



Julia Secklehner, Research Fellow at the Department of Art History, Masaryk University, Brno. Her current research focuses on modernism beyond the metropolis and is part of the collaborative project *Continuity/Rupture: Art and Architecture in Central Europe, 1918-1939* (CRAACE), funded by the European Research Council. She also leads the online project *Creativity from Vienna to the World: Transatlantic Exchanges in Pedagogy and Design*, sponsored by the Botstiber Foundation, and is a co-convenor of *The Lausanne Project*.

SOCIAL REALISMS, NEW AESTHETICS: ENGAGED WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS IN INTERWAR CENTRAL EUROPE

A year after the original presentation of the German Werkbund's exhibition *Film und Foto* (FiFo) in Stuttgart in 1929, it was shown in Vienna at the Museum of Art and Industry. Similar in form to the original, the Vienna exhibition traced the genealogy of photography while aiming to introduce the medium's latest developments to a local audience. In a detailed review in the *Allgemeine Photographische Zeitung*, one statement from the exhibition received particular attention:

The value of photography cannot lie with a photographic aesthetic, but with the human, social intensity of what has been captured, the single criterium of everything produced: what matters is not to make photography into an art form again, but to emphasize the deep social responsibility of the photographer, who does work with his given instruments that could

not be achieved otherwise: this work must be an undistorted document of contemporary reality.¹

What form such photographs should take, however, remains unclear to the reviewer, a commercial photographer going by his initials, S. F. He has little enthusiasm for most of the exhibited works, concluding that: “The professional photographer will note with astonishment what can be exhibited under the auspices of being ‘modern’ and ‘avant-garde.’”² While agreeing in principle with the photographer’s responsibility to engage with the contemporary world, he finds John Heartfield’s anti-fascist photomontages “unpleasant,” wonders about experimental portraits that “can hardly lay claim to this name,” and notes the absence of landscape photography as a genre altogether.³ The review, though perhaps an extreme example given the conservative views of S. F., does emphasize the integral role of social engagement then being ascribed to modern photography in Central Europe.

As another example, for their *International Photography Exhibition (Mezinárodní výstava fotografie)* in Prague in 1936, “the Czech variation on FiFo,” the organizers emphasized photography’s social function to an even greater extent, seeking to reconcile activist practice and modernist experimentation.⁴ Lubomír Linhart, one of the organizers, was a central Czech figure in theoretical debates about the functions of photography, and had organized successful social-photography exhibitions in Prague and in Brno in 1933 and 1934 as head of the film and photography section of the intellectual organization Left Front (Levá fronta).⁵ In the 1936 exhibition, photo reportages were shown alongside experimental works by artists including Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, and John Heartfield. As Lin-

1 S. F., “Ausstellung Film und Foto,” *Allgemeine Photographische Zeitung*, no. 3 (1930): 5.

2 *Ibid.*, 6.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Fedora Parkmann, “A Czechoslovak Variation on FiFo,” *Études photographiques* 29 (2012): 43–81; Matthew S. Witkovsky, *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 157.

5 Simona Berešová, “Sociálna fotografia v dialógu Františka Kalivodu a Lubomíra Linharta,” *Bulletin Moravská Galerie* 80 (2019): 76–89.

hart explained, “one must reject bourgeois [artistic] photography but not outright, rather in a critical, dialectical manner.”⁶

The result of this positioning was, in the photography historian Fedora Parkmann’s words, a nod to both avant-garde aesthetics and social engagement: “By presenting an additive and non-hierarchical collection of utilitarian or activist practices and experimental images, the organizers sought to offer a toolkit with everything necessary for developing a photography of tomorrow combining social utility and modern style.”⁷ While these concerns were particularly visible in the organization of the Prague exhibition—held at a time, with the rising threat of National Socialism, when the demand for clear political statements grew ever more urgent—the core concern of Linhart and his colleagues resonated in Central European photography on a much broader scale: how could photography be modern while revealing the most pressing hardships of its day?

Art and politics as a way of life

In line with this book’s focus on global practices of realism, socialist realism, and soc-modernism, this article addresses socially engaged figuration in Central European modernist photography from the mid- and late 1920s on. The essay draws attention to a group of photographers who, though only loosely connected, formulated a modern photography that negotiated between avant-garde photographic practices and social photography’s demands to construct realistic depictions of life. By exploring aspects of social-documentary photography and photomontage, it argues that leftist photographers developed a form of engaged figuration that transformed creative experimentation into social statements.

While some of these photographers have drawn increasing attention in recent years, few have been studied in detail. This group of politically engaged artists and photojournalists were *Bauhäuslerinnen* (Bauhaus women students) and of Jewish origin, and

6 Lubomír Linhart, *Sociální fotografie* (Prague: Knihovna Levé Fronty, 1934), 67. English translation in Parkmann, “A Czechoslovak Variation on Fifo,” 3.
7 Parkmann, “A Czechoslovak Variation on Fifo,” 10.

included Irena Blühová (1904–1991) and Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (1889–1944), best known as an interior designer and children’s art teacher, as well as Edith Tudor-Hart (1908–1973) and Judit Kárász (1912–1977).⁸ While few regularly featured in large-scale exhibitions such as *FiFo* and its Prague counterpart, these women made significant contributions to the development of engaged photography in Central Europe. Blending modernist techniques with documentary images for activist purposes, they developed a visual vocabulary for socially engaged art that was universal in its claims for social justice while remaining deeply rooted in local cultural and social conditions.

Photography represented an integral part of their life-long leftist political commitments, and their camerawork can hardly be separated from their activist work. In this sense, a conscious interplay between art and politics is at the core of their images, which range from documentary work to photomontage. Human life and suffering are crucial aspects in their photos, forging a social realism in which figuration remains a significant element.

In Irena Blühová’s *Cleaning Lady at the Bauhaus (Uklízečka v Bauhausu)* [Fig. 1], shot slightly from below and looking upwards, the woman stares into the distance, ignoring the viewer’s gaze. Her

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Increased attention is being paid to Dicker-Brandeis in Austria: Hemma Schmutz and Brigitte Reutner-Donous, eds., *Friedl Dicker-Brandeis* (Munich: Hirmer, 2021); Stefanie Kitzberger, Cosima Rainer, and Linda Schädler, eds., *Friedl Dicker-Brandeis. Works from the Collection of the University of Applied Arts Vienna* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter – Edition Angewandte, 2023).

Another publication is forthcoming about the exhibition *Studio Bauhaus, Vienna: Friedl Dicker and Franz Singer*, Wien Museum, Vienna, November 24, 2022–March 26, 2023. See also Elena Makarova, *Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, Vienna 1898–Auschwitz 1944* (Los Angeles: Every Picture Press, 2001); Duncan Forbes, ed., *Edith Tudor-Hart: In the Shadow of Tyranny* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013); Éva Bájky, “Vom Bauhaus bis Soziophotographie: Judit Kárász – eine Fotografin aus Ungarn,” in *Judit Kárász: Fotografien von 1930 bis 1945* (Ronne: Bornholms Kunstmuseum and Randers Kunstmuseum, 1994), 8; Elizabeth Otto, “Friedl Dicker,” in Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler, *Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective* (London: Palazzo Publishing, 2019), 12–16; Elizabeth Otto, “Edith Tudor-Hart” in Otto and Rössler, *Bauhaus Women*, 130–33.

