



The Case of Piotr Piotrowski The Avant-garde Under the Shadow of Yalta

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From a North American perspective it might seem unconceivable that a single scholar can set the tone for the entire field of art history of their country. Yet without a doubt, Piotr Piotrowski is such a figure in contemporary Polish art history, his shadow looming over the majority of current enterprises undertaken in the discipline. An internationally active academic and curator, he is also an audacious and vocal spokesperson for contemporary art, publishing widely in academic journals, art magazines and popular press. He is equally well known in the blogosphere (the hip *Raster* magazine gave him the acronym PPP). In the last few years Piotrowski has undertaken major projects summarizing the Communist years 1945-1989, both in Poland and in East Central Europe, which resulted in two key books. In 2006 his research culminated in *Avant-garde under the Shadow of Yalta*, which was awarded a prestigious Dugosz Prize in the humanities. This substantial award of 50,000 Polish zloty (approximately \$20,000) confirmed his unprecedented significance for the field. His other large publication, *Meanings of Modernism: Towards the History of Polish Art after 1945* was nominated for the Nike Prize, a literary prize sponsored by the most popular Polish daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in 2000. These facts point to the unusual reach that Piotrowski's research and writing possess, protruding out of the ivory tower of the academia into popular and vernacular realm.

Throughout his career Piotr Piotrowski (b. 1952) has been associated with the city of Poznań. He received his MA and PhD from Adam Mickiewicz University and is currently professor *ordinarius* (the highest academic title in Poland, awarded exclusively by the President of the Republic of Poland) of modern art history and the chair of Art History Department of his alma mater. He is a sought after speaker and his lectures at the University are said to be tightly packed due to his "colorful style."⁽¹⁾ Between 1992 and 1997 he was also a senior curator of contemporary art at the National Museum in Poznań. His allegiance to cutting-edge work is apparent in the selection of artists he chose to exhibit at the National Museum, or to whose catalogues he contributed. Among his favorites are the performance artist Jerzy Bereś; the Poznań conceptualist Jarosław Kozłowski; and an author of intricate, large-scale, politically and socially charged photographic collages, Zofia Kulik. Piotrowski's intimate familiarity with work by Central and Eastern European artists has led to multiple essays on the art of the region which have accompanied exhibition catalogues: *Central European Avant-gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (MCA, Chicago), *Der Riss im Raum* (Bonn Kunsthalle, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw), and *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm), to name just the most important ones. Piotrowski also wrote an essay "Central Europe in the Face of Unification"⁽²⁾ for an anthology *Who If Not We Should At Least Try to Imagine the Future of All This?*, which documented seven exhibitions organized on the occasion of the expansion of European Union in 2004. His curatorial activity is complementary to his academic writing. Citing Jean-Marc Poinot, Piotrowski claims that "to organize an exhibition is to write the history of art."⁽³⁾ As we will see, this deeply held belief has a significant impact on how Piotrowski assesses the history that has already been written.

Piotrowski's research interests are defined with a razor-sharp precision and clarity. His primary passion is the avant-garde, broadly defined, both in its modern and post-modern embodiments. His two early books were both dedicated to one of the most challenging and grossly misunderstood figures of Polish modern art: the painter, photographer, playwright, theorist and philosopher, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. Piotrowski's second or *Habilitation* dissertation, *The Artist between the Revolution and Reaction* (1993) focused primarily on the question of the "historical and political responsibility of the avant-garde in Russia."⁽⁴⁾ Already in these early publications Piotrowski's attention lay in examining the entanglement of artists in the social context and reality of their times.

Throughout his career Piotrowski's research have circled around a crisply defined set of issues and problems, but his methodology has evolved significantly. Before I proceed to describing this methodological shift however, I would like to suggest that the evolution was partially caused by the study abroad that Piotrowski undertook during and after the twilight of Communism in Poland. First, in the late 1980s he was a fellow in the United Kingdom, respectively at the University of Kent (1987) and at Cambridge (1988). Since 1989, the United States has been his primary destination. He was a

Senior Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in Visual Arts in Washington D.C (1989), a Getty Fellow at Columbia University in New York (1994) and a fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton (2000). He also served as a Visiting Professor at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College (2001). In effect then, though Piotrowski often claims to be writing against a universalizing, Western perspective, he is paradoxically in debt to this very perspective; it has obviously profoundly shaped his own writing.

Piotrowski's *The Artist between the Revolution and Reaction* (1993) was still thoroughly rooted in Continental thought and philosophy. In that book, his examination of the ethical dilemmas of Russian constructivists was framed within the concept of *historicism* he had extracted from Karl Popper's work and the idea of *revolt* (or *rebellion*) as articulated in the existentialist writings of Albert Camus. A little more than a decade later, most traces of these Continental theoretical alliances had disappeared from Piotrowski's ruminations.⁽⁵⁾ In 2006 editorial debate, the staff of the art magazine *Obieg* associated Piotrowski's current methodology with New Art History.⁽⁶⁾ This rather generic term was coined in 1982 by Jon Bird for the conference organized by the magazine *Block* at Middlesex Polytechnic, and a selection of key texts was published in 1986 in an anthology edited by A. L. Rees and F. Borzello⁽⁷⁾. Basically, I would understand it as an umbrella concept that covers a wide range of revisionist methods aimed towards art history that was rooted in iconography and iconology. The application of the term to Piotrowski's practice seems to a degree appropriate as he quite freely utilizes a variety of theories for the interpretation of specific art works. He himself declares the concept of *framing* to be his most important tool that permits him to reveal diversity of apparently similar regions he researches in *The Avant-garde Under the Shadow of Yalta*:

