## Modernity, Socialism, and the Visual Arts

**Veranstalter:** Kunstarchiv Beeskow; Universität Utrecht; in Zusammenarbeit mit Marlene Heidel, Claudia Jansen, Ursula Lücke und Joes Segal
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Socialism, Modernity and the Visual Arts, this year's summer school of the art archive at Beeskow was unusual for a variety of reasons. Aside from the fact that October in eastern Germany can hardly be described as summer, the conference took place over five days on a river-cruiser that made its way slowly from Berlin, through the former GDR, to the Polish border and back. The main aim of the conference was to explore the visual and material cultures of state socialism through the lens of modernity and associated analytical concepts. Holding a conference on board a small ship containing 24 academics and artists certainly constituted a psychological experiment. Those attending did not know how they would react to inhabiting such a small space so full of ideas: were we sentencing ourselves to five days on-board a floating prison?

Thankfully, the summer school's unusual format turned out to be a strong metaphor for those researching visual and material cultures of European state-socialism in a post-socialist and westernised academic landscape. The idea of a conference on a ship, travelling from Berlin, through the former East Germany to the Polish border and back was a result of the Archinauts project run by artist URSULA LÜCKE (Linz). *Arche*, meaning origins and *Nautics*, relating to navigation through unknown areas has led Lücke to consider various ways of bringing the Beeskow art archive's collections to greater notice.

We visited the archive after the ship moored on the first night at nearby Fürstenwalde (the waters were too shallow to navigate directly to Beeskow). The archive is home to collections of GDR art in a wide range of styles and media: from sculpture to painting including socialist realism, social realism, abstraction and landscape. The archive was evidently in need of some investment: it was cramped and had long ago run out of the necessary storage space. Art *archive* is evidently a divisive term for a collection of painting, drawings and sculpture that was produced in the GDR that is not for display, but stored as historical documents, not to be regarded as art. In her paper, MARLENE HEIDEL (Lüneburg) discussed the archive's place in collective memory twenty years after reunification. She sees the archive as a site of 'image-jam,' a term borrowed from Russian semiotician Yuri Lotmann. 'Image-jam' is a way of explaining how the artefacts at the Beeskow archive have formed a blockade in a mechanism that suppresses their circulation in museums or institutions that support collective memory. The archive, which receives some funds from the state and relies on grants for short-term programmes and interns means its management lacks continuity, or flow of knowledge production. For Lücke, this concept of flow, movement and circulation of images is a central part of the Archenauts project. As Beeskow is connected to the entire world through waterways – the concept of making these images flow again was a central metaphor for the boat conference.

In his keynote lecture, JOES SEGAL (Utrecht) examined what role art might have to play in defining the notion of a socialist modernity. In his view, realist art of the GDR has not been understood as a 'modern' phenomenon, but has instead been regarded as akin to realist art under the Nazis. Modern art, and abstract expressionism in particular, has traditionally been used as a signifier of a modern state, meaning a free market liberal democracy. However, Segal notes how modernity is most often defined by a utopian belief in social and moral progress, a progression that should proceed hand in hand with scientific and technical progress. He hopes that we can arrive at an open minded view of art history that would redefine modernity as a normative, rather than analytical concept. His keynote set the tone for a conference in which participants gave historically grounded examples of how socialist art, ar-

chitecture and design, if not necessarily modernist, might be considered modern.

As we made our way through the former East, we were forced to change our plans. While some papers were being given, we could feel occasional scrapes on the underside of the boat. Many of the rivers are no longer dredged because the waterways' statuses had been downgraded since reunification. Forced to go slow due to the shallowness of the water, we were not able to reach our mid-way goal of Gorzsów in Poland, resulting in a prolonged stay at Eisenhüttenstadt.