I have discussed some aspects relating to the work of Blühová and Judit Kárász in “A School for Becoming Human: The Socialist Humanism of Irena Blühová’s Bauhaus Photographs,” in *Bauhaus Bodies*, ed. Elizabeth Otto und Patrick Rössler (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 287–310, and in “Judit Kárász,” in *ibid.*, 178–79.



FIG. 1
IRENA BLŮHOVÁ, *CLEANING LADY AT THE BAUHAUS (UKLÍZEČKA V BAUHAUSU)*, 1932

face is covered in freckles, her dry lips are half-opened, and bushy eyebrows and dark shadows frame her deep-set eyes. Deep wrinkles on her young face lead up from the bridge of her nose across her forehead. Her hair is tied back to reveal her tanned, freckled neck down to just below her collarbone. The photo's grainy surface appears to reflect the woman's freckles across the image, enforcing a harsh, unforgiving light that matches her concerned facial expression. Yet the composition also monumentalizes and heroizes her. Her face appears worn, yet she carries the look of a thinker, someone to be taken seriously.

Blühová was a Slovak photographer and photojournalist who studied at the Dessau Bauhaus in 1931 and 1932.⁹ An activist for the Communist Party since her teenage years, by the mid-1920s Blühová had begun to use the camera to expose social realities in some of the poorest areas of Czechoslovakia. At the Bauhaus, her photographic practice became more experimental, yet never departed from her principle of using the medium as a political instrument. Blühová's *Cleaning Lady* shows a young face already marked by social hardship, representing an alternative vision to the modern young woman then gracing magazine covers and photo-spreads. Merging a working-class figure with a heroicizing image composition, the image recalls a new kind of portraiture that gained currency throughout the 1920s.¹⁰

For example, in Helmar Lerski's series *Everyday Heads* (*Köpfe des Alltags*, 1928–1931), the photographer and director recorded numerous similarly close-cropped portraits in which he challenged collective archetypes of proletarian figures, including service personnel, industrial laborers, and beggars.¹¹ As the photography historian Kathryn Alice Steinbock notes, in offering a close analysis of this transformation in *Everyday Heads*: “epic figures replace

9 Dušan Škvarna, Václav Macek, and Iva Mojžišová, eds. *Irena Blühová* (Martin: Vydavateľstvo Osveta, 1992).

10 Carolin Duttlinger, “Anleitung zur Kontemplation,” in *Porträtkulturen* (Leiden: Brill/Fink, 2019), 55–77.

11 Helmar Lerski, *Köpfe des Alltags: Unbekannte Menschen, Gesehen von Helmar Lerski*, ed. Curt Claser (Berlin: Hermann Rockendorf, 1931). See also Walter Moser, ed., *Faces: The Power of the Human Visage* (Munich: Hirmer, 2021).

familiar but anonymous social types which under normal circumstances, and normal diffuse lighting, would collectively be described and disparaged as the ‘masses’: in *Köpfe* we see cleaning ladies transformed into paradigmatic figures like the madonna.”¹² Yet though Lerski’s work was occasionally praised in leftist periodicals such as *Arbeiterfotograf* for this challenge to class stereotypes, he primarily focused on the transformative powers of different angles and lighting, through which the human face could be remodeled in ever-changing ways: for him, the medium’s possibilities stood in focus.¹³

In Blühová’s *Cleaning Lady*, by contrast, it is the portrait’s social aspect that stands in focus. The aesthetics of modernist photography—close cropping, oblique angles, harsh lighting—expose the individual’s fate as a proletarian laborer. Shot at the Bauhaus, where photo experiments were practiced enthusiastically in the curriculum and outside of it, *Cleaning Lady* is an example of student work—in this case, taken outside classes Blühová attended with Walter Peterhans—yet is revelatory of the photographer’s uncompromising social commitments. The portrait shows a new side of the legendary modernist art school: Blühová’s images included those working at the school as laborers, rather than solely picturing students or teachers, making them visible among the Bauhaus men and women who shaped the school. At this intersection, a broader pattern of socially engaged photography emerges, linked to the Bauhaus due to many of its representatives studying there. The school’s role within the development of engaged photography thus correlates to a “springboard,” as the cultural historian Beáta Hock has identified the Bauhaus, based on global connections it facilitated.¹⁴ For Blühová and engaged photography, a significant contact in this regard was Judit Kárász.

12 Kathryn Alice Steinbock, “Crisis and Classification: Photographic Portrait Typologies in Early 20th-Century Germany” (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2011), 220–21.

13 Felix Keller, “Subversionen des Lichts,” in *Fotografie und Gesellschaft*, ed. Thomas S. Eberle (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 163–76 (168).

14 Beáta Hock, “Bauhaus – a Laboratory of Modernity and Springboard to the World,” in *Not Just Bauhaus: Networks of Modernity in Central Europe*, ed. Beate Störckuhl and Rafal Makala (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2020), 120–43.

Networks of socially engaged modernism

Kárász, having taken up photography in high school, attended the École de la Photographie in Paris for six months before moving to the Bauhaus for the autumn 1930 term.¹⁵ Upon her arrival, Kárász, like Blühová, joined the Communist Student Faction (Kostufra), operating at the time clandestinely in Dessau in collaboration with the local party (KPD). They became friends and were jointly involved in events organized by Kostufra, the KPD, and the International Workers' Aid (IAH), as documented in photos they took of each other.¹⁶ These joint activities show how art and politics were practiced symbiotically by activist students at the Bauhaus, forming a community in which artistic education merged with social commitment.

In the summer of 1932, Kárász was expelled from Saxony-Anhalt for her candidacy as a KPD representative in elections that year. She moved to Berlin to work as a laboratory technician for the Dephot press agency.¹⁷ At around the same time, she was involved in activist circles of her hometown, Szeged, and became a member of the local youth college.¹⁸ Kárász visited nearby villages as part of the Szeged Youth Art College to record everyday rural life, in a similar practice to Blühová's activities in Czechoslovakia. Her photos from the period merge modernist techniques of avant-garde photography with documentary aspects. **HARVESTERS (ARATÁS)**, P. 13 (1932–1933) shows rural laborers cutting hay by hand. Their faces are cropped by the steep angle at which the image was taken, with blurred scythes suggesting that this was a snapshot, recording a moment of action.

Images including *Harvesters* comprised Kárász's only solo exhibition during her lifetime, *15 km from the City to the Farmyards*

15 Bájkey, "Vom Bauhaus bis Soziophotographie," 8.

16 Irena Blühová, "Mein Weg zum Bauhaus," in *Wechselwirkungen: Ungarische Avantgarde in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Hubertus Cassner (Marburg: Jonas, 1986), 499.