The art geography could use the strategy of framing, described by Norman Bryson after Jonathan Culler, to dislodge hierarchical paradigms of knowledge about art and to reveal differences among the locations. The concept of the *frame*, which in Culler/Bryson interpretation replaces that of the context is, of course, based on Derrida's notion of *parergon*. *Parergon* is a structure inseparable from the text, and, most significant for our discussion, it is not externally imposed. Rather, it takes shape as a result of the interpretive strategy.⁽⁸⁾

However, Lacanian analysis and feminist theory also play important role in selected interpretations. Nevertheless, all these theories are secondary in comparison to the crucial importance of the issue of relationships of power between art and politics. In each case that Piotrowski investigates the central question is the artist's reaction to the force of the *ideological apparatus of the state*.⁽⁹⁾ It is this reaction (or a lack of it) that provides the frame for the further interpretation of the art work. Moreover, it is also this reaction that validates the work of art. That is why I would probably classify Piotrowski as a social art historian, rather than a practitioner of the New Art History. In many regards, he bears interesting resemblance to Benjamin Buchloh⁽¹⁰⁾ in that he uses theories freely as he sees fit in particular interpretive cases, but makes them subservient to the main issue.

Revising Art History: *Avant-garde Under the Shadow of Yalta*.

I seek a teacher and a master
may he restore my sight and speech
may he again name objects and ideas
Tadeusz Rzewicz, *The Survivor* (1945)

At a hefty 502 pages, *Avant-garde Under The Shadow of Yalta: Art in East-Central Europe 1945-1989* is certainly Piotrowski's major opus to date, crowning years of research and travel. At the first glance the structure of the book is straightforward and unproblematic. The volume is divided into five large chapters. Chapter one establishes the grounds and the frame of the research by outlining the author's theory of the relationship between history and geography that impact the investigation of the art of the region. I will briefly introduce this chapter as it sets up important premises for the entire book. A concise chapter two, "Surrealist Interregnum" examines a short period between 1945 and 1948 before socialist realism took a firm hold over the area. Chapters three and four are the core of the book, and they concentrate on the two major forms of the avant-garde:⁽¹¹⁾ modernism of 1950s and 1960s (chapter three) and the neo-avant-garde of the 1970s (chapter four). The chapter entitled "Modernism and Totalitarianism" consists of four sub-chapters. "*The Thaw* and the *Informel* Painting" focuses on different forms of gestural abstraction in East Central Europe. "Myths of Geometry" analyzes the practices that Piotrowski classifies as neo-constructivist. "Non-socialist Realism" and "Critique of Painting" follow. The subsequent "Neo-avant-garde and *Real Socialism*" starts with the examination of the appearance and geographical distribution of the cases of neo-avant-gardism in the region. Later, Piotrowski investigates its two major manifestations: conceptual art ("Conceptual Art

between Theory of Art and Critique of the System") and body art ("Politics of Identity ? Body Art"). Finally, the epilogue gives a relatively quick overview of the works of the 1980s, particularly the neo-expressionist figuration, and very early 1990s. It also provides a summarizing reflection on the current state of art geography in form of the critique of globalization and multiculturalism. Thus the narrative is organized chronologically, and subsequent tendencies provide the anchor terms of the narrative, as in the survey of Western art after World War II, perhaps with only a few years' delay.

However, this quick tour of the table of content does not fully reveal the multitude of the questions that the use of the key qualifying terms raises. The title term "avant-garde" is used by Piotrowski in its most generic, casual meaning, loosely indicating most anything that was not social realism or wildlife painting(12). Piotrowski defines neither his understanding of the avant-garde nor the neo-avant-garde, though he mentions that the latter was a post-modernist phenomenon. However, in Polish criticism the term "modernism" [*modernizm*] tends to be commonly associated with the French *modernisme* and refers to the tendencies, particularly in literature, of the years 1880-1910. Piotrowski apparently applies it according to Greenbergian standards, but at times he also uses it interchangeably with the term "modern" (or in Polish *nowoczesny*, a distinctly different word, denoting broadly understood *modernity*, with many, also fine art, associations). Most of the time, it seems that his definitions are taken from Peter B?rger:

❖ *w ka?dym z tych kraj?w sytuacja politycznej sztuki krytycznej (je?eli takowa w og?le wyst?powaa) by?a z regu?y odmienna od neutralnych, autonomicznych eksperyment?w formalnych modernizmu (z tak zwan? sztuk? abstrakcyjn? na czele) na korzy?? zdecydowanej swobody tego drugiego. W?adze o wiele mniej obawia?y si? kultu formy, autonomii dzie?a itp. ni? postaw krytycznych, analizuj?cych system w?adzy.*(13)

[❖ in each of these countries the situation of politically critical art (if this type of art existed at all) was different from the situation of neutral, autonomic, formal experiments of modernism (primarily so-called abstract art), in favor of the freedom of the latter. The governments feared the cult of the form, autonomy of the work, and so on, less than they feared critical attitudes analyzing the structures of power.]

But if modernism is indeed an antithesis of critical art engaged with life (the avant-garde), the use of the term *avant-garde* in Piotrowski's title is misleading. I find this application of the Western opposition to the art of East Central Europe somewhat surprising since *Avant-garde in the Shadow of Yalta* is written partially as a revisionist look at the European art history. Piotrowski is a self-proclaimed "geographer-revisionist"(14), who explicitly aims to question the established "universalist, meaning Western," canon. He claims the book stems from "an objective need to fill in the gaps in the art history textbooks (almost entirely focused on the so-called Western art canon)" and to create "a more balanced study of the post-war art in East Central Europe."(15) To Luiza Nader of *Obieg*, Piotrowski's *Avant-garde Under the Shadow of Yalta* is a definitive response to *Art Since 1900* as well as a critique of "historicizing processes that take place in the Western, particularly American, institutions and universities."(16) Nader's claim provides a sensible explanation for polemics with Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh that appear regularly in Piotrowski's text.(17) According to Nader, the book is an attempt to introduce the excluded into the canon and to construct "an inconvenient art history, which not only does not fit, but moreover disrupts the model proposed by the center." Simultaneously, the book is also written in opposition to an Eastern European "desire for universalism"(18) and against "the effort to upgrade the value of our culture within the framework of universal categories, which in practice means from the Western perception."(19)