Eisenhüttenstadt (formerly Stalinstadt) was the location where we were most strongly confronted with the notion of a socialist modernity. We entered the city along the Oder-Spree canal, the city's spectacular steel mill towering above us on both banks. The group was given a tour of the city, followed by a visit to the GDR documentation centre. Here, exhibits are largely comprised of objects thrown away by East Germans shortly after reunification and replaced with Western consumer goods as a material purging of life under state socialism. Architecture, homemaking and daily life were an important topic at the conference, as these seemed to most directly address questions relating to the notion of a socialist modernity.

In her paper on the experience of moving in to newly built mass-housing during the Soviet sixties, SUSAN REID (Sheffield) explained what made this generation's experience of socialism explicitly *modern*, highlighting the role of technical specialists in creating the domestic interior of socialism. For Reid, much of the advice received by residents on style and hygiene resulted in comparable experiences to those of moving into mass housing in the West, noting that on both sides of the iron curtain, individuals experienced a central paradox of modernity through its creation of individualised private space through mass standardised industrial production.

CHRISTINA SCHWENKEL (California) spoke about East German architects' involvement in reconstruction of Vietnamese housing after the war. She showed how for many citizens in Vietnam, East Germany was viewed as the normative source of modernity. Many architects were sent to train in Moscow and Weimar, which displaced the west as the locus of such exchanges. However, she points out that in spite of imported modernist visions, the fate of East German building projects in Vietnam was very much determined not only by the quality of local materials but also by the appropriation of living space in terms of local traditions such as living together with livestock in the apartments.

In his paper, VLADIMIR KULIĆ (Fort Lauderdale) also dislocated definitions of modernity, in this case with reference to the changing geopolitics of Tito's Yugoslavia. He spoke about how in both built and unrealised architectural schemes, New Belgrade reflected ideas of a progressive socialist state: firstly as a regional power in the project of Soviet globalisation, before modernist architecture – along with abstract expressionist art – came to express Yugoslavia as a non-totalitarian socialist state with US backing. Finally, as a non-aligned country in the Cold War, Yugoslav architecture spread through the non-aligned world through its construction company Energoprojekt.

Three papers looked specifically at the issue of gender and problematized the adoption of Western feminist discourse as a normative means of discussing female autonomy and emancipation in the arts. BEÁTA HOCK (Leipzig) examined how artworks and feature films created in socialist Hungary dealt with gender issues outside of a Western feminist framework. While many artworks show a clear understanding of the themes present in second-wave feminism, the artists Hock interviewed were able to enter into a socialist discourse relating to women and labour without necessarily identifying with the label feminist.

Likewise, APRIL EISMAN (Iowa) spoke about East German artist Angela Hampel's neo-expressionist paintings of mythological women who defy the notion of the female subject of the male gaze. Also operating outside the western framework of feminism, Hampel expressed her disillusionment at female inequality in an artistic profession run by a state that had failed to deliver the equality it had promised. Using mythology to discuss contemporaneous events through the guise of allegory – she created images of defiance and led other female artists in an at-

tempt to reform the system. Despite being able to travel and consume „western" feminist literature, her activism continued to work in direct reference to the social reality of the GDR. In Claudia Jansen's discussion of role models in East German socialist realist art at the Beeskow archive, she examined how depictions of women veered between conservative views of women as objects of a male gaze and expressions of progressive ideals of women in industry – and how state policies on labour and support for working women manifest themselves in paintings with female subjects.

Such a nuanced narrative was also constructed by visual artist NIKA RADIĆ (Berlin) in her opening performance at the Academy of Arts in Berlin. Taking on the role of an 'art detective' researching the work of the fictitious artist Neda Kovačević – she created a totally plausible investigation of the Dubrovnik artist ranging from her life story as a frustrated piano player to discussions of the production of her film work in the material conditions of Yugoslavia. Playing on the way the audience automatically trusts an academic with a power point and the way historians construct narratives, Radić had not only fooled the majority of passengers before they had boarded the boat, but also implicitly pointed out some widespread preconceived ideas about socialist art and modernity.

