Political narratives of modern art in the European museum

Lia Yoka   ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI   liayoka@arch.auth.gr

Abstract

Using the semantic and syntactic qualities of the semiotic square to understand the cultural history of modern art in European museums, the paper examines three recent exhibitions. The reinstallment of Harald Szeemann's 1978 Mammelle della Verità show on the Monte Verità colony, the exhibition Freedom: The Art of the Novembergruppe in Berlin, and Peter Weibel's Art in Europe 1945-1968, all help demonstrate, each from a different historical vantage point, that the radical moment in modern art is far from self-explanatory, and is best understood through an appreciation of the networks and personalities who pioneered political art groups, collective exhibitions, and art colonies consciously (and not by way of some inherent essence of modern art forms) in the service of opposition, dissent and social change. The exhibitions presented here offer concrete evidence of what the late Otto Karl Werckmeister –to whom this paper is dedicated– has called The Political Confrontation of the Arts.

Keywords

modern art exhibitions , cultural semiotics , political art

modern art as political avant-gardism by default

Modern art, whether we situate its beginnings in Courbet's realist, Manet's impression-ist, Caspar David Friedrich's romantic or even in Jacques Louis David's neoclassical mo-ment, has been understood as an oppositional movement within an elite culture in the academies and art institutions of 18th and 19th century Europe and the US. The breeding ground for modern art is a European metropolis, even if, by the mid-19th century, New York, Boston and Chicago claim some of the art market. Thus, parallel to the violent but gradual, country-by-country birth of the nation-State that is interlocked with the emer-gence of the institution of the open, public museum, there is an almost simultaneous flourishing of anti-academic ideas (from romanticism through to realism, impression-ism and symbolism) and anti-academic institutions, Secessions, artistic communes and manifestos harnessing politics and artistic style.

According to most accounts, modern art has been an institutional tool for political rad-icalism, yet this fact has rarely been linked to the condition that, by the beginning of the 20th century, fine art in general is also a medium of mass communication (think of ori-entalist postcards, portrait photography, amateur impressionist landscapes, monumen-tal sculpture, and of the persistence of "traditional" artistic forms in general that en-joy a growing popularity). The analytical focus in studies of the 20th century remains on art that defined itself as modern and new, on modern works and educational frame-works (from arts and crafts' workshops to Bauhaus and Vkhutemas). An impressive scope of studies, from monographs and catalogues to handbooks and overviews, con-tinue to scrutinize and reproduce the ideology of its most successful (canonical) produc-ers, an ideology marked on the one hand by the drive to fight in the front line for broad-er causes, combining formal innovation with social awareness, and on the other, by the need to be subjective, subversive and original, (which could range from making contro-versial, offensive, shocking to plain eccentric works).

Indeed, scholars have identified to a great degree with 20th century avant-gardists them-selves, and radicalism is recognised as a precondition for art. It is true that movements we associate with the avantgards often had explicit ties with social oppositional move-ments of their time and -much less often than most art students might imagine- formed an oppositional movement themselves (the early Dada in Zurich, expressionism for the whole of its enduring cultural life, surrealism for a brief critical anticolonial moment in 1931 at the exhibition *La Vérité sur les colonies*). Political engagement was defini-tive for the production of Russian constructivism and suprematism, as well as for sev-eral other tendencies pre- and post-October 1917 in the USSR. In addition to the texts that have shaped the canon of what we now understand as the *avant-gardes* and their predominantly left oppositional politics (that form a lineage of works from Barr 1936, Greenberg 1939, Poggioli 1962, to Foster, Krauss et al. 2004), books of the last 20 years

(Antliff 2001, Bronner 2012) are highlighting evidence and interesting angles of the inter-dependency of the artistic and the politically oppositional, while at the same time point-ing at the historical moments radical trends were far from dominant.

Such studies help show that the canonisation of the avant-gardes as the dominant art in 20th century Europe did not occur thanks to the metaphysical power of artworks or the genius of their creators. Otto Karl Werckmeister's recent *Political Confrontation of the Arts in Europe* (Werckmeister 2020: 23-29) is a materialist exception to the rule of histo-ries of 20th century art. In his polemical style, Werckmeister's account describes the ide-ology of modern art as mainly a "posture" of "principled non-conformity". He also claims that modern art never actually replaced traditional art.

> *Counteracting traditional art with an ever-growing self-assurance was an art based on the free market rather than on state guidance or support. (...) Incessant repudiations of traditional art orchestrated the market as-cendancy of modern art in the public sphere. (...) As a result of the struc-tural bifurcation (...), the history of European art from the late 19th centu-ry through the end of the Second World War was conditioned by an endur-ing disparity between two antagonistic venues of artistic culture, styled tra-ditional and modern respectively. (...) That eventually modern art should have prevailed in the artistic cultures of most capitalist societies is the out-come of a protracted contest, fought out in recurrent conflicts of cultural policy.* (Werckmeister 2020: 23-24)

Werckmeister's position echoes Peter Bürger's conviction that "in complicity with capital-ism «art as an institution neutralizes the political content of the individual work»" (Bürger 1974:143), but actually refuses to lament the decline of the *avant-gardes* after the Sec-ond World War, as if they had been *de facto* revolutionary before (Rosenberg 1983:219, Buchloh 2000, Foster, Krauss *et al.* 2004).[1] A great part of what Werckmeister calls "con-flicts of cultural policy", succeeded in retrospect in establishing the avant-gardes as the dominant art of early 20th century Europe. Rather than springing from the atelier or the street to the art history classroom and the auction house, these conflicts were fought out within the realm of exhibitions. Exhibition genealogies that help demonstrate this point can now easily be tracked with a certain accuracy, thanks to ever-growing databases such as DoME and BasArt.