Piotrowski's ambitious book raises questions of the globalism of art history, particularly whether the discipline can rely on a set of common, shared methodologies and to what extent application of indigenous critical terms is needed in evaluation of particular, local artistic tendencies. While on one hand Piotrowski tries to be a revisionist, on the other he takes key Western concepts and methodologies and applies them to art practices which on many levels ? despite their seeming similarity to their Western counterparts ? were a result of very different concerns and motivations. Piotrowski himself acknowledges this, but his acknowledgment leaves many open questions as he ultimately decides to remain within the familiar Western terminology.

I will come back to the issue of his terminology; here I want to point specifically to the example of the Croatian group *Gorgona*, which Piotrowski discusses in the chapter "Critique of Painting." His analysis of *Gorgona's* activities is one of the most extensive and thorough in the text. Due to the fact that the group aimed at the elimination of painting, Piotrowski classifies it as the forefront of East Central European conceptual art. Simultaneously, he also observes that *Gorgona's* activities had at

their core an existentialist character; their discourse continuously referred to the concepts of freedom, absurdity, nihilism, irony and metaphysics, which are in Piotrowski's judgment associated with modernism. In fact, Julije Knifer's statements on painting sound very much like Ad Reinhardt's theses. The key issue here is not the fact that Piotrowski uses "Western" terms. What is at stake are the limits and usefulness of their application. I am not certain if Piotrowski does justice to uniqueness of *Gorgona* presenting them as tangled up between modernism and post-modern conceptual art. However, this is a tough call to make: perhaps asserting *Gorgona* as an original phenomenon beyond the familiar art movements would actually alienate it from the readers who are very comfortable with these terms.

Revisionist Symptom: "Non-socialist realism"

This is a trivial event
that will not become history.
This is not a battle or a pact,
which motivations will be researched,
nor a memorable assassination of a tyrant.
Wisława Szymborska, *Can be Untitled* (1996)

The chapter on non-socialist realism epitomizes characteristic traits of Piotrowski's approach to writing art history. It clearly traces the relationships between social attitudes, political developments and the artistic activities resulting from them. On the other hand, it weaves in the titans of Western critical canon into the analysis, only to show how difficult it is to create a meaningful dialogue with their theories.

The chapter opens with a dramatic description of the overnight construction of the Berlin Wall on May 12, 1961. As Piotrowski observes, the Wall's erection was an ultimate and final end to the hopes of lightening the grip of the regime over East German society after Stalin's 1953 death. At the same time he notes that East Germany was radically different than other countries of East Central Europe due to the fact that

both GDR authorities as well as artists, even those who could not find themselves a place within official artistic life, shared in essence the same ideology based on two powerful complementary pillars: anti-fascism, that is critical attitude towards their Nazi past, and Marxism and resulting from it anti-liberal, anti-Western political attitude.(20)

Piotrowski concludes that this shared attitude caused an incredibly complex relationship between GDR's official and independent cultures (for him the tension between official and oppositional artistic enterprise is symptomatic of every system). This is also how he explains the East Germans' lack of interest in *informel* painting, contrary to its massive popularity in neighboring Czechoslovakia and Poland.

Even this opening page of the chapter points to a number of difficult issues typical of Piotrowski's book. First of all, it manifests how artificial the concept of East Central Europe is. As Piotrowski himself stresses throughout his text, despite the way it might have seemed to Westerners, East Central European countries were not alike and in many cases shared more differences than commonalities. They were bound together into a singular entity by one political decision. However, this does not mean that identical histories followed. As Piotr Kowalik asks in the *Sekcja* review, an important question is whether a similar political situation (i.e. being under a rule of many versions of Communism) is a sufficient reason to write a common history of art.(21) Yet, the limits of research must be set somehow. Similarly to national or administrative borders, they might run along natural or artificial division lines. Piotrowski examines the concept of East Central Europe in contrast with Habsburg-shaped idea of Central Europe, but his definition of East Central Europe seems to some extent exclusive. Given the tumultuous history of the region as well as its complicated present, it is surprising that Piotrowski does not acknowledge countries aspiring to independence, but excluded by the Yalta Conference from the West (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine etc.).

The opening remarks also hint at Piotrowski's personal attitude towards *informel* painting since he seems to imply it was synonymous with capitalism, materialism and "anti-humanism of post-war Western world." (22) If this is indeed the case with modernism, then why is it given the title *avant-garde* (epitomizing modernism *informel* appears clearly as its opposition, very much along B?rger's definition)? Why is it even included in the book? Apparently, what validates modernism in context is its opposition to the official art of the government, the social realism. Thanks to this opposition, modernism earns its place in the canon, even if the author is reluctant to grant it that status. While discussing East German "modern figuration" Piotrowski focuses on Ralf Winkler, who is better

known in the West as A. R. Penck. Piotrowski looks at Winkler's work from the perspective of the artist's ideological formation, which takes precedence over the evolution of his painting. Piotrowski starts his assessment with Penck's early inspiration, Picasso, whose work, Piotrowski says, epitomized not formal inventiveness, but "an example of ideological engagement of modern art on the side of Marxist ideology." (23) He discusses the Peck's ambiguous relationship to the erection of the Berlin Wall (he accepted the GDR's policy) and the development of his stick-figure style. Finally, Piotrowski identifies a moment of the artist's loss of faith in the party and his emigration to the West. Penck is to Piotrowski an embodiment of a truly independent and engaged artist. His faith in Marxism was more pure than that of the party officials. He never tainted himself with any kind of collaboration with the governing party, as he was never accepted by a "professional" art academy or admitted to the East German artists' Association (VBK, the official organization sponsored by the communist government). Piotrowski praises Penck's work because he sees his stylistic experimentation not as experimentation for its own sake or as a shallow pictorial inventiveness, but as a means of expressing his times in the most universal fashion. Penck's art embodies the most valuable historicism, engaged both with modernity and ideology.