The final panel dealt with the issue of how the aesthetics of state socialism are variously being revived, subverted or rebranded in contemporary art and exhibition practices. FRIEDERIKE SCHULZ (Hamburg) showed photographs of an exhibition she held in Hamburg to mark 20 years of the Berlin Wall. Here, she recreated the GDR inside a disused office block in Hamburg complete with entrance permits, guard dogs and lots of chintzy wallpaper. The exhibition's location in Hamburg was supposed to help West Germans deal with their experiences of reunification because, as she puts it, „they lost their home too."

ALMIRA OUSMANOVA (Vilnius) gave a paper on the uses of discourses relating to modernity, modernisation and everyday life across post-socialist space, that brought the conference to an apt and thought-provoking close as we neared Berlin. She spoke about how in Lithuania, exhibitions of Soviet-era design and architecture have become a euphemism for discussing the Soviet experience. While enabling some to discuss positive aspects of socialism, discourses on modernisation are often used to proclaim, often with little reference to the economic and social conditions of production, that creativity was able to flourish, only in spite of the Soviet occupation.

During the 5 days of the conference, all of the participants became aware of a range of instances where the central premise of a socialist modernity created specific circumstances for cultural production: be they socialist realist, techno-utopian, internationalist, modernist, „feminist" or even postmodern. Thankfully, the speakers avoided too many ship metaphors in their presentations – we did not dredge the past or navigate uncharted waters. It was clear that most of the participants agreed on the importance of socialist visual culture as expressions of modernity (this over-agreement may be related to the fact that we were sharing a confined space). However, from the condition of the art archive at Beeskow, the shrinking city of Eisenhüttenstadt and the poorly maintained waterways would suggest the passengers of the Gretha van Holland continue to hold a minority view.

**Conference Overview:**

Nika Radić (Berlin): The Case of Neda Kovačević – A Performance

Eckhart Gillen (Berlin): Andrej Wroblewksi between Modernism and Socialist Realism

Franciska Zólyom (Leipzig): Critical Pedagogy and Alternative Educational Models in Art

Yuri Leving (Halifax): Raising the (Iron) Curtain: The Unknown Art of Joseph Brodsky

Julian Debeusscher (Barcelona): Strategies of Becoming Public: The Case of the Inconnu Group

Nela Milić (London): Time case: A memory in action

Joes Segal (Utrecht): Art and History after the Cold War: The Socialist Heritage

Yulia Karpova (Budapest): Lyricism, Practicality, and Vividness: Revisiting Socialist Realism in the 1950s

Tom Cubbin (Sheffield): Artistic Design on the Edge of Utopia: Senezh Studio 1964–1974

Beáta Hock (Leipzig): Beyond Gender Roles: What Can a Gendered Cultural History of the Cold War Teach Us?

Claudia Jansen (Düsseldorf): Role Models in East German Socialist Realist Art

April Eisman (Ames): Angela Hampel and the Contradictions of „Equality" in a Communist State

Susan Reid (Sheffield): Making Oneself at Home in a Socialist Modernist Utopia

Christina Schwenkel (Riverside): Traveling Architecture: East German Urban Designs Abroad

Vladimie Kulić (Ford Lauderdale): New Belgrade and Socialist Yugoslavia's Three Globalizations

Marlene Heidel (Lüneburg): The Art Archive Beeskow and its Place in the Collective Memory

Ursula Lücke (Lüneburg/Linz): Floating Archives: Beeskow, the Oder and the Archenauts-Project

Kilian Krug (Berlin): Changing Perspectives: Visual Access to Digital Archives

Ada Avetist (Vienna/Amsterdam/Bern): The Living Art Museum, Reykjavik

Nadiya Chushack (Melbourne): Representing Labour in Post-Yugoslav Visual Art

Friederike Schulz (Hamburg): 2009 – a Special Year in the History of Germany: 60–40–20 Years „Fall of the Berlin Wall"

Almira Ousmanova (Vilnius): The Materiality of Utopia: Rebranding of Soviet Aesthetics of the Everyday as a Strategy of Reconciliation with the Past in Lithuania and Belarus

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