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Editorial:
Narratives and Interpretations

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Editorial: Narratives and Interpretations

Matthew Rampley

The common thread tying together the articles in this issue of the journal is the question of narrative and interpretation. Each of them deals with a different topic, from folk art to performance art in the 1970s, but they all deal with questions about the kinds of narratives and interpretations that have been deployed by art historians in relation to their respective topics.

The journal opens with Katalin Cseh-Varga and Kornélia Deres's discussion of performance art in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and, in particular, the various ways in which its history has been narrated. When, after 1989, the art of East Central Europe became much more accessible to international scholars, performance art was a focus of particular interest. Narratives of art under socialist rule homed in on the artist's body as a site of resistance to conditions of political repression. However, this account, which was bound up with a heroization of the male artist, offered a partial interpretation of its subject. For, as Cseh-Varga and Deres argue, the work of performance artists – they take as case studies the Hungarian Tibor Hajas and Karel Miler from Czechoslovakia – had a much wider and richer range of interests. The explanation for this, they contend, is the rule of 'guardians' and 'gatekeepers,' theorists who worked with the artists in question and who played a disproportionate role in shaping the meaning of their work in the art historical memory. Petr Rezek, for example, a philosopher who had a particular concern with phenomenology, enjoyed close relations with Miler and other performance artists, and played an important part in ensuring that a phenomenological lens was prominent in the reception of their work.

Cseh-Varga and Deres's article highlights the deep ties and interconnections between theoretical work and art-making in Hungarian and Czechoslovak art in the 1970s and 1980s, and their emphasis on 'gatekeepers' can be seen as part of a wider study of the infrastructure of art, the network of 'actors, philosophies, media, and spaces' which, they contend, are only now beginning to be investigated in depth. In one sense, the phenomenon of the 'gatekeeper' is a familiar figure in art history. The image of many artists is often heavily shaped by one or two scholars, who often enjoyed a personal acquaintance with them, who act as figures of authority and even, in extreme cases, exert a kind of monopolistic proprietorial control over the legacy of the artist in question. Cseh-Varga and Deres point to the distortions that can arise out of such a phenomenon, but one could take their analysis still further, for the guardian role assumed by some commentators can inhibit critical judgement. The guardian ends up being an advocate for the artist, defending their reputation from any adverse view.

In the case of the art of East Central Europe, such gatekeeping arguably plays a deeper role than elsewhere. Not only is the interpretation of individual artists subject to the 'guardianship' of certain scholars, in addition, communities of scholars can adopt a protective stance towards 'outsiders,' art historians from western Europe and North America, who offer their own interpretations of artistic practices of the region. The discourse of post-colonial and

decolonial criticism is then mobilised to rebut accounts of the art of East Central Europe originating from outside the region, viewing them as imposing an epistemic regime that forces Hungarian, Polish, Czech or Ukrianian art, for example, into alien interpretative frameworks. Cseh-Varga and Deres do not address this phenomenon, for this lies outside the scope of their study, but their article, in addition to offering an alternative way of approaching performance art, opens up 'guardians' and 'gatekeepers' as the potential subject of a more wide-ranging historiographic study.

The second volume of the journal included a number of translated texts as part of a goal to introduce primary writings to broader audiences. This volume continues this practice, starting with the translation of 'The Concept of the Avant-Garde,' taken from the book *Reality and the Poetic* by the Czech theorist Vratislav Effenberger. It is commonly assumed that discussions of modernism and the avant-garde in socialist states consisted merely of the rehearsal of the nostrums of socialist realism. Until the early 1950s this was undoubtedly the case, but after 1956 and Nikita Krushchev's famous speech denouncing Stalin and Stalinism, the cultural and artistic environment slowly changed. Theoretical reflection was still heavily inflected by Marxism, yet the intellectual environment was considerably more diverse than traditional images have acknowledge. In Czechoslovakia, the 1960s saw a gradual loosening of censorship controls, culminating in the so-called Prague Spring of 1968. Effenberger's text was a product of that changing situation, and, with its references to contemporary American art as well as art criticism and modernist art practice in France, it illustrates the extent to which writers in Czechoslovakia were engaged with wider international currents. His book was published at the same time that the fate and the meaning of the avant-garde was being debated elsewhere. Yet where many authors, such as Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger, were fast concluding that the avant-garde had reached its demise in a capitalist society that had reduced it an aesthetic commodity, Effenberger held out the hope that an avant-garde impulse was still relevant and viable. He was sensitive to the dangers of 'avant-gardism,' by which he meant the circulation of stylised avant-garde practices stripped of any critical content. Yet he held to the idea that an avant-garde was still viable, provided it was embedded in an ideological programme.

In 'Shifting Paths in the Study of Art in Ukraine,' Dariia Demchenko outlines some of the debates that have been taking place in Ukraine over the nature of art history as a field. The ostensible prompt for her discussion is a conference that was held early this year commemorating Hryhorii Pavlutsky, who played a central part in the establishment of art history in Kyiv in the 1880s. Demchenko indicates convincingly that he saw himself as Ukrainian, for he was a member of the Nestor the Chronicler Historical Society, a Ukrainian-language scholarly association founded in 1873 named after an eleventh-century monk from Kyiv.[1] He also wrote extensively on topics in Ukrainian art and, as such, Pavlutsky can be seen as a formative figure in the creation of a specifically Ukrainian art historical voice. Yet consideration of Pavlutsky raises other questions which, as Demchenko shows, bring to the fore the degree to which he become a totemic figure, a prism through which wider questions of Ukrainian identity are debated. This is evident from the fact that the collective memory of Pavlutsky emphasises his interest in art historical scholarship in France and Germany.

