest.

15:45

Karel Srp

### The Society of the Future

After 1918, when Czechoslovakia was established as a new state, a small group of young visual artists, writers and architects gathered as a group named Devětsil, which devoted itself to a new language of art that pointed against all common art forms of that time. My lecture will focus on the question of why the so-called ‘avant-garde language’ spread so rapidly that as the leading and most vivid expression it very soon dominated other art forms. I will concentrate especially on typographic forms of layouts, front pages and illustrations in Czech art of the 1920s. Most important for this avant-garde language were its international forms and contents, which were immediately recognisable in other central European countries – whereas in the Austria-Hungary Empire every nation had spoken in a different language that was incomprehensible to the others. A main focus will be devoted to the connection between the international avant-garde language and the Soviet revolution, or rather Marx’s and Engel’s revolutionary ideas in the Manifesto of the Communist Party. From a historical point of view it is possible to recognise a double shift contained in the international language of the historical avant-gardes: on the one hand it became a historical form of expression, on the other hand it still has a strong impact on young artists; it is possible to find not only inspiration, but also direct quotations from key avant-garde pieces in their output.

Karel Srp is a chief curator at the Prague City Gallery. He has organised numerous exhibitions concerning Czech avant-garde artists like Karel Teige (1994, 2009), Toyen (2000), Jindřich Štyrský (2007), Josef Šíma (2006) and has co-curated a show on Czech Surrealism (1996). A further focus is on contemporary art, and he has published books on Karel Malich (2007) and Václav Bošтік (2011). Most recently he has been working on František Kupka.

17:30

Margarita Tupitsyn

Media Fever

This talk tackles key moments and iconic images associated with a media fever that had descended on the Soviet abstract avant-garde by the mid-1920s and transformed the creative consciousness of the most significant male and female artists. Among my examples are Kazimir Malevich's dissemination of Suprematist compositions by means of mechanical reproduction in 1919; Aleksandr Rodchenko's abandonment of painting in 1921, in favour of designing printed matter; Gustav Klutis's first photomontage illustrations in political magazines; Valentina Kulagina's ability to intensify the materiality of the abstract image and increase its faktura through the technique of lithography; and finally Popova's insertion 'Into Production' with radical educational campaign.

As an independent curator, critic and art historian, Margarita Tupitsyn is the author of *The Soviet Photograph* (1996). She has authored catalogues and organised many shows including 'El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet' (1998), 'Bauhaus: Dessau, Chicago, New York' (2000), 'Against Kandinsky' (2006), and 'Rodchenko and Popova: Defining Constructivism' (2009).

19:00

Barbara Piwowarska:

Footnote 5: Screening Space

This presentation – understood as a 'footnote' intervention to the conference and exhibition – will focus on the 'avant-garde margins' and international reception of the work of Polish early avant-garde sculptor and theorist Katarzyna Kobro. It will attempt to take the perspective of the contemporary artists who contributed to the topic and revisit marginalised avant-garde phenomena (referencing the a.r. group, Concretism, Neoconcretism, or the 'Neoplastic Room' legacy at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź). It will include screenings of Józef Robakowski's *Kompozycje Przestrzenne Katarzyny Kobro* (Spatial Compositions by Katarzyna Kobro), 1971 and Karin Schneider's & Nicolás Guagnini's *Phantom Limb*, 1997/1998, which combines works by Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński, Raul Lozza, Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. Schneider and Guagnini first started matching Kobro and Clark in the 1990s, and 'scholars' soon noticed the compelling relationship between the two women artists and their understanding of sculpture as a laboratory of 'social space' and open spatial structure. This film includes unique material shot at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in 1997 of the artists playing with original Kobro sculptures, arranging them in 'performative' sequences.

Barbara Piwowarska is an independent curator based in Warsaw. She is the author of *Jadwiga Maziarska. Atlas of the Imaginary* (2009) and co-editor of *Star City: The Future under Communism*, published by Nottingham Contemporary and tranzit.at (2011). Since 2010 she has run the Footnote project employing 'methodology of margins', referencing existing institutions, statements and concepts in the format of exhibitions and interventions. Her recent 'footnotes' are devoted to the contemporary reception of the Polish avant-garde of the 1920s and 30s.