17 Peter Nadas, *Kindred Spirits: Hungarian Photographers 1914–2003* (Berlin: Nicolai, 2005), 76.

18 Magdolna Szábo, "Kárász Judit," in *Bäck Manci - Kárász Judit - Liebmann Béla - Müller Milós: A szegedi zsidóság és a fotográfia*, ed. István Tóth (Szeged: Múzeumi Tudományért Alapítvány, 2014), 17.

(*Városból tanyára 15 Km*), held in 1933 at the Szeged Youth Art College. Like Blühová in Czechoslovakia, she was among the first social-photography activists in Hungary, using elements of avant-garde photography to record social realities in an attempt to merge art and activism. In the curator Magdolna Szábo's discussion of Kárász's work in Szeged, she has noted how critical the photographer was in making her exhibition selections to fulfill her standards, both documentary and aesthetic.¹⁹ Despite her work's strong documentary focus, its aesthetic framing remained of crucial importance to Kárász, revealing guiding principles from her training in Paris and Dessau.

The link between a modernist-art education and political activism was also acutely relevant in the work of Edith Tudor-Hart. Born Edith Suschitzky, she became a Viennese photographer and studied at the Bauhaus from 1928 to 1930. Like Blühová and Kárász, before coming to Dessau she was a member of the Communist Party and a photojournalist. At the Bauhaus, she too attended Peterhans' classes and was a Kostufra member, but then left in solidarity with Hannes Meyer, the school's director who was dismissed in mid-1930 for his leftist political views (before the arrivals of Blühová and Kárász).²⁰ Tudor-Hart returned to Vienna until her emigration to Britain in 1934. She taught at a Montessori kindergarten and published photos in leftist illustrated magazines including *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (AIZ) in Germany and its Austrian equivalent, *Der Kuckuck*.

Her photos from the early 1930s thus include numerous documentary images with a focus on poor and homeless women, children, and families, along with more experimental work. *Unemployed Family* (*Arbeitslose Familie*, 1930) [Fig. 2] was taken in a slum on Vienna's outskirts.²¹ The image shows a family of three, with father, mother, and a small child standing in front of a crumbling building, with dirty wood furniture standing in the yard. While the mother looks upon the scene from behind, as if guarding over the

19 Szábo, "Kárász Judit," 18; Judit Karasz, *Városból tanyára 15 Km* (Szeged: Szeged Youth Art Club, 1933).

20 See Forbes, *Edith Tudor-Hart: In the Shadow of Tyranny*.

21 See "Das Leben in Marienthal," *Der Kuckuck* 5, no. 27 (July 2, 1933): 14, 16.



FIG. 2
EDITH TUDOR HART, *UNEMPLOYED FAMILY (ARBEITSLLOSE FAMILIE)*, 1930

family, the father sits next to the child who plays in a wood crate instead of a cradle. The father's hands appear cramped up, perhaps with amputated fingers, indicating perilous working conditions among society's poorest members who, nonetheless, are hardly able to afford a living. Perhaps an accident implied by the father's emaciated, injured body was the reason he is unable to work? As in Blühová's *Cleaning Lady*, it is difficult to discern the subjects' ages: hardships seem to make them older. Tudor-Hart also employs a grainy surface and seemingly roughens the image, adjusting the photo's materiality to the family and the scene it depicts.

Modernist figuration's pinnacle: photomontage as artistic activism

By capturing a sense of movement and the roughness of living conditions they were depicting with seemingly spontaneous snapshots of the mundane, the photographs of Blühová, Kárász, and Tudor-Hart reveal the specific aesthetic that went hand-in-hand with social realism in the early 1930s. Juxtaposed with their experimental work, much more tightly composed and glossily developed photos such as *Cleaning Lady*, *Harvesters*, and *Unemployed Family* use this specific aesthetic to construct realistic scenes of hardship. In doing so, the works relate to a significant aspect of amateur photo practices of their time: the worker-photography movement.

Originally, the purpose of worker photography was to encourage ordinary laborers to take up the camera and create a realistic impression of the lives of the working class. This was reinforced through competitions and advice on camerawork, most famously in *AIZ* but also in *Der Kuckuck*.²² Yet worker photography was also popular among leftist photographers, with their work often filling magazines' pages: better equipped and trained to forge the "right" kind images in the service of leftist agitation, socially engaged artists including Kárász, Blühová, and Tudor-Hart devised a visual

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Rudolf Sturmberger, "AIZ and the German Worker Photographers," in *The Worker Photography Movement*, ed. Jorge Ribalta (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofía, 2011), 80–97; Josef Seiter, "Der Kuckuck: The Modern Picture Magazine of Red Vienna," in *ibid.*, 226–35.

language that set a pronouncedly realistic view by merging worker photography and techniques of modernist composition.

Yet as a form of modern social realism, their photographs were not only printed in leftist magazines such as *Der Kuckuck*, *DAV* in Czechoslovakia, and *AIZ*. They were also reused in what is arguably the most modernist form of engaged figuration: photomontage. Heartfield, for example, in his design of the dustjacket for *Brachland* (Fallow land) by the Slovak leftist writer Peter Jilemnický, employed documentary photos by Blühová that recorded the taxing lives people led in rural Czechoslovakia, which was also the focus of Jilemnický's writing.²³ The revelatory purpose of the montage of Blühová's images is further emphasized through the message control implemented by Heartfield's pioneering collage technique.

By the early 1920s, the German Communist Party was already debating the fallacies of documentary photos, particularly because they could easily be misinterpreted by less-educated readers and by political opponents.²⁴ Photomontage represented a remedy to this issue: combining images to offer entertainment along with strong political commentary on contemporary events, this became an ideal technique for the leftist populism of magazines including *AIZ*. While Heartfield remains most closely associated with the practice, not least for his dozens of covers for that widely circulated magazine, the Central European activist women photographers discussed above and others also took up photomontage in their practices.²⁵ A photomontage attributed to Blühová by the art historian Marketa Svobodová, for one example, is on the cover of *Ročenka slovenskej chudoby* (The yearbook of Slovak poverty, 1933), a constructivist design that echoes Soviet compositions from the 1920s.²⁶ The raised hand functions as a silent call for protest and as

23 Peter Jilemnický, *Brachland. Ein slowakischer Roman*, trans. Julius Mader (London: Malik, 1935).

24 Andrés Zervigón, "Persuading with the Unseen? *Die Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, Photography, and German Communism's Iconophobia," *Visual Resources* 26, no. 2 (2010): 147–64.

25 Sabine Kriebel, *Revolutionary Beauty: The Radical Photomontages of John Heartfield* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

26 Marketa Svobodová, *The Bauhaus and Czechoslovakia, 1919–1938* (Prague: Kant, 2017), 190.

a protective gesture for workers who seem to stand up to a chimney as the sign of capitalist industrialism. Blühová, having fractured that arm from a body, turns it into a universal symbol of protest. Rather than using a “straightforward” documentary image, she manipulates her visual language through photomontage. In the context of the economic crisis that was ongoing in Czechoslovakia, Blühová’s image highlights the collective, unemployed working body’s mistreatment, while using the gesturing hand as a call for action.