1) Oleksii Tolochko, 'On "Nestor the Chronicler",' *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 29: 1–4, 31–59.

His translation of works from French is undisputable evidence of his engagement with contemporaries in France, yet other connections are slightly more tentative. Participants at the conference suggested that Pavlutsky has absorbed some of the ideas of Alois Riegl and Aby Warburg. The idea of a connection to Warburg is speculative and the evidence is tenuous, as Demchenko herself recognises, but the idea of reference to Riegl is more convincing. He was widely read in the Russian Empire, and his analysis of ornament, starting with *Problems of Style* (1893), was authoritative and influential, and coincided with Pavlutsky's own work on ornament in Ukraine. The specifics of this issue are less important, however, than the symbolic importance attached to the very idea of French and German aesthetic and art historical ideas playing a role in the formation of Ukrainian discourses on art. For the possibility of this intertwining serves as a tool of Ukrainian self-definition and helped loosen the sense of a dependence on Russian culture and intellectual life.

As Demchenko shows, this concern over the presence of a distinctly Ukrainian discourse is most in evidence in the debate over the meaning of *mystetstvoznavstvo*. This term, based on the Ukrainian term for art, *mystetstvo,* (мистецтво), as opposed to the Russian *isskustvo* (искусство), was first coined in Tsarist Russia, and was a rendering of the German *Kunstwissenschaft*. The various connotations of the latter term, which included not merely empirical study of art but also aesthetic and methodological reflection, were lost in the 1930s, and *mystetstvoznavstvo* was subordinated to the demands of Marxist orthodoxy emanating from Moscow. Ukrainian art historians were provincialized; opportunities for international travel were severely limited and they were reduced to the status of local experts, subordinate to universities in Moscow and Leningrad. As such, Demchenko points out, many Ukrainian art historians are keenly aware of the fact that historical discourse functioned as one more instrument of Soviet colonial rule. Yet trying to 'decolonise' Ukrainian art history has its own share of problems. Trying to reclaim *mystetstvoznavstvo* from its colonial heritage has at times degenerated into sterile debates over the formulation of precise definitions, at the expense of more productive discussion of current and future thematic, methodological and theoretical possibilities. In many respects, Demchenko's article indicates, the centenary commemoration of Pavlutsky was more revealing about the present in Ukrainian scholarship than about the achievements of a scholar working at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

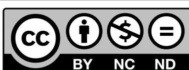
Pavlutsky's final major work, unfinished on his death in 1924, was on folk art and ornament, and it reminds us that while the heyday of the folk art revival in Central and Eastern Europe was in the beginning of the century, it remained a topic of concern after the First World War. This conclusion is underlined by the collection of texts on the same topic by authors in interwar Czechoslovakia. Although Czech social elites prided themselves as members of an advanced, modern, industrial society, folk and vernacular cultures were still considered important enough to warrant an extensive body of scholarly analysis. This was particularly the case after 1918, when Czechs found themselves in a new state that included extensive regions in Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia that were underpinned by a primarily agrarian economy. The inequalities of this arrangement, and high-handed Czech attitudes towards the 'less developed' Slovak and Ukrainian parts of Czechoslovakia, have

been extensively analysed.[2] Yet what is of more significance here is that folk art assumed a renewed significance, as part of the project of identifying a shared Czechoslovak cultural identity.

The authors chosen here convey a sense of the different lenses through which folk art was viewed in the 1920s. They range from romantic and enthusiastic promotion of the aesthetic qualities of folk art through to more sobre discussions of the social production of folk art (including the role of gender divisions) and of the genealogy of folk-art forms. The authors selected also include Karel Teige, more usually associated with theories of modernist architecture and, subsequently, Surrealism. Teige was not, in fact, commenting on folk art itself, but rather with its absorption in bourgeois society and the reasons for its popularity. Advocates of the folk-art revival may have thought they were articulating the basis for a new national culture but ultimately, Teige argues, they were looking in the wrong place if they wished to find the folk art of the present and the future. For rather than searching in the countryside and its village and hamlets, they should be turning their gaze to the city, where the popular, vernacular, art of present was to be seen. Teige mentioned Josef Čapek's book *The Humblest Art*, which had been a serious attempt to plot the continuities and transitions from rural to urban vernacular.[3] Yet with one or two exceptions, this project did not ever develop any further. Analysis of urban popular culture became channelled into the discussion of kitsch, even under state socialism, while rural folk art became a subject for ethnographers. The essays collected here are thus monuments of a brief moment when folk art, its meanings and origins, could be of equal interest to modernist art critics, ethnographers and art historians.

2) See, for example, Mary Heiman, *Czechoslovakia: the State that Failed*, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

3) Josef Čapek, *Nejskromnější umění*, Prague: Štorch-Marien, 1920.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