Leaving Penck behind, Piotrowski then moves on to Hungary, "where the situation was to a certain degree similar, but motivations and the type of figuration as well as its provenance had a completely different character." (24) This is an abrupt transition, symptomatic of many of the geographical shifts in the book. It epitomizes the difficulty of generalizing when dealing with the East Central Europe. Hungarian artists in the late 50s and early 60s might have lived in situations similar to East German ones. After the 1956 Budapest uprising, the state operated within the Stalinist policy model, but despite their isolation Hungarian artists wanted "to inscribe themselves in the modernist value system, they wanted to reach the world of Western contemporary art." (25) Therefore, as Hungarian Laszlo Beke suggests, they were influenced by both *informel* and pop-art from the West. (26) Piotrowski points specifically to the rise of American Art in Europe as epitomized by Robert Rauschenberg's Grand Prix at the Venice Biennial in 1964. He also notices that at some point the artists could have experienced pop-art first hand, most notably through the Vienna exhibition. (27) As a result, Piotrowski sees the Hungarian reception (or rather multiple receptions) of pop-art as a "function of rebellion against socialist art." (28) He expands an opinion of the historian Katalin Kener?, to the effect that Hungarian pop art was a negation of ideology, to see it specifically as a "negation of the ideology of communist state." (29) It was the only possible reception, because according to Piotrowski, totalitarian ideology left no neutral zone. Artists had only two options: either they rejected the dominant ideology, or they were co-opted by the totalizing policy of the state. (30) There was no other option. Political neutrality was a false idol. A belief in it de facto meant a complete submission to the ruling system.

This is why later in the book Piotrowski dismisses a vast majority of Polish conceptual artist as conformists. To support his claims he cites Stefan Morawski: "Contestation in this area was rather bleak. It was an odd rebellion, since studies of cybernetics and Wittgenstein were recommended in its name, and semiotics was seen as a salvational solution." (31) Another problem was that Polish conceptualists did not reject the modernist notion of the autonomy of the work of art. This belief created a safe haven for the Communist government from the critical, politically engaged art. Hence, Piotrowski would not even qualify this breed of conceptualists as post-modern or neo-avant-garde. (32) On the similar grounds, Piotrowski also writes off a performance artist and theorist, Jan ?widzi?ski and his *Contextual Art*, a semiotic critique of hermetism and social isolation of pure conceptual art. Since ?widzi?ski formulated his ideas as a theory, Piotrowski sees his work as merely pseudo-critical. However, I suspect that ?widzi?ski's theory might simply threaten Piotrowski's beliefs by dislodging the locus of truth and placing it in a shifting, relativist semantic landscape.

In his analysis of Hungarian pop-art Piotrowski observes that local art historians wanted to inscribe this new type of figuration into their own tradition, particularly as the outcome of the tendency they called *ournaturalism*. (33) This is one of the rare instances in the book in which Piotrowski refers to a non-Western concept that was coined as a local response to complex influxes of foreign influences onto a local artistic practice. Yet, he dismisses this Hungarian attempt at the creation of the indigenous terminology. He rejects *ournaturalism* as a "weak, imprecisely developed term." (34) As he then follows Laszlo Beke's analysis of S?ndor Altorjai's painting *Let Me Fall Upwards*, he skims over the interesting issue of the disruption of the Eastern European taboo of a "poor Jew" (35) and sees the painting chiefly as an appropriation of style of Robert Rauschenberg, "the classic of American pop-art," (36) primarily because of Altorjai's use of magazine reproductions. Similarly, in the work *Study of Rembrandt* by L?szl? Lakner he sees exclusively elements "typical of Rauschenberg": "repetition of Rembrandt's images, fragments of words, which co-exist with smears and drips of paint." (37) This

quick glance at some examples of what Piotrowski sees as Hungarian pop reveals continuously questionable position of these works. Rauschenberg is called a classic, while indirectly the Hungarian artists are presented as derivative followers of the Western master's style.

However, even if East Central European art was indeed stylistically imitative, perhaps visual motifs used by the artist could reveal something specific of the region. Here, a methodological interest in iconology and iconography could have been helpful. Moreover, Piotrowski is often reluctant to account for artists' specific intentions in the cases he describes. To some extent, he remains a believer in the myth of "the originality of the avant-garde." Because he sees the work as a linear, progressive historical narrative, he cannot engage with what Arthur Danto called the work's "own terms, its meaning, its references."⁽³⁸⁾ While I am not advocating ahistoricism, I would prefer it if Piotrowski were to acknowledge that works of art can be many things: "mimetic or metaphorical, formalist or moralist"⁽³⁹⁾ and that the hope for the peripheries lays exactly in treating their works on their own rather than "Western" terms.⁽⁴⁰⁾ By skimming over micro-narratives, Piotrowski gives the peripheries no chance for asserting their specificity.