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis also created a range of anti-fascist photomontages in the early 1930s, at around the time Blühová began experimenting with collage techniques. She based the work on her training in the Bauhaus Typography and Advertising Workshop, and it included *This Is How It Looks Like, My Child (So sieht sie aus mein Kind, diese Welt, This World)* [Fig. 3]. Dicker-Brandeis was a Viennese artist and designer who studied at the Bauhaus in the early 1920s before maintaining successful studios in Berlin and Vienna, along with social projects including furniture-design workshops for unemployed youth.²⁷ Active in the Austrian Communist Party from 1931, Dicker-Brandeis emigrated to Czechoslovakia after the authoritarian regime of Engelbert Dollfuß took power. In 1942, she was deported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto, where she organized theater performances and art classes for children, trying to create some structure and comfort for the youngest inmates. She was murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau on October 9, 1944.

The photomontage *This Is How It Looks* was produced shortly before Dicker-Brandeis departed for Prague. Rather than showing one specific scene, it is arranged in a circular stream revolving around a baby. At the center, the screaming newborn floats in the void, ostensibly left alone in the turbulent surrounding world. To the baby’s left, we see fascism’s “public faces,” including Hitler, Vice-Chancellor Franz von Papen, and SA chief Ernst Röhm, and cheering crowds and rallies that emphasize society’s growing mili-

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See Sabine Plakolm-Försthuber, “Dicker (Dicker-Brandeis), Friedl (Friederice) (1898–1944), Designerin, Malerin und Kunstpädagogin,” *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon ab 1815*, ÖBL Online-Edition 7 (December 14, 2018); DOI:10.1553/0x003a25db.



FIG. 3
 FRIEDL DICKER-BRANDEIS, *THIS IS HOW IT LOOKS LIKE, MY CHILD, THIS WORLD*
 (SO SIEHT SIE AUS MEIN KIND, DIESE WELT), 1933

tarization.²⁸ Above left, a formation of warplanes suggests impending armed conflict, as well as the rapid mechanization of modern life, a connection also made by cars and motorcycles placed close-by. In space between the baby and the text, the viewer's attention is drawn to forms above a human crowd. These are *Meldungskarten* used to register the unemployed. The collage points towards the desperate situation of those left with no support with a simple newspaper headline that reads "Mass Death Verdicts." Diagonally above, dollar bills float among people sitting on the streets. To the right, the image traces poverty's downward spiral, including prostitution in the form of a barely dressed lady and suicide in the form of grave crosses, with desolate housing at the bottom.

Set to the right of the uniformed motorcyclists, Tudor-Hart's *Unemployed Family* draws a direct visual connection to Viennese social photography.²⁹ By embedding that scene into a broader context using montage techniques, Dicker-Brandeis' use of photos created as leftist propaganda draws a connection to interwar activist photography. Dicker-Brandeis would have encountered Heartfield's work at *FiFo's* Vienna edition in 1930, and her use of *AIZ* clippings in her own montages clearly indicates that he was a point of reference.³⁰ However, rather than directly drawing on his typical composition, which merged different elements to create a single scene with a tailored, satirical message, Dicker-Brandeis used photomontage cut to her own specifications. In this vein, *This Is How It Looks* is a much more difficult and serious image than those of Heartfield, focusing on a broader social and political analysis of actions and consequences.

The spiral of bitter poverty, fascism, and a predetermined division of "those born to shear and those born to be shorn," as the text in the image asserts, imply cause-and-effect relations of capitalism and fascism with symbolically charged images. Though

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See Angelika Romauch, "Friedl Dicker: Marxistische Fotomontagen 1932/33" (MA thesis, University of Vienna, 2003), 43; Julie M. Johnson, "The Other Legacy of Vienna 1900: The Ars Combinatoria of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis," *Austrian History Yearbook* 51 (2020): 243–68.

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Otto, "Friedl Dicker," 14.

30

Romauch, "Friedl Dicker," 10.

appearing chaotic at first sight, each image selected was charged with symbols—uniforms, warplanes, grave crosses—that help in laying out complex political and economic processes for a common audience, which is then underlined through leftist political framing in the image-text combination. In addition, with images that had already appeared in magazines that circulated by the thousands, many of the individual components of the montage included a degree of recognizability based on a political network linking artist, source materials, and viewers. Dicker-Brandeis' work from the early 1930s, in using works by like-minded artists to construct a clear message for a wide public, as did that of Blühová, positions activist photomontage as the latest step in engaged photo practice. And their images highlight that, beyond Heartfield's highly successful work in the genre, Central European photographers were adapting and tailoring his model to local circumstances as the political and economic situation deteriorated. In this light, their photomontages suggest that at this point social realism as activist documents needed to be enhanced by more extreme forms of image composition, with solutions still to be found in avant-gardist practice.

**Modernist photography, engaged figuration,
and avant-garde masculinity**

In work by Dicker-Brandeis, Blühová, Kárász, and Tudor-Hart, one encounters a social realism operating overall within the registers of modernist photography as much as in reference to practices that are documentary and sociological. How may we position their work as modernist artists within the genealogy of engaged figuration?

In a recent article, Jordan Troeller has examined the work of another photographer associated with the Bauhaus outside the Bauhaus context: Lucia Moholy.³¹ Focusing on Moholy's photographic work at the Schwarzerden feminist agricultural commune in Germany, Troeller argues for "the revalorization of a kind of feminized photographic labour that was systematically negated at the

Bauhaus, and, as such, as an oblique commentary on the gendered nature of avant-garde discourse in the 1920s.³² Partly, this relates to Moholy's contributions to Bauhaus photography being erased, her work being perceived only in a support function to that of her husband, László Moholy-Nagy, the Bauhaus master.³³ However, Troeller suggests that Moholy's longstanding exclusion from avant-garde narratives is also due to the very nature of her photographic work: intimate portraits and documentary images. Addressing "the false premise that there exist certain forms of visual representation that merely transcribe the world as it already is," Troeller positions Moholy's photos of the Schwarzerden commune as a modernist form of photography embracing realism and the medium's reproductive functions as a challenge to avant-garde claims of originality.³⁴

Though this article is concerned with a different kind of documentary practice, a similar argument could be made about the work of the photographers it has focused on. In line with Blühová's memory of the Bauhaus as a "school that created humans, for becoming human," their work built a strong sense of social engagement, in acting against the dehumanizing effects of fascism and capitalism they were combatting.³⁵ Artistic experimentation and "originality" were secondary to a practice in which the human stood at the center. In this sense, the photographs in question, strongly focused on social engagement, challenge the gendered principles of avant-garde experimentation, while aspiring to represent "good," modern photography. In light of these women's political work, a definition of this objective may be found in a 1929 text by Tina Modotti, the political activist and photographer:

Photography, precisely because it can only be produced in the present and because it is based on what exists objectively before the camera, takes its place as