This paper points to recent exhibitions that seem to highlight, through concrete exam-ples, and convincingly explain this historiographical sobriety and clarity of perspective that mark Werckmeister's *Political Confrontation.* It aims to show that an appreciation of the networks and personalities who pioneered political art groups, collective exhi-bitions, political involved in art colonies and social issues, are far more important than

acknowledged. According to this approach, these networks and artists are all the more important, not for some innate quality in their work that the keen eye of critics and collectors was quick to single out, but for constantly questioning how forms manipulate meaning, and for consciously deciding to put their art in the service of the struggle for meaning.

a brief genealogy of definitive gestures

Despite the general reluctance to acknowledge the actual status of the avant-gardes within the artworld, it is widely accepted that certain major exhibitions have shaped the canon of modern art: The *Sonderbund* Exhibition (*Internationale Kunstausstellung des Sonderbundes Westdeutscher Kunstfreunde und Künstler* - International Art Show of the Special Association of West German Art Lovers and Artists) in 1912 in Cologne, Germany, set the stage for modernism in Europe, coupling Cézanne with the expressionist Brücke, and Egon Schiele with Vincent van Gogh (Aust 1961).

The *International Exhibition of Modern Art*, commonly known as the *Armory Show* (as it took place at the 69th Infantry Regiment Armory), in New York City in 1913 brought Cubism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism and early Duchamp to the USA, and influenced the Abstract Expressionists of the 1940s (Brown 1963).

The First Russian Art Exhibition (Erste russische Kunstausstellung Berlin, October 1922), featured Russian Constructivism and included works by El Lissitzky (who designed the catalogue), Vladimir Tatlin, Olga Rosanova, Alexander Rodchenko, Kasimir Malevich, and Marc Chagall. The curators were artists: David Sterenberg, Nathan Altman, and Naum Gabo (Nisbet 1983).

In the same year as the Cubism and Abstract Art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936, the *London International Surrealist Exhibition* was curated by a group of already prominent artists and poets including Henry Moore, Paul Nash, Andre Bréton, Man Ray and Paul Éluard. The highly popular exhibition brought Surrealism to London. It included artwork by Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and Salvador Dalí, who delivered a lecture on Surrealism while wearing a diving suit, and had to be rescued as he almost suffocated to death (Elliott 2010). The Sidney Janis Gallery organized the *International Exhibition of the New Realists*, which opened on October 31, 1962, and was the first large scale exhibition to introduce Pop Art to the artworld. The exhibition brought together work by American artists such as Wayne Thiebaud, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, Robert Indiana, and work by European artists such as Jean Tinguely, Yves Klein, Arman, Christo, Marisol, and Öyvind Fahlström. It showed the connection between the American Pop artists and the European *Nouveaux Realistes*. Some die-hard Abstract Expressionists such as Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, and Robert Motherwell quit the gallery in pro-

test, in what they saw as the art world transforming into crass commercialization (Ashbery 1962).

Swiss curator Harald Szeemann initiated the role of independent curator, as he was the first to work outside of the art institution mounting big survey shows. His 1969 exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information)* included experimental, performance and conceptual art and featured various politically charged art movements such as *arte povera*, Anti-form, and Process Art (Celant 2013).

The material displayed in these exhibitions determined and narrativised both avant-garde and post-war art in its sites of explosion to an industrial scale in the following decades (Luke 2002; Dunlop 1972) – museums hosting modern art collections, art history departments, more public and private collections, academic journals and publishers.

the rearrangement of modern art museum narratives

In the last 25 years there has been a major rearrangement of exhibition narratives of modern art in its most important permanent collections, with conceptual-thematic taxonomies overriding the chronological and school-based ones, collapsing the modern into the contemporary and diluting the avant-garde moment within a broader spectrum of modern and contemporary artistic trends (Bishop 2013: 55-59, Klonk 2009). This shift from chronological to conceptual-thematic displays of modern art in permanent museum collections has of course been based on more or less the same collections. The examples are well known.

Tate Modern abandoned chronology for a thematic presentation in 2000 ['Poetry and Dream' - 'Transformed Visions' - 'Energy and Process' - 'Structure and Clarity' Monet vs Richard Long, Matisse's mighty bronzes of women's backs vs Marlene Dumas' ink-drawn nudes]. The MoMA started "rejiggering" its permanent displays and, characteristically for the whole trend:

> "[c]urators plan to switch up permanent collection installations every six months by reconceptualizing individual rooms, shifting entire presentations, or using other strategies to encourage new perspectives on modern and contemporary art (...) [and suggesting an] open ended art history..." (Cohen 2019)

The Metropolitan Museum thematized its 20th-century collection into 'The Metropolis' - 'Work' - 'The Bodies', and similar initiatives were taken by the Brooklyn Museum the Denver Art Museum, the Atlanta's High Museum, as well as by several regional museums across Europe. This trend seems to have taken the depoliticisation and aestheticisation of the history of modern art to its extremes – following perhaps the omnipresent

and anodyne notion of politics in today's art market. It is followed by a historicist trend, namely a self-referential (and potentially also self-reflexive) return to old modes of display, perhaps best exemplified in displays such as the aptly named *The Shape of Shape* at The Museum of Modern Art, 2019–2020 (Sillman 2019).