In the course of his analysis of Hungarian work Piotrowski points to the abundance of the motifs from popular and consumer culture in the work of other Hungarian pop artists. In a brief summary he states that "original" Anglo-Saxon pop-art was "a commentary on consumer culture; analysis, sometimes critical or ironic commentary, but never a contestation of the spectacle society"⁽⁴¹⁾. In this case the question is what to do about the reception of such a movement in a society that had no consumer culture of its own.⁽⁴²⁾ To Piotrowski Hungarian pop-art was, on one hand, an attempt to participate in the "universal" Western culture, but on the other, was a symptom of "nostalgia for a consumer society."⁽⁴³⁾ This turned out to be the failure of Hungarian artists as through their desires for material goods they became co-opted by the system, which was soon to promote "goulash socialism" ? the version of the system in which potential opposition is shut up by the abundance of imported goods and a relative material comfort.

It is in the following summary of Hungarian "pop-art" where the essay becomes really interesting and starts openly touching on the issues of reception, canon and geographical and cultural hierarchy. Piotrowski begins with an assessment by Atilla Hor?ny and Katalin Tim?r. As the issue at play lies at the core of Piotrowski's larger project, I'll use an extended quotation:

The authors [Hor?ny and Tim?r] observe that similarities between Hungarian and American pop-art are restricted to their formal and technical similarities. They further conclude that the problems of subject and autonomy of the work, the positions that can be understood as a reaction against the tradition of socialist realism, distinguish the two from each other. What's more, the authors try to prove that the use of stylistic devices and concepts developed in the West to describe this work by Hungarian historiography can be seen as a kind of self-colonizing tool.⁽⁴⁴⁾

To Piotrowski, under the political circumstances artists openly and consciously subjected themselves to this kind of colonization. After all, it was far better to be colonized by the West than by the communist East. It also gave the artists an impression of being a part of the Western culture. In an ironic aside Piotrowski also observes that the use of "post-modern, primarily American critical thought"⁽⁴⁵⁾ in Hor?ny and Tim?r's analysis can also be perceived as an intellectual self-colonizing tool and express the critics' desire for participation in the international intellectual discourse. However, Piotrowski also wants to be a player on the global scale and in the introductory chapter of his book he openly praises Bryson's "context" and Culler's "frame" as primary tools of art historical research. He does not address the question of what actually constitutes "self-colonization". If art history is to be global, then surely there have to be common methodologies shared between different localities.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Is Bryson's method the only one? At the same time it seems that in order to do justice to particular artistic forms, certain local concepts must also be developed. Piotrowski himself avoids fleshing out any particular, specific terms. In effect he does not construct a theoretical proposition of methodological approaches for writing a revisionist art history, which would both permit to participate in the global discourse and account for local particularities. Yet, it seems that with his intimate knowledge of art historical margins Piotrowski is excellently equipped to construct such a proposition.

It is unfortunate that the book has no place for such speculation. Having written off Hor?ny and Tim?r, Piotrowski moves on to Czechoslovakia. Here the greatest influences are the French critic Pierre Restany and his *nouveau r?alisme*. And while appearance of figuration within art is seen very much as a reaction to modernism (as in the American model), it also expresses a characteristic East

Central European nostalgia for a consumer society. Again, it is debatable to what extent this diagnosis is fair. While I suspect Piotrowski is right as far as the desire for what can be perceived as economic "normalcy" is concerned, the brief equation between American and East Central European reactions to modernism appears to be suspect. Here, we could once again refer to *Gorgona* and its existentialist doubt in art.

Yet, in Czechoslovakia the artistic formation, so formally similar to Hungarian, stems from a radically different political situation. Culture is "an engine and an avant-garde of *par excellence* political changes"(47) and is symptomatic of a political "thaw" sweeping through the country in the early 1960s. Czech and Slovak artists traveled to the West and were influenced not only by *nouveau réalisme*, but also pop-art and assemblage.(48)As a result, a wide array of artistic forms of expression flourished in the country.

One of them was the tendency loosely called "new figuration," which according to Piotrowski also developed in Poland and Yugoslavia. However, Piotrowski does not discuss Polish and Yugoslavian "new figuration" because to him they appear on the wrong side of political scale. As much as Hungarian or East German figurative tendencies represented "modernizing" currents in the arts and evolved in opposition to the official socialist realist art of those countries, in Poland and Yugoslavia they stood for the opposite. According to Piotrowski's assessment they were a pitiful "negation of modern culture". In Yugoslavia and Poland, most open of the East Central European countries, modernism took a strong hold both in forms of *informel* and neo-constructivism and to large extent became the mainstream fine-art culture. However, at some moment, perhaps associated with the rise of Nikita Khrushchev, official policy started to "ration" abstraction. As this brand of "new figuration" shared interests with the governmental ideology, Piotrowski chooses not to write about it. Piotr Kowalik observes(49) that by easily writing off this tendency, Piotrowski perhaps unconsciously confirms an already established local canon, which had always dismissed this art as "derivative and shallow". It is yet another dilemma for a historian: can the Western canon be revised without a simultaneous revision of the existing canons of individual East Central European countries? As Piotrowski's major sources are easily accessible books, articles and exhibition catalogues, there is a possibility that he does not take into account artistic enterprises that were too contested to make it into the mainstream publication circuit. Were that the case, the radicalism of Piotrowski's argument would substantially lose its power.(50) I will return to the issues of canon and exclusion in the summary of this essay.

Continuing his meditations on the resurgence of figurative tendencies in the region, Piotrowski undertakes a polemic with Benjamin Buchloh and his opinion that returns to figurative art are associated with the rise of authoritarian politics and the elimination of the critical function of art. Piotrowski questions Buchloh's assessment as inapplicable to situation of "new figuration" in East Germany or Hungary due to the completely different "artistic geography"(51) of the region, analysis of which resists interpretative tools developed in the West (i.e. by Buchloh himself, among others). This unexpected polemic with Buchloh supports Luiza Nader's claim that Piotrowski's book was indeed conceived as a polemic aimed at the perspective and the authors of *Art since 1900*. However, it is surprising that historian as dedicated to the concept of *framing* as Piotrowski does not seem to pay attention to the particular circumstances that spurred Buchloh's essay. Piotrowski's footnote refers the reader to Buchloh's "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting."(52) If Piotrowski were to be fair and to use his frame consistently he could have seen this essay not only through the prism of the rise of German *Neue Wilde* or Italian *transavanguardia*, but also through the looming influx of conservatism in the Reagan era. At the same time, Piotrowski has more in common with Buchloh than he would like to admit. He also suggests that the only art that is really worth talking about is the art that is explicitly oppositional and critical.