- 32 Troeller, "Lucia Moholy's Idle Hands," 74.
 33 Robin Schuldenfrei, "Images in Exile: Lucia Moholy's Bauhaus Negatives and the Construction of the Bauhaus Legacy," *History of Photography* 37, no. 2 (2013): 182–203.
 34 Troeller, "Lucia Moholy's Idle Hands," 108.
 35 Irena Blühová, "Fragebogen einer ehemaligen Bauhaus-Schülerin," in *Das Bauhaus im Osten: Slowakische und Tschechische Avantgarde 192–1939*, ed. Susanne Anna (Stuttgart: Verlag Cerd Hatje, 1997): 188–97 (191).

the most satisfactory medium for registering objective life in all its aspects, and from this comes its documental value. If to this is added sensibility and understanding and, above all, a clear orientation as to the place it should have in the field of historical development, I believe that the result is something worthy of a place in social production, to which we should all contribute.³⁶

Following a visual language that set the human figure at its center in line with those specifications, Central Europe's activist women photographers created a body of work striving to value people both collectively and as individuals. They merged commitments to solidarity and to modernist artistic production, which included monumental worker photos, photo reports, and the most radical tool of photo-activism, photomontage. Making use of different opportunities open to them with the primary aim of giving voice to society's most disadvantaged, their work represents an international network of engaged photography, less for propagandistic and combatant aims than to emphasize a revelatory and empathetic worldview.

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ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

The discussion between conference participants was held online on

The transcript below has been edited for brevity and clarity.

PIOTR SŁODKOWSKI: Let me start with a general question that might help us frame our collective thinking about the complex relations between socially engaged or socialist art and the future of art history. Beyond doubt, the history of twentieth-century art is founded on two crucial terms: the avant-garde and modernism, which have framed our thinking about almost all artistic phenomena.

A lot of work was done in previous decades to rethink and decentralize these concepts. But what will change when we realize that socially engaged or socialist art, so-called socialist realism, was also a global phenomenon? How will it change the mainstream narrative of art?

PARTHA MITTER: I believe this has made us rethink the whole issue of Soviet or socialist and social realism against the perspective of the contemporary global canon of art, which I think we all agree is mod-

eled on Western discourse, centering on France, Germany, and Italy, later on Britain and America. This is what we call “center” as opposed to “periphery.” And how does this relate to global art now, and to the post-socialist period?

The first thing we need to think about is that our political background must be Cold War politics. And there you see [the critic Clement] Greenberg as one of its absolute archpriests. It was he who started this debate on socialist realism versus formalism, or communist countries versus the free world. To put it simply, according to Greenberg all academic art is kitsch because it panders to the masses, whereas abstract art—and in the 1950s and 1960s that of course referred to abstract expressionism and action painting—defends aesthetic standards and resists the dumbing down of the masses by consumerism.

Secondly, I want to go back to the original debate, as it were, in the late nineteenth century. Impressionism conquered visibility of the whole objective world. It seemed there was nothing more to explore in representational art. Cézanne was the first painter to challenge the reign of naturalism centering on directional lighting that began with Ciotto and was brought to its most advanced expression in the impressionists. The rejection of three-dimensional illusionism went on through to cubism and all the way to abstract art; it became the credo of the formalist avant-garde canon.

It was relevant to India as well, because India was affected by this as a colonized country, and colonial art maintained the contrast between figuration and abstraction. So basically we’re thinking about the naturalism of comprehensible representation—something that looks “real”—versus the Platonic ideal of reality, which lies beyond the perceptual world. So that was how the avant-garde attacked illusionism.

Greenberg came to it soon after with his abstract expressionism. But the whole idea was that Soviet art, Eastern European art, and socialist realism were all one, since they all showed workers engaged in various activities in a very naturalistic manner. However, as Nadia [Plungian] showed us, that wasn’t the case at all. There are many different visual languages in the Soviet-sphere art.

I like to think that the artists who are seen as socialist-realist painters were also often in fact social expressionists. I'm thinking of the earlier period and of Käthe Kollwitz—the wonderful Käthe Kollwitz. Was she a realist or was she an expressionist, indeed what was she?

Today, under the impact of non-Western modernisms, the categories are loosening up; we need to rethink them. Piotr Piotrowski talked about Europe's non-European other, the margins of Europe, including the Balkans, Eastern Europe, etc. He proposed to place all these local narratives on a horizontal level. But there's one simple point where I didn't quite agree with him. I felt that his aim was to include Eastern and Central European art within dominant Western modernism, within the canon. But doing that creates another set of restrictive categories. It doesn't solve the inherent problem of otherness and the hegemonic canon. So I would once again return to the idea that the problem lies in the nature of colonialism itself. Western hegemony created categories contrasting exclusion and inclusion with reference to the canon. What is correct? What is not correct? And this has to do with power and authority. Colonial powers not only exercised power and authority, but also managed visibility.

These issues are crucial and relate to another persistent question: derivativeness, slightly delayed development, differing time frames, slow growth. The great Mexican poet Octavio Paz said in connection with Mexico: "Modernism lies elsewhere." So I would say that the proper way of decentering would be to think of the Western discourse, the avant-garde discourse, as historically situated. And then to think about multiple local possibilities that illuminate the global process of modernity. Therefore, instead of a grand globalizing narrative, we need to think global modernism and contemporary art as a world phenomenon with multiple local components that both share certain general features and also differ in their specificities.

KATARZYNA MURAWSKA-MUTHESIUS: I always feel obliged to react when Piotr's rejection of postcolonial theory is mentioned. I also had quite a lot of problems with that. I thought that postcolonial theory was

actually applicable to Eastern Europe, and I have always used it while modifying it, of course.

Piotr kept saying that Eastern Europe was not the same other, it was a kind of next door other of the West. Colonial relations of power exist between the West and Eastern Europe and, of course, within Eastern Europe itself. But his reason for rejecting postcolonial theory and choosing critical-art geography was that this area has been marginalized both by “vertical” Western art history and by postcolonial theory. He also stressed that Eastern Europe still belonged to the European continent. There are artistic relationships between the East and the West, such as the existence of art schools, the fact that Eastern European artists were trained in so-called Western art centers, such as Vienna and Paris.

I know you will tell me, Partha, that artists from India, Africa, or South America were also trained in Paris, Vienna, and Berlin. But still there is a matter of geographic affinity, and he saw a very close affinity between Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Another thing about his rejection of postcolonial theory is that the majority of scholars—those gurus of postcolonial theory—operate within the realm of literature. You are the only one who operates within the realm of art. So, in a way, you are an exception.

PARTHA MITTER: I agree with you, we have to think in a more nuanced, more complex way. Of course postcolonialism has been very important, since it has changed a lot of our thinking, including critical reflection on modernity.

I'm thinking much more radically now about the whole modernism as a project. What has not been recognized? First of all, this modernism project was a corporate thing. Picasso never admitted his debt to African art. Great non-European figures like Wifredo Lam have not been given recognition by art historians. This is my great objection. So while I do admire Piotrowski's work, one of the things I feel we need to think about a little more is how we decenter, how we decolonize. These issues have become slogans—but how can we use them properly and critically?