At the same time, scholarship has started paying more and more attention to networks and to the formative role, both in contemporary and modern art, of organising initiatives and exhibitions in stylistic and formal choices and the creation of value (Larsen 2014, Dickerman and Chlenova: 2012).

exhibitions on the left of modern art

I focus here on three exhibitions that study the significance of networks (of artists with each other, of artists with non-artistic movements) and collective initiatives for their claim on artistic value and political meaning. The exhibitions selected share a strong interest on the political function of art. Neither received wide commercial acclaim, yet all shared a serious meta-narrative taxonomic concern, (*i.e.* were pointedly historiographical), heavy official sponsorship, thoroughly researched content, already established curator-auteurs, and great recognition by professionals in the field. They cover the trajectory of the short 20th century from the early decades until 1968 – after which it is meaningless to talk about the legacy of modern art, since modern art is not a direct influence on post-68 production (Heinich 2014), but more like a myth of legitimation.

The conceptual arrangement of the following exhibitions are here examined and formalised:

1. *"Le mammelle della verità": Monte Verità,* Casa Anatta Museum*, 2017 (using the 1978 installation as centerpiece of broader project). It was produced by the Fondazione Monte Verità, and co-organised with Canton Ticino, the Swiss federal institutes of technology, ETH Zurich, EPF Lausanne, and the Commune of Ascona.

2. *Freedom: The Art Of The Novembergruppe 1918–1935*, November 9, 2018 – March 11, 2019, at the Berlinische Galerie was part of the winter festival on the "100 Years of Revolution – Berlin 1918/19". It was sponsored by the Capital Cultural Fund, the Lotto-Stiftung Berlin, the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, the Förderverein Berlinische Galerie, and the Berlin mayor.

3. *Art in Europe 1945–1968: The Continent that the EU does not know*, (October 22, 2016–January 29, 2017), traveled from the ZKM Karlsruhe Centre for Fine Arts to Brussels (BOZAR) to State Museum Exhibition Centre ROSIZO The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, to the Contemporary Art Centre, Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art, the University of Jyväskylä. It was sponsored by the Federal Republic of Germany Foreign Office, and the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung, and co-funded

by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union, the Galerie Zdenek Skle-nar, the Ministry of Science and Research, and Art Baden-Württemberg and the City of Karlsruhe.

Through specific curatorial choices and display techniques, all three shows aim to demonstrate the specific social aspect of the radical, the oppositional, the institution-critical moment of modern art (avant-garde and post-war) and seem to be suggesting historically alternative views themselves. Set against a chronological background, they unfold like a diagrammatic study of the transformation and fierce decline, in the face of obscurantist commercialisation, of the critical politics of European art as the 20th century progresses.

the modern art exhibition as historical semiosis

> "Imagine a museum hall, in which artworks from different periods are exhibited, along with inscriptions from different languages. In the meantime, there are visitors and museum staff in the hall, preparing guided tours with all kinds of reference materials." (Eco in Lotman 1990: xii)

Umberto Eco's museum metaphor in his introduction to the 1990 English edition of Yuri Lotman's *Universe of the Mind* was indeed a metaphor. There is an implication about the medium specificity of the museum here, that museology scholarship has since elaborated on (Bennett 2018; Hooper-Greenhill 1992). The universality of Eco's metaphor allows us to assume that exhibitions themselves (like the historically earlier genre of the encyclopedia entry) have played an important role in shaping knowledge, in other words, they constitute powerful registers that can override the semantic resilience of concepts in collections, books and art history departments.

Indeed, exhibitions are semiotic models devised and presented as finished products of knowledge, as semantic/syntactic entities, and therefore correspond to a political program external to the intrinsic values and regulations within the semiosphere to be presented, exhibited, represented (the sphere of the exhibition). This is what Eco seems to have meant: *One can understand the notion of the semiosphere by imagining a spatial arrangement of signs that correlates them to each other and creates a system out of this correlation*. This means that one cannot explain the ideology of an exhibition by imagining it as free range archival material that is being simply "captured" and translated in the museum *dispositif*. Indeed, as Lukken and Searle have pointed out for church architecture (Lukken and Searle 1993), that can be directly applied to museum space, the museum is a space that becomes "the signifier of the object", since it possesses what Greimas and Courtes have called extensiveness (Greimas and Courtes 1982: 114), its own territo-

ry, an utterance that produces space as a continuous and undifferentiated dimension of reality (Juodinytė-Kuznetsova 2011: 1270).

The aim in all three exhibits I have chosen to highlight is to create a political and aesthetic framework for socially subversive meanings of art production. Thematically, they are preoccupied with versions of the artistic history of the Left: its anchorite, its institutionalised and its oppositional tendencies. All three exhibitions share an ambition to challenge the canon of modern art (as product of a European political avant-garde) through highlighting the politics of artistic creativity and conscious group formations. Furthermore, all three of them address the relationship of such formations (of artist colonies, of political artist groups, of regime-critical artists) to exhibition practices and programmatically underplay the significance of "iconic works", since all seem to lack a narrative spatial arrangement around a "centerpiece" or around a few "leading figures".

Also, all three exhibitions are "exhibitions of exhibitions": The first showcases the collective self-representations of the Monte Verita colonists (that included photographic documentation, exhibitions, reflexive and also self-critical texts), the second assembles the material and reconstitutes the aesthetics of the Novembergruppe exhibitions, posters and collective activities, while the third draws heavily on Eastern European exhibitions and catalogues in order to compare and rehabilitate, so to speak, the works within the broader European Cold War production.