Diagnosis: Methodology in Revisionist Art History

finally they

the authors of canvases divided into the right side and the left side

who know only two colors

color yes and color no

the inventors of simple symbols

open palms and clenched fists

Zbigniew Herbert, *Three Studies on the Subject of Realism* (1957)

In my opinion it is important to evaluate Piotrowski's methodologies in the light of his revisionist

enterprise. By measuring Piotrowski's achievement against his assumed mission, we will be able to see his accomplishments and shortfalls. In the process, we will also see that the revision is an unfinished business and that Piotrowski lays the groundwork for a possibly never ending project.

Without a doubt, Piotrowski's ambition is grand. He does not simply want to create his own canon (which he does nonetheless by highly selectively writing about avant-garde art). His rhetoric is aimed at the "center", so that it revises the canon it writes. Without a doubt, his ambition stems from a dramatic shift that has taken place in Europe. As the geography of East Central Europe has and still is changing dramatically, the question of the position of the new EU members ? formerly obscured by the shadow of Yalta ? is of utmost importance. At the moment the new member countries have a lot at stake. It remains to be seen whether they are going to become equal partners in the complicated socio-political European alliance or whether they will remain the periphery of the Western center. Artistic exchange will most likely play a role in this equation, so in a sense Piotrowski's enterprise can be seen as an attempt to guarantee East Central European countries a partner position within the EU, in an often uncomfortable marriage.(53) This is probably why the book was received so enthusiastically by the popular media.(54) At the first glance, it might seem that since the issue of center / periphery relationship is in essence political, writing art history as a history of ideological struggle goes with it hand in hand. It is interesting in this regard that Piotrowski, as "geographer-revisionist," does not account for countries which did not simply exist under the shadow of Yalta, but were literally annihilated by the Soviet world order. Despite of the fact that Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Slovenia(55) have emerged as independent states after the fall of the Berlin Wall and are now part of united Europe, Piotrowski does not include them in his analysis. As I already mentioned he never explains why he made this decision. Is it because they were a part of Soviet Union? Is it perhaps because there was no avant-garde there? This is another case in which leaves an important question unanswered and as a result, his attempt of creating relationships that he himself calls horizontal, falls short. He does not acknowledge that he too builds a kind of hierarchy, because Poland was a privileged area within communist bloc. As Adam Mazur mentions, Warsaw's Gallery Foksal was proposed as an example for all institutions in the region.(56)

Piotrowski also fails the margins because of his unwavering commitment to modernity. Iza Kowalczyk claims that despite of his revisionist claims, Piotrowski nonetheless adheres to the established modern canon, and the path that he follows is not altered despite the political obstacles he encounters *en route*. The neat, linear organization of the book substantiates Kowalczyk's claim. For example, Piotrowski cannot include in his analysis the art of such countries as Bulgaria or Albania. Moreover, his exclusive interest in the work that is explicitly politically and ideologically critical (according to the Western criteria of what "critical" is), makes him lose sight of East Central European phenomena that do not fulfill this requirement.

This is apparent when he deals with the Polish *informel*. Piotrowski points to painters Jerzy Nowosielski, Maria Jarema and Jadwiga Maziarska, as the most original artists of their time, whose work expanded significantly upon the Western models of abstraction. He also suggests that due to these local particularities, Nowosielski never achieved the level of international recognition of Tadeusz Kantor. As a matter of fact, Nowosielski, an Eastern Orthodox, had always been fascinated with traditional icons, which resulted in the characteristic, somewhat hieratic look of his works fusing modernist formalism with high stylization and transcendental mysticism. Characteristically, these works aimed to transform the mundane into the divine and were a result of personal spiritual belief system. They also provide an interesting case for phenomenological investigation of what an image is, bringing in an iconic presence into the modernist realm. Nowosielski is very well known in Poland, but in Piotrowski's book he is still second to Kantor and mentioned only in passing. Even though Piotrowski acknowledges that Kantor ? the painter was simply imitating Western models, he still chooses to reinforce his place in the canon rather than to replace him with an artist who worked out a more unique, more region-specific formula for their work.

There are other examples of this kind of dismissals and omissions in the book. Luiza Nader complains that Polish conceptual art is overly-simply summarized as insufficiently critical and politically suspect. In fact, statements like: "Freedom of art was seen here in its autonomy, not in its engagement. Without a doubt, such an artistic attitude, that is the political indifference of conceptual art, was very convenient for the communist government"(57) recur throughout the chapter. In this discourse, autonomy and the self-referential nature of the work of art are also seen as inherently suspect modernist qualities allied with systems of power.