SIMONE WILLE: I've been attending conferences in the past years where discourse amongst postcolonial scholars has taken place, where language has become repetitive. I think you would agree, Partha. I would like to return to socialist realism. I would find it problematic to draw a clean line between socialist realism and formalism. Shouldn't we perhaps be concerned with the social and the formal values of art and then look at how artists and art historians positioned themselves ideologically?

Let me give you an example of one of the artists I'm concerned with: Chittaprosad Bhattacharya,¹ a communist artist in Calcutta [now Kolkata] during the 1940s, who transferred to Bombay [now Mumbai] after the partition of India. He was not acknowledged by the art establishment in India until private galleries in the 1990s began to bring his body of work to public attention. With the global contemporary-art world developing an interest in modernist art from the Global South, his work was included in Documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017. In Germany, his works from the Bengal famine of 1943 and 1944 were displayed, framed by the curator Natasha Cinwala along currents of interrelated modernity.

Chittaprosad's artistic language was less socialist realist in the classical sense; he was an illustrator, a political commentator, he made puppets and he performed for the children of the poor neighborhood in which he lived in Bombay in the 1950s. He addressed social concerns in his works, but his aesthetics was perhaps closer to what Partha calls expressionist. Was he therefore a social expressionist?

While he struggled for recognition in India during his lifetime, he gained considerable exposure in Czechoslovakia as early as the 1950s. In Prague, there is a large collection of his works, which was acquired directly from the artist.

The attention and the promotion he received in Czechoslovakia had to do with his profile as a former communist artist, but

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Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1915–1978) was an Indian artist whose sketches, linocuts, and woodcuts sharply criticized feudal and colonial systems. He gained particular renown for his publication *Hungry Bengal*, which reported on the Bengal Famine in 1943, and was censored by the British authorities.

it also had to do with a general interest from one geographic periphery to another. In Czechoslovakia, Chittaprosad's work was discussed and valued for the artist's deep bond with the hopes and sufferings of the common people. Aesthetically, it attracted attention because of its folkloric and popular Indian orientation. An assessment or evaluation of the social in Chittaprosad's work must therefore take into account the various currents of postwar modernity, the different discursive frameworks, and evaluate the position that artist, curator, and critic took.

JULIA SECKLEHNER: Even in Central Europe, the role of social realism ought to be reassessed in consideration of peripheral geographies. This concerns the work of photographers such as Judit Kárász and Irena Blühová. When we speak about "center" and "periphery," I think we often miss out on center-periphery relations between urban and rural spaces and their hierarchy. It seems to me that it also creates a different kind of social realism and a different hierarchy of judging the value of artworks.

If something is created in the rural environment, which is often seen through the lens of urban imagination, it is automatically considered more derivative and therefore perhaps of lesser value. So maybe thinking in terms of urban and rural spaces offers a different or an additional perspective on "center" and "periphery." This also relates to our viewing practices, because photographers like Blühová often worked in series, whereas we often look at individual artworks, especially in modernist photography. If we look at an individual work by Kárász, for example, it may lose a lot of its significance. So the mode of seeing in multiples, in series, might help us decenter the single image and understand it differently.

As a final point, I would say that we can potentially rethink central institutions, such as the Bauhaus. Beáta Hock has recently described the Bauhaus as a springboard to the world. But I think that rather than seeing it as a place where people came to learn and meet and then went out into the world, with hindsight we can also just see it as a place that brought them to our attention. The

photographers I'm talking about had careers before and were successful before, whereas we became aware of them just because the Bauhaus gained renown.

So, instead of thinking of the centrality of the Bauhaus as a place where knowledge was produced and propagated, we can also think of it as something within the canon, as a place that draws our attention, which we need to examine more closely and then move outward from that.

AGATA PIETRASIK: I want to comment on the criteria of judging socialist realism, because I find it really interesting to observe what happens when we try to write about socialist-realist art. I can see from my own practice that we usually value more highly those practices that we situate on the edge of socialist realism. I think that in mainstream art history the idea of socialist realism is still very simplistic and dominated by the image of Joseph Stalin holding a child or flowers.

Such imagery is considered central to socialist realism, from the mainstream perspective. And what is usually researched and highlighted are things that occupy a somewhat marginal position. My question would be: are they really marginal and can we have, in fact, such a concrete definition of socialist realism?

At the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art there is an exhibition curated by Jérôme Bazin and Joanna Kordjak, which shows a lot of socialist-realist paintings.² Painting is something we struggle with the most because I think we simply lack a formal vocabulary to address this type of painting, this type of practice, since it's so different from abstraction, from modernism, and so on. But when

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Cold Revolution: Central and Eastern European Societies in Times of Socialist Realism, curated by Joanna Kordjak and Jérôme Bazin, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, May 27–October 10, 2021.

we look at the paintings on display at the Zachęta, I think most of them do not fit this straightforward idea of socialist realism, which boils it down to propaganda art.

A question for us to critically reflect on could be what definition of socialist realism we use while discussing artworks. And why, so many years after the end of the Cold War, it's still so infused with negativity that the only way to engage in the topic is to explore its margins. Those margins actually often appear quite central in studies on the artistic practices of that time.

PIOTR SŁODKOWSKI: I think it's a very important comment, since, of course, margins are very often extremely productive for artistic practice.

TATIANA FLORES: It's a question of the frames that we use, the restrictive categories, and how detrimental they are. I just want to mention that I began my academic career working on avant-garde art in Mexico, and of course in Mexico there's no way to get around figuration, as it marks the art of the twentieth century in such a definitive manner.

It's akin to an albatross or psychological burden, especially when you deal with contemporary post-1945 Latin American art, which embraces abstraction and creates the good/bad divide: good abstraction, good modernism, and bad, derivative figuration. Not only do I encounter these categories all the time, but I'm also returning to this research partly because of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Mexican muralism in 1921. So I started receiving invitations to publish and speak.

One of the things that strikes me about the discourse is that we still keep talking about the same thing. It's tremendously frustrating, of course. For instance, the question of "center" and "periphery." In my understanding, it carries a different kind of connotation. When you think about the colonization of the Americas, Latin America is not a geography, it's not a place on the map. It's an

imagined community of the Latin American elites who want to present themselves on an equal footing to the United States and the geopolitics of the Western hemisphere.

So members of the Latin American elite, like Octavio Paz and well-known Argentinians and Brazilians with a platform, often project frustration at not being in the center, not being recognized as members of the European diaspora, whom in many cases they actually are. That's why I would say the conversation about "center" and "periphery" should be reoriented to embrace Black and Indigenous populations of those territories as the real periphery. This would mark the center-periphery relation as part of the coloniality of knowledge.