As a semiotic experiment, I will present here the museological concept of each exhibition in a Greimasian semiotic square each, integrating static and dynamic, semantic and syntactic elements (Hébert 2011), taking a. as a semantic axis the critical politics that artists and artworks in each exhibition presented to their contemporaries, and b. as a historical/syntactic criterion the way the politics of these groups of artists and their institutions developed over the time period examined in each exhibition.

The three exhibitions I have singled out are Central European affairs. They refer to Switzerland, South Germany and Russia, and Berlin. My hope is to show that despite their institutional co-optation and against the backdrop of the full canonisation of the avant-gardes, the arrangement of the rich archival material and critical information in these exhibitions can still point us in the direction of recognising the noble causes of artists joining their forces with social movements against oppression, exploitation and colonialism, genocide and permanent war.

Monte Verità

In contrast to most earlier museum accounts of modern art, the Monte Verità exhibit of 1978 narrates a story of modern artists beyond artistic manifestos and inner city controversies, and transfers the revolutionary impetus to the utopia of communal life, to the critique of property and consumerism, to naturism, meditation and experimen-

tal psychiatry – and, notably, to art that expresses the performative and liturgical element of *Lebensreform* (Yoka 2005). The Monte Verità exhibition was recently reinstalled exactly as it had been designed by Harald Szeemann as the centerpiece of an encyclopaedic permanent display on the Monte Verita (Lafranchi Cattaneo and Schwab 2013) (plate 1).

Plate 1. Interior of Casa Anatta, Ascona, Monte Verità exhibition in Ascona, Photo: bobo11, November 2017
Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

As a historical gesture, Szeemann's exhibition of 1978 throws light on the combative political origins of the communal initiative and on the post WWI degeneration of the mountain to inspire metaphysical, buddhist, gnostic-syncretic Jungeian inspired pan-liberalism and mysticism. The second aspect is emphasized in the 2018 reinstallment of the exhibition (Phillips and Kaiser 2018), which revolves around Szeemann the curator of the *Museum of Obsessions,* rather than around the curator's actual obsession with the Monte Verità colony, its creativity and impact. One might say this approach downlplayed an important historical fact: The 1987 exhibition paved the way for the exploration of direct connections between early 20th century European communes and post-war American globalised culture, hippies, New Age and healthy living cults (plate 2).

Plate 2. Eden Ahbez and Nat «King» Cole. *We, The People* the CBS Radio program, broadcast on television from CBS Television Studio 44, (the Maxine Elliott Theater) at 109 West 39th Street, New York, NY. Image dated June 1, 1948. Photo by CBS, Getty Images.

Below is a diagrammatic depiction of the concepts that hold together the argumentative system of the exhibition, the broader multimedia framework in the museum complex in Ascona today, that envelopes the 1978 exhibit (plate 3).

alternative -   *Monte Verita 1900-1905*   **oppositional**

"vegetabilism"   refuge from the police

                              socialist commune

naturism -detox

nudism   *Monte Verita 1905-1920*

EXHIBITION POLITICS: (600 biographies, emphasis on art practices, utopian location and architectural reconstruction)

modern dance
religious performances

non-oppositional   *Monte Verita 1920 -*   artists' colony   **non-alternative**

                       syncreticism

                       congress center - hotel

Plate 3. The three historical layers of the inhabitants and actors on Monte Verità as described by Harald Szeemann in the 1978 exhibit, that was reinstalled in 2018, and the position of these layers in a semiotic square, where alternative-anchorite-utopianist and oppositional-urban-revolutionary stances are presented as antithetical in order for them to reveal their conceptual oppositions, equivalences and contradictions.

The semiotic square follows the inner conflicts and contradictions within the community over three waves of inhabitants The key notions of alternative vs. revolutionary oppositional culture are based on a political juxtaposition of the two contradictory political-cultural tendencies that seem to have dominated also the early 20th-century inhabitants of the Monte Verità. (Keith 2013: 158) (plate 4).

Alternative Culture	Oppositional Culture
Apathetic or hostile to concept of political engagement.	Consciously embraces resistance.
Change seen in psychological and cultural terms.	Change seen in economic and political terms.
Individual consciousness is the target.	Concrete institutions are targeted.
All authority is rejected out of hand.	Legitimate authority is accepted and cultivated.
Rejection of moral judgment.	Strong moral code based on universal human rights.
Attack on conventions: • Allboundariesarefairgame • Shock value	Attacks on power structures.
Alienated individual valorized.	Loyalty and solidarity valued.

Alternative Culture	Oppositional Culture
Goal to feel intense "authentic" unmediated emotions.	Goals and adult concerns guide the community, socialize the young, enforce norms, participate in larger projects of righting the world.
A politics of emotions in which feeling states outweighs effective strategy or tactics.	A politics of community that values responsibility, mutual aid, work ethic, dependent upon self regulation of mature adults.
Politics is who you are.	Politics is what you do.
Human relations are corrupted in the act of political resistance; only right consciousness can prevail.	Human relations are corrupted by systems of power and oppression; justice must prevail even if it takes generations.
Generalized withdrawal as strategy.	Withdraw loyalty from systems of oppression and the oppressors but active engagement to stop injustice.

Plate 4. Alternative vs oppositional culture [excerpt] (Keith 2013: 158).