Personally I think that Piotrowski leaves most unanswered questions to people who actually share his

leftist position. Adam Mazur, writing in *Obieg*, notices that Piotrowski "avoids working through the trauma of communism". This is certainly the case in the *Avant-garde*, which barely touches on the 1980s and the early 1990s (they are only briefly summarized in the book's epilogue). Almost out of necessity, it is also true of *Meanings of Modernism*, which was published in 2001. Piotrowski to this day? in books and articles? is relentless in championing the art that is critical towards the ideological apparatus of the state; but he speaks relatively little about art that is critical of methods of capitalist production and of economic power. In *Meanings of Modernism* he mentions Zbigniew Libera as a rare example of the artist who takes on a critique of consumer culture. Perhaps this is because *liberal* and *conservative* have substantially different associations in Poland. The Polish left, while ideologically and socially very open and progressive, simultaneously champions neo-liberal capitalism, while the Polish right (nationalistic, fundamentalist and separatist) nonetheless supports wide economic controls and a system of social protection within the state. This is why I am eagerly awaiting Piotrowski's forthcoming book to be titled *Art after Politics*. Even though the volume is to be a collection of mainly previously published essays, it might shed some light on how Piotrowski would account for some highly ideologically ambiguous contemporary Polish artists. I am particularly curious about his assessment of a group of artists whose international critical and commercial success prompted Polish critics to coin for them a moniker *Young Polish Artists* (obviously as a Polish response to Young British Artists). Would Wilhelm Sasnal, whose formally sophisticated paintings are often a bitter critique of Polish Catholic-nationalist politicians, earn a place in his canon? How about Rafał Bujnowski, who successfully submitted a reproduction of his hyper-realistic self-portrait as his photograph for the US visa application and then traveled on this visa to the States? Would political commitment of these artists outweigh in Piotrowski's eyes, their engagement with traditional media, established art institutions and market-based circulation system?

Altogether Piotrowski's attempts to introduce different methodologies into Polish, or in general, East Central European art history are certainly ground breaking. Perhaps this is why the term "New Art History" is applied so eagerly to the description of his practice.⁽⁵⁸⁾ As a teacher, Piotrowski has contributed to the growth of some very radical thinkers, most notably the feminist historians and critics, Iza Kowalczyk and Agata Jakubowska, whose dissertations he cites in his book while discussing body art. In *Meanings of Modernism*, where he simply has more physical space to develop personal interpretations of art work, and not just account for their relationship to the political system, he effectively uses Lacanian analysis to look at such classics of Polish art history as Andrzej Wróblewski and Tadeusz Kantor.

However, in essence what Piotrowski succeeds in writing is a "traditional" or "old" art historical text, whose primary virtue does not lie in application of theories or cutting-edge interpretations of the work, but in diligent accumulation of facts. Of course, we may wonder with Adam Mazur what would happen if Piotrowski decided to incorporate not just written, but also oral history into his account. Nonetheless, it seems to me that by providing a wide overview of the East Central European Art, Piotrowski offers an excellent starting point for further research. In one sense he appears to be absolutely correct: through forty-four years of Communism, East Central European artists looked rather to the West than to each other for the sources of inspiration. Similarly, my art history classes in Poland looked to the West in order to establish the canon, with Polish art trailing at the end of the chapters. Piotrowski makes the room for the art that previously received no more than a casual mention. I expect that he will also try to ensure that contemporary East Central European art is written about as being in European Union, not under its shadow, but this? of course? is a whole new story.

(1) Justyna Kowalska, "Znaczenia awangardy" [Meanings of the Avant-garde] *Obieg* No. 2 (79), 2005.

(2) This essay also appeared as "Between Place and Time: A Critical Geography of 'New' Central Europe" in: *Time and Place: The Geohistory of Art*, Thomas DaKosta Kaufmann, Elizabeth Pilliod, eds., Ashgate Publishing: 2005.

(3) Piotr Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Ja?ty* [Avant-garde Under the Shadow of Yalta], Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 2005, p. 22. Quotations from the first chapter of Piotrowski's book are taken from the manuscript of the translation kindly made available to me by professor Anna Brzyski. All the other translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

(4) Piotr Piotrowski, *Artysta mi?dzy rewolucj? i reakcj?: studium z zakresu etycznej historii sztuki awangardy rosyjskiej*, [The Artist between Revolution and Reaction. Study on Russian Avant-garde and Politics], Pozna?: Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 1993, 171.

(5) The exceptions are Derrida and Foucault, but I suspect Piotrowski might have arrived at them through Anglo-American sources.

(6) Iza Kowalczyk specifically mentions travels to Rochester and seminars of Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey and Stephen Melville, which supposedly were responsible for Piotrowski's rare in Poland openness to dialogue. However, I wasn't able to find the record of these encounters in Piotrowski official biographic material. See: "Ja?ta i cie? awangardy. Dyskusja redakcyjna wok?? ksi??ki Piotra Piotrowskiego Awangarda w cieniu Ja?ty z udzia?em Bo?enny Stok?osy, Izy Kowalczyk, Luizy Nader, Grzegorza Borkowskiego i Adama Mazura" *Obieg* 08/25/2006. Also: Pawe? Leszkowicz "Jak PZPR ukrad? ide? sztuki nowoczesnej. O Znaczeniach modernizmu Piotra Piotrowskiego" *Magazyn sztuki*.

(7) See: Jonathan Harris, Review: "The Chic of the New" Reviewed Works: *The New Art History* by A. L. Rees; F. Borzello, *History of Art: A Students' Handbook* by Marcia Pointon, *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1987, Calvin Seerveld, Untitled review: *The New Art History* by A. L. Rees; F. Borzello, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 45, No. 3. (Spring, 1987), Henri Zerner, "The Crisis in the Discipline", *Art Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 4, (Winter, 1982).

(8) Piotrowski, *Avant-garde*, 30

(9) Piotrowski manifests his allegiance to Louis Althusser's terminology in the article "Zadania Louisa Althussera. O polityce autonomii i autonomii polityki w sztuce Europy Wschodniej." [Following Louis Althusser. About politics of the autonomy and autonomy of the politics in the Art of Eastern Europe], *artmix*, No. 13 (3), 12/23/2006. http://www.obieg.pl/artmix/artmix13_01.php

(10) This observation is made thanks to Anna Kryczka's essay.

(11) Of course, in the light of Peter Bürger's classic *Theory of the Avant-garde* this is a highly contentious division. I'll be addressing issues of Piotrowski's terminology later in the essay.