A crucial framework for me is postcolonialism, but also the decolonial school. Walter Dignolo has made these points about Latin America, shedding light on the construct of Latin America. The issues that I've described are very much inspired by his research. Very interestingly, a lot of people who have worked with the avant-gardes in Latin America, scholars who have made crucial interventions, many of us have actually abandoned our research into modernism to look more closely at the contemporary period.

I think this is partly because the frameworks are so oppressive. However much you write and however hard you try to change the narrative, it is still there. So it's perhaps more liberating to think about the contemporary period in ways that are open, expansive, and different, offer new stories, than to go back and try to open the discourse, which doesn't want to change.

MACDALENA MOSKALEWICZ: That's very enlightening to hear about this situation in Latin America. I also find that there is a limit to this framework of "center" and "periphery" because both are completely impossible to pin down, porous, and fluid. And this framework is often constructed by people who somehow feel excluded from the center—at least that's surely the case with Eastern Europeans—who inadvertently reinforce this way of thinking by trying to tackle it.

That's why I've found it much more useful to think about the issue of colonialism not through the concept of center-periphery, in a geo-

graphical or geopolitical sense, but from a completely different angle, through the prism of chronology and periodization. As in the title of our conference: “What Are Our Genealogies?”

The way I understand it is that we are here today looking back at the genealogies of mid-century figuration because we’re looking for our ancestors, the predecessors of the socially engaged art of today. To turn this question about the genealogies around would be to ask about the modern-day legacies of socially engaged art of the 1930s and 1950s.

When I ask myself this question, I realize how much decolonial struggle was happening already in the 1950s. Granted, a lot of this was delivered through Stalinist propaganda. But think of events such as the Festival of Youth and Students in Warsaw in 1955, which was a meeting of people from developing countries or the so-called Third World, still largely a colonial world—most African countries were still colonial countries at that time. A lot of knowledge was produced in Poland and Eastern Europe back then for the anti-colonial struggle, but it’s been lost somewhere since. I feel that we lost this knowledge and these strategies with decommunization that happened after 1989.

Thinking about coloniality, I would like to ask: what are the decolonization possibilities for us today that can be traced directly to that moment? Let’s say, to the year 1950? It is a question about recuperating continuity both for intellectual history and for political activism.

However, to complicate things a little, we have to remember that communism itself was a modernist project. For example, Susan Buck-Morss thinks of modernism as something that started with Columbus and Europe’s military expansion into Latin America, North America, and elsewhere. And communism [in the twentieth century] is of course a direct extension of Russian imperialism in Central Asia. This may seem somewhat contradictory to what I just said about the anti-colonial positions existing under Soviet communism, and certainly complicates things, but we should embrace these contradictions: on the one hand, predecessors of and possibilities for decolonial struggle were present in Eastern

Europe already in the 1950s, partly through official state positions as communicated through propaganda, but on the other hand, communism was also part of militant colonial modernity.

MAGDA LIPSKA: *Discourse on Colonialism* by Aimé Césaire was translated into Polish as early as in 1952, and there were other translations published almost simultaneously with the books themselves, which now, as Magdalena was saying, fell completely into oblivion. So I do agree that there is a history of mutual connection between Eastern Europe and the Global South that needs to be rethought.

NADIA PLUNCIAN: The problem of socialist realism and realism itself in the twentieth century is one of the crucial problems for us, scholars from Russia. In Moscow, we have a group of independent researchers, Soviet art historians and curators, working for almost fifteen years now.

Our generation initially faced harsh censorship, probably due to the supremacy of two historical narratives, which are themselves modernist. The first of them is the late Soviet art theory, based on the idea that modernism is a Western phenomenon. It is very established in Russia today that modernism is Western and socialist realism is Soviet art in general. It's still difficult to situate socialist realism in the context of modernism as well. Even more difficult is to rethink Soviet art history in general as part of the international field of the twentieth century, which is a fundamental problem for us.

The second problem is relevant to the “center” and “periphery” debate, since the history of Soviet art is still described in Russia in center-periphery terms. This binary view, where art is described as a struggle between Soviet and anti-Soviet messages, is still very influential in the Russian academy, although it goes back both to Cold War narratives and to anti-modernist campaigns that took place in the USSR from the 1930s to 1960s.

For now, Russian museums and universities continue to broadcast the idea that Soviet art was rigidly divided into two parts, the mainstream socialist realism loyal to the Communist Party

and helping it build its own reality, and another part that includes many marginal, minor, and failed artistic movements. A special term exists for this kind of art: “quiet art” or “silent art,” used in late Soviet art history and still influencing major exhibitions.

In my opinion, this concept is very outdated, since the political labels do not allow us to see and understand the local specificity of the artistic processes of the century—for example, the general movement from non-objectivity to neoclassicism in the 1930s, the synthesis of arts, or the deconstruction of ceremonial academic painting. Unfortunately, in the post-Soviet years, we didn’t have general comparative exhibitions of figurative art, such as *Les Réalismes* at the Centre Pompidou,³ where people could find deep similarities between uncensored art groups in the USSR of the 1930s and 1940s and, for example, Italian metaphysics or French surrealists. We still need such bridges between various fields of art in the interwar and later decades. Not only to abandon the idea of the secondary nature of the artistic experiment and the significance of political propaganda, but also to understand that socialist realism formed part of a larger figurative-art movement in the modernist paradigm.

MIRELA TANTA: I agree it’s essential to look at realism. And I have in mind a not-well-known Romanian painter who painted a piece of meat. It was so realistic, almost hyperrealistic, your perfect roasted meat. That was in the 1980s during a major shortage of sugar, eggs, bread, etc. The painter faced censorship right away and was probably persecuted in other ways.

So how much realism is allowed in socialist realism? And how do you represent that?

Now that this era ended, there are many discourses. But they are all somewhat suspicious because they try to recover a sense of belonging, as Partha Mitter said of all our problems, to an interrupted tradition. This obviously resembles the postcolonial

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Les Réalismes: entre révolution et réaction, 1919–1939, curated by Gérard Régnier, Centre Pompidou, Paris, December 17, 1980–April 20, 1981.

view of the precolonial identity, a way of going back and searching for precolonial values that no longer exist. So, it doesn't work, the discourse is not necessarily that coherent.

There are young art historians who raise questions and call for examining this imposition. Weren't there artists who had already been working in the realist tradition when socialist realism was imposed, and what were they doing? Actually, they were thriving in the new atmosphere because that was exactly their direction. It's very important to think about why we are looking at socialist realism so carefully today.

There are many reasons: obviously the rise of fascism, right-wing nationalism, etc., but we also have a generation of young historians and curators who do not remember communism, who want to understand the past and pick and choose paintings, making forays into discourses that interest them. Perhaps this is a chance for a new discourse on socialist realism to become more local, more interventionist, connected with other fields.

AGATA PIETRASIK: I think there is still a need for the kind of capacity we mentioned before, because while there was definitely a lot of interest in colonial struggle, for example in Eastern European painting, it turns out that what was actually represented were often figures like Raymonde Dien in France, who helped slow an armament shipment bound for the war front.