This irresolvable tension between alternative and oppositional culture was already described by Erich Mühsam, an inhabitant of Monte Verità, in his account of the reasons he quit, in his brochure *Ascona,* published in 1905 "Communist settlements...cannot survive when the principles that tie the participants together is as irrelevant as vegetabilism" he wrote. And when people started needing money "they opened a sanatorium that slowly but inevitably developed into a purely capitalist venture." (Mühsam 1905/1972: 5) (plate 5).
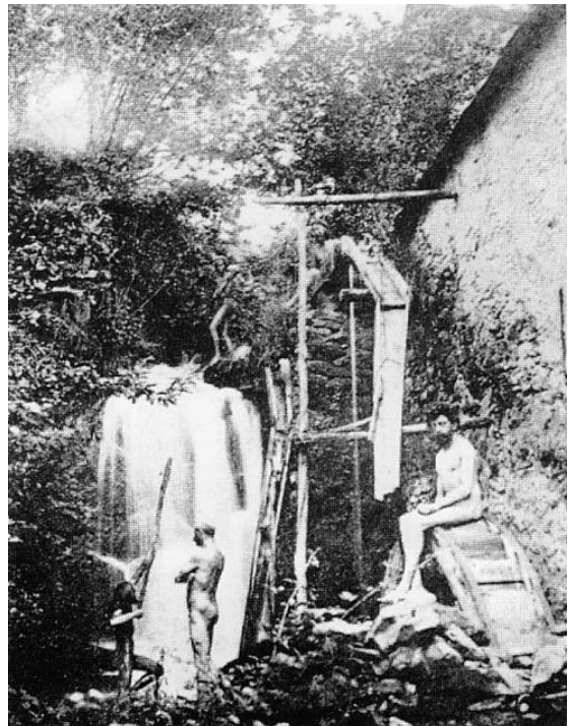

Plate 5. Raphael Friedeberg and Erich Mühsam on a postcard, Sanatorium Monte Verità ca 1904. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.

"Freedom": Kunst der Novermbergruppe

The Novembergruppe exhibition concentrates on the "day after" of expressionism in Germany, yet not emphasizing, as perhaps expected, the "Neue Sachlichkeit", Cubo-futurist and realist trends, instead treating those trends as primarily formal and stylistic developments. The exhibition provides a detailed sociological and theme/content-based account of the propaganda and the extrovert cultural activities of a specific constellation of formerly avant-garde artists who offered their services to the Republic(s) in Germany after World War I (plate 6). Hannah Hoech or Hans Richter are not being treated as political dadaists, but as art professionals dedicated to the social cause, forming an internal opposition within a predominantly social-democratic patriotic formation.

Plate 6. Members of the November Group in Berlin, 1920. Clockwise from left: César Klein, unknown, Rudolf Belling, Heinrich Richter-Berlin NN, Heinz Fuchs, Moriz Melzer, Herbert Garbe, Emy Roeder, unknown, Wilhelm Schmid (Berlinische Galerie catalogue 2018: 40-41).

The section "Liberating energies of the new Art" reverses the standard idea of the Neue Sachlichkeit as a realist turn away from dada and expressionist sensibilities, while the

section "Dada and Scandal" seems to celebrate the decadence and sensationalism of interwar dissent rather than its uncompromising sharpness. Entire rooms host experimental film and architecture, including physical models by Mies van der Rohe and Martin Gropius, that are hardly oppositional works by today's standards, as well as in the views of their contemporaries.

Plate 7. Heinz Fuchs Arbeiter, Hungertod naht, Streik zerstört, Arbeit ernährt, tut eure Pflicht, arbeitet, (Workers. Famine. Death Is Approaching. Strike Destroys. Work Nourishes. Do Your Duty. Work) early 1919, poster, Werbedienst der deutschen sozialistischen Republik, Nr. 60, 73,7 × 103,9 cm. (Berlinische Galerie catalogue 2018: 27).

In the semiotic square (plate 8, on the next page) I have placed the images presented at the exhibitions for their degree of political dependence on established institutions and State sponsorship: They range from independent anti-bourgeois nihilist to full support of the government: from dada-esque caustic realism (Scholz) to SPD Party agit-prop (Nationalversammlung and anti-strike) (plate 7) to carnival, art show and concert posters, hence the key antithesis in the semiotic square: "radical (in the sense of anti-establishment) vs institutional (in the sense of endorsing specific policies of the government)".

radical   institutional

The NG artists before 1918

Georg Scholz industy farmers

Nationalversammlung posters

Novembergruppe

Novembergruppe - **EXHIBITION POLITICS: emphasis on national agit-prop,
collective celebrations, participation at national exhibitions**

"Strike destroys, Work feeds" poster

Hannah Hoech later

non-institutional   **non-radical**

Plate 8. The historical narrative in the exhibition *Freedom: The Art of the Novembergruppe*: critical subjectivity, so-
cialist agit-prop, collective celebrations, participation at national exhibitions.