(12) In *Obieg* discussion panel Bożenna Stokosa aptly states: "his title avant-garde is modern art, modernism, neo-avant-garde, post-modernism and even post-neo-avant-garde".

(13) Piotrowski, *Avant-garde*, 111

(14) *Ibid*, 17

(15) Piotrowski, *Avant-garde*, 15

(16) "Ja?ta i cie? awangardy", *Obieg*, 08/25/2006

(17) In the book's index there are five references to Buchloh and four to Krauss, including extended three page passage. In comparison, Bryson's name appears in the text three times, W. J. T. Mitchell's twice, Donald Kuspit's twice, and Douglas Crimp's once.

While discussing the grid in the chapter on neo-constructivism, Piotrowski refers to Krauss's *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*. On p. 147 he states: "Rosalind Krauss uses examples from the Western art exclusively. It is unlikely that she has any knowledge of the art with is the subject of our analysis, maybe apart of the classics of constructivism, particularly the Russian ones. The Occidentalism of her viewpoint to large extent determines her opinions" ♦

(18) Piotrowski, *Avant-garde*, 34

(19) *Ibid*, 34

(20) Piotrowski *Avant-garde*, 154.

(21) Piotr Kowalik, "Sztuka w cieniu awangardy, awangarda w cieniu Ja?ty ? o nowej ksi??ce Piotra Piotrowskiego" [Art in the shadow of avant-garde, avant-garde in the shadow of art ? about Piotr Piotrowski's new book], *Sekcja*.

(22) Piotrowski *Avant-garde*,

(23) Ibid, 154

(24) Ibid, 163

(25) Ibid, 164

(26) In his analyses Piotrowski relies on the existing historical sources and local criticism reinforcing the already established East Central European canons.

(27) Piotrowski does not specify what exhibition it was. He repeats Hungarian art historian Katalin Kener?.

(28) Ibid, 172

(29) Ibid, 172

(30) It is interesting to note here that as opposed to his Western colleagues, Piotrowski's totaling force is the communist state, not capitalist market or society of spectacle.

(31) Stefan Morawski, "Neo czy pseudo? Czy mamy awangard?", *Sztuka*, No. 4 , 1981, cited in: Ibid, 361

(32) In this instance Piotrowski refers to Victor Burgin's *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*, London: MacMillan Education Ltd, 1986; in: ibid, 422

(33) Ibid, 167

(34) Ibid, 167

(35) Ibid, 166

(36) Ibid, 167

(37) Ibid, 168

(38) Arthur C. Danto *After the End of Art*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1997, 150.

(39) Ibid, 169

(40) I guess Piotrowski would ridicule his suggestion. He would reject Danto as much as he rejects Douglas Crimp and he would probably agree with Hal Foster that Danto's position is "not-so-benignly neo-liberal." (Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*, London, New York: Vertigo, 2002, 125.)

(41) Ibid, 173

(42) This is a frequent problem when Marxist analysis is used in case of an impoverished communist society.

(43) Ibid, 173

(44) Ibid, 173

(45) Ibid, 174

(46) See *Is Art History Global?*, James Elkins (ed.), New York, London: Routledge, 2007

(47) Ibid, 177

(48) Ibid, 177

(49) Piotr Kowalik, "Sztuka w cieniu awangardy, awangarda w cieniu" [Art in the shadow of avant-garde, avant-garde in the shadow of art ? about Piotr Piotrowski's new book], *Selekcja*

(50) As a matter of fact, in case of Poland the canon has been established since at least early 1980s. Piotrowski accepts it within the framework of his interest without questioning.

(51) Piotrowski, *Avant-garde*, 181

(52) The text originally appeared in *October* Vol. 16 (Spring, 1981). Piotrowski cites it from an anthology *Art After Modernism. Rethinking Representation* edited by Brian Wallis (1984).

(53) This phrase comes mostly from the political havoc previous Polish administration raised within the European structures, purposefully torpedoing many of the common cultural initiatives. It is that type of ideology (nationalistic, fundamentalist and separatist) that Piotrowski fights against within his popular writing. The issues of this struggle will be the topic of my presentation in class, so that I can compare Piotrowski ♦ art historian to Piotrowski ♦ social critic.

(54) For example: Dorota Jarecka, "Wyjście z cienia" [Emergence from the Shadow], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 05/03/2005. Jarecka claims:

Księżka Piotrowskiego jest przełomowa ♦ Sama wiadomość historii może być siłą. Jest niezrozumiała, że region o takiej potencji artystycznej i tak ciekawej tradycji ciągle sam siebie postrzega jako stojący na niższym szczeblu rozwoju. Choć to się ostatnio zmienia. Za kilka tygodni otworzy się (♦) Biennale Sztuki w Pradze. Tak jak ta księżka posłuży do przezwyciężenia mentalnego bezwładu.

[Piotrowski's book is groundbreaking ♦ Historical awareness itself can be power. It is incomprehensible that a region [East Central Europe] of such artistic potency and interesting tradition still perceives itself as being at a lower stage of development. However, this has been changing recently. In a few weeks the second Prague Biennial will open. Just like Piotrowski's book, it will be fighting against mental impotence.]

(55) Iza Kowalczyk makes the same point.

(56) "Ja?ta i cie? awangardy", *Obieg*, 08/25/2006

(57) Piotrowski, *Avant-garde*, 349

(58) As a class discussion with James Elkins at the Art Institute of Chicago on Nov. 29th showed, the term "New Art History" does not seem so new any more here. Perhaps due to its generality and vagueness it does not appear too often in current discourse in the "West". However, as the previously mentioned *Obieg* articles indicate, Piotrowski's methods bring a breath of very fresh air to the Polish art historical discourse.