# Saturday, May 28

## Non-European avant-gardes

Moderation: Christian Kravagna & Florian Pumhösl

14:00

Einführung / Introduction

14:15

Michael Asbury

Modernismo in São Paulo and *L'Esprit Nouveau* in Paris

The term Modernismo relates to a period in Brazilian culture between the late 1910s and the late 1930s. It involved a loose gathering of artists and writers who expressed the desire to be up-to-date with European developments at the same time as reacting against the local conservative and provincial environment. In Brazil the predominant interpretation of Modernismo has viewed it as a necessary but tentative stage in the drive for the cultural emancipation of the nation. Such a conclusion is reached by comparing Modernismo to the consensual interpretation of modern art: namely an autonomous 'universalising' language that naturally tended towards abstraction. More recently, the concept of Anthropophagy – developed by the poet and art critic Oswald de Andrade, who equated the absorption of the European modern aesthetics by the modernistas with the cannibalism of the Brazilian natives – has been largely accepted in Europe and North America as an early example of the strategic appropriation within the field of contemporary art. This paper investigates the relation between painting and art writing during the 1920s – particularly through the influence of the Journal *L'Esprit Nouveau* on the São Paulo group – to argue that it was neither the case of an alternative and incomplete modernism nor that of being before its time, but that the strategies adopted by Modernismo coincided with contemporaneous European regionalist factions and the return to figuration within the context of the Rappela à L'Ordre.

Michael Asbury is a British/Brazilian art historian, art critic and curator. He is Associate Professor at the Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN) at the University of the Arts London. His PhD investigated the work of Hélio Oiticica and its relation to modernism and Brazilian popular cultures. He was associate curator for the Rio de Janeiro section of 'Century City: Art and the Modern Metropolis', Tate Modern, London (2001). He has curated exhibitions such as 'Antonio Manuel: Occupations/Discoveries' (2005), 'Detanico & Lain: After Utopia' (2006), 'Anna Maria Maiolino: Order and Subjectivity' (2007), 'José Patricio: Connections' (2008), 'Cao Guimarães: Gambiarras' (2008), 'Cildo Meireles: Occasion' (2008), 'Rosângela Rennó: Ring' (2009), 'Shirley Paes Leme: quotidian heterotopias' (2009) and 'Maiolino: Continuous' (2010).

15:45

Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff

*Il y a aux Antilles un vide culturel*

*The Periodical Tropiques (Martinique 1941–45)*

In 1941 André Breton and André Masson spent a few days in the French colony Martinique, breaking the journey from Marseille to their exile in New York. By chance, Breton discovered the periodical *Tropiques* with its breathtaking, surrealist poems and became friends with the editors Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, who had founded the journal *Etudiant Noir* in 1934 in Paris. The story is often told to illustrate the expansion of French Surrealism into the Caribbean. Yet this was by no means the objective of *Tropiques*. On the contrary, the idea was to construct an independent, local culture, which could not be based on indigenous traditions, the absence of which Aimé Césaire described as an absolute cultural void. Instead of offering invented traditions or racial concepts of identity like Négritude, the authors of *Tropiques* provided an amazing textual patchwork, borrowing from a broad variety of sources. While European fascism, World War II and censorship by the local Vichy-government isolated black intellectuals on Martinique, the periodical celebrated an outburst of poetical and critical energy. *Tropiques* defined Martinique as a site of cross-cultural relations between avant-garde movements in the Caribbean, Europe and the USA. The debates about aesthetics and politics, surrealism and realism, slavery and emancipation refer predominantly to poetry and language, but also to natural history, music and painting.

Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff is Professor Emerita of art history at the University of Trier, Germany, where she is a board member of the Center for Postcolonial and Gender Studies. She is the author of *Ästhetik der Differenz: Postkoloniale Perspektiven vom 16. bis 21. Jahrhundert. 15 Fallstudien* (2010) and (co-) editor of *Weißer Blicke: Geschlechtermythen des Kolonialismus* (2004), *Postkolonialismus, Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* (2002) and *Das Subjekt und die Anderen: Interkulturalität und Geschlechterdifferenz vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (2001).