Art in Europe 1945-1968

Following smaller recent shows like *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe* in 2010 (Kot-
sopoulos 2010), *Ostalgia* in 2011 (Gioni 2011), *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous His-
tory of Art in Former Eastern Europe* in 2009 (Mytkowska and Macel 2009), and *Gender
Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* in the same year (Pejic
2009), *Art in Europe 1945-1968* integrates the Eastern bloc within the post-war contem-
porary post-avant-garde art discourse, suggesting a new canon to fit the post-1968 era.
According to the curator's vision, at a certain historical point after World War II, left wing
internationalism in Western and Eastern Europe alike, turns universalist, and a creative
force erupts, rejuvenating art institutions with cathartic subjectivity, utopian declarations
and technoscientific experiments.[2]
Several novel conceptions of Europe are developed in the exhibition and the catalogue.
"Firstly, post-war art is being interpreted as the processing of traumatic experiences of
World War II, the Holocaust and nuclear annihilation. This leads to crisis and rejection of
representation by abstraction, as well as to the destruction of the means of represen-
tation and to the processing of the materials of the trauma. Secondly, around 1960, the

abandonment of abstraction and the devotion to objects begins, e.g. in the form of New Realism. As a result, the expansion of the arts into technical media and into forms of action of the artist and the public emerges. Thirdly, the departure from utopia is exhibited, which is expressed intently in 1968 – the same year the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops into Prague took place. Fourthly, the exhibition aims to culturally unite a historically divided Europe" (ZKM 2016).

Adding to this, *Art in Europe* 1945–1968 is "making a dedicated plea for Europe," according to Peter Weibel, CEO of ZKM and curator of the exhibition (Weibel 2016).

The semiotic square (plate 9) describes the cognitive function of the display. All works exhibited expressly refute the dictum about "poetry after Auschwitz". The curatorial team – and this is the crucial gesture here- explains why perhaps there indeed was "poetry after Auschwitz": First, since Auschwitz was not the first European concentration camp, humanity should have been prepared and should have prevented genocide, but it didn't. Secondly, just as the world did not cease the production of nuclear weapons after Hiroshima, it went on with its chimera that political art can change the world.

subjective   **political**

"Architectural Utopias 1950-1968"

"France 1945-1950"   **Europe 1945-1968**

"pictures of pain"   "Polish Art 1944-1970"

"Ecce Homo"   "Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner"
"pop sensibility"

EXHIBITION NARRATIVE: psychological trauma and political gestures are the dominant and often competing themes, within art institutions

"Impulses from Science in unofficial Russian art"

Broodthaers, Metzkes

"1958: The Fight against Nuclear Death"

non-political   **non-subjective**

"The Secret Revolution": cybernetics

Plate 9. *Art in Europe 1945-1968*: The institutional Left in Eastern Europe between dissent and trauma.

If we connect all three semiotics squares (plate 10) it becomes clear that the three historical moments, as conceptualized in the exhibitions, form a continuous narrative of the progressive decline of the anti-institutional and anti-establishment, institution-criti-

the "anti-establishment movement" 1900-1919

alternative -   *Monte Verita 1900-1905*   **oppositional**

"vegetabilism"   refuge from the police
                                    socialist commune
naturism -detox

nudism   *Monte Verita 1905-1920*

    **EXHIBITION POLITICS: (600 biographies, emphasis on art practices, utopian location
        and architectural reconstruction)**

modern dance
religious performances
non-oppositional   *Monte Verita 1920 -*   artists' colony   **non-alternative**
                        syncreticism
                        congress center - hotel

"the oppositional Left" 1921-1939

radical   **institutional**
    The NG artists before 1918
        Georg Scholz industy faromers

                                Nationalversammlung posters

                    Novembergruppe

        Novembergruppe - **EXHIBITION POLITICS: emphasis on national agit-prop,
        collective celebrations, participation at national exhibitions**

                                "Strike destroys, Work feeds" poster

        Hannah Hoech later

non-institutional   **non-radical**

"the Institutional Left" 1945-1968

subjective   **political**
                "Architectural Utopias 1950-1968"

"France 1945-1950"   **Europe 1945-1968**
                "pictures of pain"   "Polish Art 1944-1970"
            "Ecce Homo"   "Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner"
"pop sensibility"

                **EXHIBITION NARRATIVE: psychological trauma and political gestures
                are the dominant and often competing themes, within art institutions**

                            "Impulses from Science in unofficial Russian art"

Broodthaers, Metzkes
                                "1958: The Fight against Nuclear Death"
non-political   **non-subjective**

                "The Secret Revolution": cybernetics

Plate 10. European art in the 20th century as the progressive institutionalisation of the subversive moment through the lens of three major exhibitions.

cal, political aspect of avant-garde art. In the first decades of the 20ᵗʰ century, the social movements to a (internationalist, anticolonial, workerist movement, with connections to a strong spiritual/mystical current) inspired both alternative and oppositional radicalism. In the interwar period alternative and anti-authoritarian approaches were repressed in favor of patriotic, Bolshevik and social-democratic ideas, while the critical artists in post war Europe (East and West) seem to have pended between a need to process a personal trauma of collective shame and disgust and an urge for political statements within the confines of the national art worlds or the art metropoles in the West. They stand at the opposite end of certain State-supported reactionary national exhibits across the world today (I am thinking of Hungary, Croatia, Estonia), which attempt to rewrite world history in revisionist terms (Pető 2016, Otto 2009, Tucker 2008) according to which political history has always been a struggle between backward, racial and conservative forces and liberal imperialist ones.

Conclusion

Historical museum exhibits confirm and legitimize dominant political ideas, besides, of course, guiding our understanding of history in certain classificatory ideological directions through their structure and forms of communication: They often display primary sources and full archives. They unravel their arguments by exploiting spatial and other sensory-empirical modalities and temporalities of perception, and often encourage further research. They function as archival records themselves.