However, figures from African countries, the leaders of colonial resistance, are very rarely represented. So there is a kind of solidarity, the topic is present, but with a grain of salt, filtered through the dominant narrative of whiteness. This is common in Eastern Europe, which is why I struggle with such easy transposition of postcolonial theory to the Eastern European context. We experienced a different kind of genocide, which happened during the Second World War. I would strongly emphasize the need for specificity and sensitivity to the context.

PIOTR SŁODKOWSKI: I would like to ask the final question about socialist realism as an unwanted heritage, as an issue in contemporary

cultural politics. What can socialist realism mean for us now as part of our complex legacy?

KATARZYNA MURAWSKA-MUTHESIUS: I want to make a short point about the domination of modernist art history. In our discussions, we have to relate to what has been said about socialist realism by others, such as Boris Croys, who pointed to the links between socialist realism and the avant-garde in terms of their emphasis on political engagement. He also wrote an article about socialist realism as a reaction to modernity that was in a way postmodern, as the first manifestation of postmodernism. Perhaps we should also take that into consideration.

In earlier discussions about postcolonial theory and decoloniality we mentioned Mignolo,⁴ and the Russian scholar Madina Tlostanova was trying to apply the concept of coloniality mainly to Russia, but also to the former Communist Bloc. But I think that decoloniality doesn't really help us, because decoloniality departs from the rejection of Western domination. Communism was a modernist project, as Magdalena pointed out. So you may say that socialist realism was a modernist project as well. Therefore decoloniality, as attractive as it is for us, in my opinion doesn't help very much. For instance, the concept of *aisthesis* also appears very interesting. The rejection of modernist esthetics, replacing it with the notion of art as doing, rather than art as a product. Does it help with socialist realism? Perhaps it actually does. To what extent could socialist realism be seen as transregional? How can we approach it from the margins, as it were, by focusing on socialist-realist interiors, mosaics, murals, and all those applications of socialist realism to the wider sphere of built environment, the iconosphere of socialism? The final question is a negative heritage. There are many other -isms that have been seen in negative terms for a long time. We're studying those margins of socialist realism, things that have not been studied so far. However, French socialism has not been approached in uniformly negative terms. Jérôme, I'm not sure whether you would

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Walter D. Mignolo, b. 1941, is an Argentine semiotician and decolonial scholar.

agree with me, but there is a kind of celebration of French communist painters. Well, perhaps not by the whole mainstream of art history, but it is definitely acceptable. So simply carry on with our research, not bothering about the canon, not bothering whether it's decolonial or postcolonial, just doing and publishing our research.

PIOTR SŁODKOWSKI: Jérôme, do you want to comment?

JÉRÔME BAZIN: First, I would like to add a few words about decolonial reflection on Eastern Europe. Magdalena talked about the connection with the Third World. I think it was one thing to discuss what was happening in the Third World during decolonization, and it was another thing to participate in decolonization. Very simply, we can say that Eastern European countries did not participate directly in postwar decolonial struggles in Africa and Asia. They observed them, they sympathized with them. They exchanged information, but they did not fight directly. I agree, however, that there is something we need to understand about the relationship between Eastern Europe and the Global South during that period of time.

About the question on the legacy of realism, one of our problems is that we are considering a very large number of figurative images in different categories: socialist, social figuration, simple figuration, and so on. It was said at some point that we need more vocabulary, that we lack the vocabulary to describe them.

We need to describe them in order to make them visible. That's the challenge. But I don't think it's difficult to describe them. Our problem is not really a formal problem. We have the tools to describe these images. One question is rather if we want to make them visible, and one very crucial problem is that we can't make every image visible, precisely because we have a very, very large number of them. I don't have a solution, but I don't think that the real problem is the ability to describe the visual material. The problem lies somewhere else.

MAGDA LIPSKA: I want to add something to what you've just said—that Eastern Europe was not involved in the decolonial project. I think

that's not true. Like the Soviet Union, all its satellite countries hosted youth from Asia and Africa, educating the elite who came back to their countries to become leaders and the intelligentsia. Russia and Poland were also sending arms to the Third World.

JULIA SECKLEHNER: There's one additional point that must be added to notions of decolonialization in Central and Eastern Europe. I sometimes miss a look to our own backyard. Speaking from the perspective of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, or the former Czechoslovakia, a major issue is how Roma/Sinti communities have been dealt with, how they have been represented and exoticized in visual arts, figurative arts, under socialist realism. Kunsthalle Wien recently showed a great exhibition, *Manuš Means Human*, curated by the Averklub Collective,⁵ which represented the socialist period as a golden era. It was a very positive response, interestingly, in this context of rethinking such kinds of legacy.

What I want to stress as being problematic is the tendency to look outside while a lot of problems are often very close to us, especially in the field of art history, that haven't really been addressed.

MACDALENA MOSKALEWICZ: I would like to go back to the question of the customary distinction between realism and modernism, and ask it to Jérôme in relation to the exhibition you and Joanna Kordjak curated at the Zachęta, *Cold Revolution: Central and Eastern European Societies in Times of Socialist Realism, 1948–1959*. I found it fascinating that you decided to entirely eschew the issue of aesthetics and intentionally refrained from discussing the place of socialist realism in either modernism or the avant-garde, presenting, as a result, a whole array of artistic styles, of visual languages.

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Manuš Means Human, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, June 2–September 5, 2021. The exhibition reflected on the policy of Roma integration in socialist Czechoslovakia from a more general perspective of success and failures of Roma emancipation, but also more specifically through the history of the Chanov housing estate on the outskirts of Most in the Usti nad Labem region.

JÉRÔME BAZIN: The question is: what do we do when we go beyond? For me, to go beyond the narrative of modernism and socialist realism means to propose other questions.

I would advocate for giving up these terms. Is this modern? Is it socialist realism? I propose to abandon them. I know you can criticize me for such magical thinking: if we decide not to use the term, the problem will disappear. But this at least will give us space for raising other questions. Our resignation from using label categories, such as socialist, modernist, expressionist, etc., will free up space for other issues to emerge.

To give a concrete example: you spoke very kindly about the exhibition Joanna and I curated. One central issue was the representation of work, the transformation of work, agricultural work, industrial work. We find this in socialist realism, of course, but also in many forms of avant-garde and modernist art. So we have here a common ground for the different artistic trends of the twentieth century. I find such approach—defining common grounds—more productive than attempts to redefine modernism or socialist realism. By doing so, we can also take into consideration the other images that are between modernism and socialist realism, which we can call social figuration or sometimes not-so-social figuration. The topic of work is just one example of common grounds, and it is not a very original one. There are many others that need to be explored in this perspective.

Going one step further, I think we also reached the question of the national, the transnational, and the local, because in the exhibition we put together artworks from various places. It's a way to answer the question: how can we have a transnational exchange? I don't think that the priority for us is to universalize socialist realism—there is a risk to universalize a flat idea of socialist realism. My proposal would be to find issues that socialist realism has in common with modernist art, to include all the different kinds of socialist realism and of figurative art, and only then see what is the best scale to understand each issue.