17:30

Richard J. Powell

### Ethiopia Awakened, Harlem Sublimated

This paper contemplates the conceptual realignments and aesthetic usurpations that occurred among American artists within the 1920s and 1930s cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Starting with the metaphor of a cultural reawakening (or 'rebirth') among peoples of African descent, selected artists envisioned this formerly denigrated constituency as a rich and vital element in America, whose cultural contributions led to a native, largely uncharted modernism. Ending with an artistic turn towards a folk and/or populist aesthetic, the Harlem Renaissance (or, as it was then known, the 'New Negro arts movement') was eventually understood in terms of an elitist conceit whose cultural aspirations were ultimately seen as incongruous with the political and economic realities facing most Americans. The visual manifestations of the Harlem Renaissance – paintings, sculptures, graphics, and media arts – were the vehicles for this radical re-imagining of black America: representations that, with their emphasis on the rural/urban dichotomy, primitivism and/or the racial/sexual outsider, and the mythologizing of African-Americans as a panacea for society's ills, prompted heated debates about the role and function of the arts in modern times.

Richard J. Powell is the John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, where he has taught since 1989. He is the author of *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (2008); *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (1997) and *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (1989). He (co-) curated exhibitions such as 'Conjuring Bearden', Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham (2006), 'Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary' at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (2005) and 'Rhapsodies in Black: The Art of the Harlem Renaissance' at Hayward Gallery, London (1997).

19:00

Partha Mitter

### Rabindranath Tagore, Okakura Tenshin and the Creation of a Regional Modernist Art in Asia

This paper will focus on Indian and Japanese efforts to create a regional discourse of art within transcultural modernism which emerged in the early twentieth century. In this period, the worldwide circulation of ideas and artistic styles was the outcome of a print culture that created a 'virtual cosmopolis' of Eastern and Western intellectuals, giving rise to an alternative form of modernism in both India and Japan. Behind this 'movement' were the great Indian poet Tagore, the leading Japanese art theorist Okakura Tenshin and several likeminded Europeans. Tagore's belief in alternative cosmopolitan values based on ancient Indian thought as well as Okakura's slogan 'Asia is one' helped create a powerful though short-lived vision of regional anti-colonial modernity.

Partha Mitter is Professor Emeritus of art history at University of Sussex, England, and has been Director of the Arts and Humanities Research Board (UK) Project 'Modernity and National Identity in Art, 1860s-1940s: Japan, India and Mexico'. He is the author of *Much Maligned Monsters. A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (1977), *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922* (1994), *Indian Art* (2001) and *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde 1922-1947* (2007).

# Friday, May 27

## Central/Eastern European avant-gardes

Moderation: Sabeth Buchmann & Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen

- 14:00 Introduction
- 14:15 Krisztina Passuth: Theatre and Utopia. The MA-Issue „Musik und Theater“ and the „Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik“
- 15:45 Karel Srp: The Society of the Future
- 17:30 Margarita Tupitsyn: Media Fever
- 19:00 Barbara Piwowarska: Footnote 5 – Screening Space

# Saturday, May 28

## Non-European avant-gardes


Moderation: Christian Kravagna & Florian Pumhösl

- 14:00 Introduction
- 14:15 Michael Asbury: Modernismo in São Paulo and „L'Esprit Nouveau“ in Paris
- 15:45 Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff: „Il y a aux Antilles un vide culturel“. The periodical „Tropiques“ (Martinique 1941-45)
- 17:30 Richard J. Powell: Ethiopia awakened, Harlem sublimated
- 19:00 Partha Mitter: Rabindranath Tagore, Okakura Tenshin and the Creation of a Regional Modernist Art in Asia

26.5., 19:00: Abstract Space - A Tour at Distance:  
A guided tour by Aino Korvensyrjä through the exhibition  
Abstract Space (in English Language)

Die freie Teilnahme widmet Ihnen

DER STANDARD

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