To understand the schematic abstraction of the political moment in 20ᵗʰ century modern art, one should begin by sensing both the hierarchy of semiotic registers within any nominal category of concepts, (and that also includes the conceptual category of art, the category of the art object, and its relationship to the category of culture) and also the historical nodes at which these are ideologically and institutionally challenged or destroyed. Historical museum exhibits programmatically try to link material sources of the past to current ideas – their main task is the multimodal scaffolding of an airtight logic that makes sense to today's visitor. The crucial critical move here, in order for one to grasp curatorial politics in historical exhibitions, and the relationships between the major art institution complex on the one hand and political art and popular cultural movements and ideas of the 20ᵗʰ century left on the other, is not the shift from the semiosphere of a collection (*e.g.* the Monte Verità biographical material, the Novembergruppe posters, or the East German performance art videos) to the semiosphere of the exhibition. It is the awareness of the tension between instrumentalising our estrangement from the political art of the past, and productively historicising this estrangement for current use. An exhibition, as it develops across narrative space, turns the porous semiosphere of "political art" into a logical model, that can aptly be described in the semantics and syn-

tactics of the semiotic square, for its tight spatial structure, logical relations, narrative clusters and boundaries that withstand common sense and deep reflection alike. Its great heuristic value in the study of historical exhibitions lies in the potential of the semiotic square, if used against a convincing conceptual framework, to articulate fixed ideological constellations and their historical dynamism in a condensed and comprehensive way.

The 1978 Szeemann exhibition (and its reinstallment within the *Museum of Obsessions* in 2018) offered us the interwar background to the debate on the German *Wandervogel* and *Lebensreform* origins of the American counterculture after the 1940s and highlighted links between critical psychiatry, post-symbolist painting and modern dance. The *Freedom/Novembergruppe* show scratches the surface of the German culture wars in the interwar period, embarassingly bringing together liberal architects and reclus painters, fun-loving friends and loyal, often authoritarian-leaning, Communist Party members. *Art in Europe 1945-1968* is the long-due recasting of the legacy of the Cold War in a common (European?) mass-media-critical vocabulary continuing avant-garde art's conscious coupling of subjectivism and dissent.

Indeed, some insight is to be gained from all three exhibitions, insight that should affect and question the narrative of the self-standing, "politically charged", innately radical modern quality of (any) artworks. In fact, the historiographical arguments of all these exhibitions seem to confirm, from a different route, the broader political history of interwar art in Europe as delineated in the study by Otto-Karl Werckmeister mentioned above (Werckmeister 2020), that challenges (and openly disagrees with) the idea that the arts in the first half of the 20th century were predominantly (politically) radical. Their material does not care to confirm the priority of avant-garde trends such as futurism, surrealism, or abstraction, *de facto* joining the post-1990s reappreciation of symbolism, expressionism and realism – and their combinations. In fact, their overall approach stresses the importance of political interventions of artists, since radically oppositional, progressive and combative aspects are not sought in the inherent qualities of works, nor are they seen as spontaneous expressions of some genius that is radical by default. In the end, these exhibitions encourage the discussion of three successive moments in the history of left wing culture and ideas in Europe, and some of their crucial dialectics and dilemmas (alternative vs oppositional, radical vs institutional, subjective vs sociopolitical), as well as their exclusions (the anarchists in *Monte Verità*, the striking workers and anti-establishment artists in the *Freedom: The Art of the Novembergruppe* exhibition, the "decadent" countercultural and anti-institutional artists in *Art in Europe 1945-1968*).

Endnotes

1. See e.g. Harold Rosenberg's statement that "[art has become] a profession one of whose aspects is the pretense of overthrowing it» (Rosenberg 1983:219), a position underlying Benjamin Buchloh's insightful *Neo-avantgarde and Culture Industry*. (Buchloh 2000)
2. I am grateful to the late Peter Weibel for discussing the exhibition with me over two meetings in Karlsruhe in November 2016.

References

Antliff, Alan (2001) *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics, and the First American Avant-Garde,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Ashbery, John. (1962). International Exhibition of the New Realists, exhibition catalogue, New York: Sidney Janis Gallery.

Aust, Günter (1961) Die Ausstellung des Sonderbundes 1912 in Köln, *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch,* vol. 23: 275-292.

Barr, Alfred H. (1936/1986) *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.

BasArt: An Open Access Global Database of Exhibition Catalogues, 19th-21th c
   https://artlas.huma-num.fr/en/artlas-bases-de-donnees-en-acces-public/

Bennett, Tony. (2018) *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays*, London: Routledge

Bishop, Claire (2013) *Radical Museology, or, What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* London: Koenig Books.

Bronner, Stephen Eric (2012) *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia,* New York: Columbia University Press.

Brown, Milton W. (1963) *The Story of the Armory Show*, New York: Joseph H Hirshhorn Foundation.

Buchloh, Benjamin (2000) *Neo-avantgarde and Culture Industry*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Bürger, Peter, (1974/1984). Theory of the Avant-garde, transl. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota and Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Camilleri, Patricia. (2003). Object, space and the museum : a semiotic approach. *Malta Archaeological Review*, No 5, 46-53.

Celant, Germano (2013). *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013,* Fondazione Prada: Venice.

Cohen, Alina (2019) The 5 Biggest Changes to Look for at the New MoMA, *artsy*, 11 Oct. https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-5-changes-new-moma

Database of Modern Exhibitions (DoME)
   https://exhibitions.univie.ac.at

Dickerman, Leah with Masha Chlenov (eds.) (2012) The Artist Network Diagram. displayed at *Inventing Abstraction*. the Museum of Modern Art, December 23, 2012-April 15, 2013.
   https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/MoMA_InventingAbstraction_Network_Diagram.pdf

Dunlop, Ian. (1972) *The Shock of the New; Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art.* New York: American Heritage.

Elliott, Patrick (ed.) (2010) *Another World: Dalí, Magritte, Miró and the Surrealists,* exhibition catalogue, Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland.

Foster, Hal and Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh and Yves-Alain Bois (2004) *Art after 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, New York and London: Thames and Hudson.

Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe. (2009), exhibition, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna, curated by Bojana Pejić November 13, 2009 to February 14, 2010.

Greenberg. Clement (1939) Avantgarde and Kitsch, *Partisan Review* VI, No. 5, Fall 1939: 34-49.

Greimas, A. J.; Courtés, J. (1982) *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hébert, Louis (with Nicole Everaert-Desmedt) (2011) *Tools for Text and Image Analysis An Introduction to Applied Semiotics*, version 3, transl. Julie Tabler, https://nicole-everaert-semio.be/PDF/fr/Tools-for-Texts-and-Images.pdf

Heinich, Nathalie. (2014) *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain : Structures d'une révolution artistique*, Paris: Gallimard.

Hooper-Greenhill, Eileen. (1992) *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London: Routledge

Juodinytė-Kuznetsova, Kristina (2011) Architectural Space and Greimassian Semiotics Societal Studies. 3(4): 1269–1280.

Keith, Lierre. Culture of Resistance (2011) In Derek Jensen and Lierre Keith eds. (201) *Earth at Risk: Building a Resistance Movement to Save the Planet*, New York: Seven Stories Press.

Klonk, Charlotte (2009) *Spaces of Experience. Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 87–134.

Köhler, Thomas, Ralf Baumeister and Janina Nentwig (eds.) (2018) *Freedom. The Art of the Novembergruppe 1918-1935*, catalogue of exhibition at the Berlinische Galerie, Munich, London, New York: Prestel.

Kotsopoulos, Nikos (ed.). (2010) *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, London: Black Dog Publishing.

Lafranchi Cattaneo, Claudia and Andreas Schwab (eds.) (2013) Dalla visione al chiodo. Dal chiodo alla visione. Il Fondo Harald Szeemann dell'Archivio Fondazione Monte Verità. *Bollettino storico della svizzera italiana*. No. 12, Salvioni Edizioni.

Larsen Lars Bang (ed.) (2014) *Networks*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.

Luke, Timothy W. (2002) *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Lukken, Gerard and Mark Searle (1993) *Semiotics and Church Architecture: Applying the Semiotics of A.J. Greimas and the Paris School to the Analysis of Church Buildings*, Leuven: Peeters Publishers.

Macel, Christine, Vit Havranek and Joanna Mytkowska (eds.) (2010) *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, exhibition catalog, Geneva: JRP/Ringier.

Mühsam, Erich. (1905/1972) *Ascona. Alternatives Leben auf dem Monte Verita.* Berlin: Berlin: Verlag Klaus Guhl,

Nisbet , Peter *(1983). The 1st Russian Show: A Commemoration of the Van Diemen Exhibition Berlin, 1922.* London: Anneley Juda Fine Art

Ostalgia (2011), exhibition, New Museum, New York, curated by Massimiliano Gioni, July 14 – September 15 2011.

Otto, L. (2009). Post-communist museums: Terrorspaces and traumascapes. In E. Kjeldbaek (ed.),*The power of the object. Museums and World War II*, Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc, 324–360.

Pető Andrea (2016): Revisionist histories, 'future memories':far-right memorialization practices in Hungary, *European Politics and Society*, vol. 18, No 1: 41-51,

Phillips, Glenn and Philipp Kaiser (2018). *Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions,* exhibition, Getty Research Institute, February 6 through May 6.
https://www.getty.edu/news/getty-presents-harald-szeemann-museum-obsessions/

Poggioli, Renato (1962/2014) *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia*, Rome: Biblioteca d'Orfeo.

Rosenberg, Harold (1983) *The De-Definition of Art: Action Art to Pop to Earthworks*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sillman, Amy (2019) Amy Sillman discusses "The Shape of Shape" at MoMA, *Artforum*, October 21, 2019.
https://www.artforum.com/interviews/amy-sillman-discusses-the-shape-of-shape-at-moma-81082

Tucker, Aviezer. (2008). Historiographic revision and revisionism. In M. Kopecek, M. (ed.) *Past in making. Historical revisionism in central Europe*. Budapest: Central European University Press: 1-15.

Weibel, Peter. (2016) New Narrative in Ten Phases.The Development of Art in Europe after 1945, online exhibition archive, https://zkm.de/en/event/2016/10/art-in-europe-1945-1968/new-narrative-in-ten-phases

Weibel, Peter and Eckhart Gillen (eds.) (2016) *Art in Europe 1945-1968: Facing the future*, catalogue of exhibition at ZKM, BOZAR, Pushkin State Museum, Tielt: Lannoo.

Werckmeister, Otto Karl. (2020) *The Political Confrontation of the Arts in Europe from the Great Depression to the Second World War*. Heidelberg: Wolfgang F. Kersten.

Yoka, Lia. (2005) On Monte Verità (after 1900.) as a locality, a utopia and a museum exhibition In Fenia Lekka (ed.) *Approaches to Cultural History*, Karditsa: Portitsa Museum, 127-156.

ZKM Media File. (2016) *Art in Europe 1945–1968 The Continent that the EU does not know*. https://zkm.de/media/file/en/pm_europa_e_0.pdf