Introduction

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Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism

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1 See, Rudolf Bahro, 'The Alternative in Eastern Europe', *New Left Review* 1/106, November–December 1977, p 5. As the author points out, the original title 'A Contribution to the Critique of Socialism as it Actually Exists' eventually became the subtitle of a book originally published in German as *Die Alternative: zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus*, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt, Cologne, 1977.

2 Ibid, p 33

3 The articles collected in this special issue began life as a selection of conference papers given at the symposium on 'Contested Spheres: Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism' held at the Kassák Museum in Budapest in May 2016, which were subsequently expanded and refined in light of the exceptionally lively discussions it generated. The gathering itself arose from an invitation to participate in the museum's ambitious project to reassess Hungarian art of the 1960s and 1970s by bringing in

After a long search for a term that encapsulated the particular social, economic and political conditions of the Eastern Bloc during the 1970s, East German theorist Rudolf Bahro finally settled on one of the communist system's own preferred markers of self-identification. The label 'actually existing socialism' had the advantage and ironic piquancy of containing within itself the notion that a distinction could be made between the ideals of socialism and the form they took in practice in the countries of Eastern Europe.[1] The term was originally used by communist regimes in the 1960s to mark a distance between the ideological maximalism and deferred horizons of the Stalinist utopia and a more realistic assessment of achievable goals for a society functioning on socialist principles. Support for the idea that a feasible version of socialism had been realised could also be found in the successes of East European science and technology, tangible improvements in living standards, and sincere efforts to reform and modernise the system epitomised by the Czechoslovak experiment in 'socialism with a human face'. By the middle of the 1970s however the phrase 'actually existing socialism' had lost all its affirmative connotations, resonating instead as a reminder of the failures and compromises of a moribund regime based on the cynical self-preservation of a gerontocratic elite. For Bahro, after the debacle of Soviet intervention to crush the Prague Spring in 1968, the 'ideological impotence of the old forces' who 'control a church in which no one believes anymore', had become a 'matter of notoriety'.[2]

This special issue is an attempt to delineate the characteristic features of the art scenes of Eastern Europe during a period initially marked by the rebounding of a sense of possibility through the cultural, social and political effervescence of the 1960s and later by the dissolution of the prospects for radical change in the post-utopian twilight of the late 1970s.[3] It is premised on the idea that artistic life in Eastern Europe was profoundly

comparative East European perspectives on a crucial chapter of national art history, and our special issue could also be instructively read in conjunction with their recent publication: Sándor Hornyik, Edit Sasvári and Hedwig Turai, eds, *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980: Doublespeak and Beyond*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2018.

4 József Mélyi, 'Abstract Boundaries: The Changing Principles of Art Policy in 1958–68', in *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980*, ibid, p 173

5 See for example, Joanna Kordjak-Piotrowski and Stanislaw Welbel, eds, *Cosmos Calling! Art and Science in the Long Sixties*, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2014

6 Press release for 'The Other Trans-Atlantic: Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America 1950s–1970s', exhibition at Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 17 November 2017 to 11 February 2018, https://artmuseum.pl/en/wystawy/inny-trans-atlantyk, accessed 14 September 2018

7 Art critic Kazimierz Rainczak quoted in Magdalena Moskalewicz, 'An Exercise in Participation: Op and Kinetic Art in Poland Circa 1966', in Marta Dziewanska, Dieter Roelstraete, and Abigail Winograd, eds, *The Other Transatlantic: Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2018, p 241

shaped by the structures, conventions and workings of the overarching system, with artists and critics compelled to negotiate the often productive contradictions of actually existing socialism. In that sense, the quotidian functioning of the socialist art system depended on the drawing up of tacit compromises and maintenance of calculated ambiguities in relations between party authorities and artists. This entailed the state moderating its political and stylistic demands, to the extent that ideological expectations of wholehearted engagement with the socialist mission were replaced by the pragmatic understanding that artists should avoid sensitive topics and aesthetic excesses in work destined for public display. On the other hand, if they were to remain in the country and further their careers, artists were obliged to find a *modus vivendi* with the existing system and its artistic economy, with refusal of all involvement in official art institutions rarely a viable option. While the tension between actual and ideal versions of socialism was vigorously tested by the neo-avant-garde, the equally telling discrepancy between the social and artistic systems of East and West was another generator of local specificity. Ultimately it was the latent and unrealised promise of actually existing socialism as much as its demonstrative failings that marked a crucial difference in the attitude of East European artists to the utopian reverberations of the countercultural movements and radical politics of the 1968 era.

By the middle of the 1960s, in most East European countries the artistic authorities had lifted the ban on abstract art, partly in recognition of the fact that it was too late to stop the spread of international art trends, but even more so because they had concluded that abstract forms were not necessarily incompatible with the pursuit of a socialist agenda. The divergence of European non-figurative tendencies from the dominant outlook of American Abstract Expressionism also raised hopes that such approaches 'might actually be compatible with socialist art's visions of the future'.[4] Artistic exploration of the technological and social transformations of the 1960s, often taking the form of experiments in geometric abstraction, seriality and kinetic art, corresponded in that sense to the strategic concerns and public posturing of the ideology of socialist modernisation.[5] Relevant here also is the argument made in the context of an inter-regional comparison that while in the West the 'reigning art ideology had definitively abandoned the idea of utopia', in South America and Eastern Europe the 'fascination with science, new technologies and cybernetics symbolized a continued commitment to building a better future through art'.[6] However, the extent of such correlations was tested by socialist realities, since as one Polish art critic put it, there was at the time only a narrow choice of 'synthetic materials, the engines malfunction, the lighting crashes', while artists were hindered by the 'low quality', 'very expensive' and 'hardly obtainable' electronics available in the country.[7] In the other words, the ambitions of artists were tempered by more mundane factors of the socialist economy.

The potential for collaboration between artists and socialist states expanded or contracted in response to changes to the institutional apparatuses of the artworld. One consequence of a thickening of bureaucratic structures in the early 1960s was that decisions over censorship, commissions and funding were often no longer undertaken directly by ministries of culture but through professionalised committees and juries. While designed to give a veneer of accountability to an ideology-driven

decision-making process, such bodies also created a buffer or distorting filter between the party and the artworld, with the resulting lack of clarity and inconsistency in the interpretation of cultural policy blunting the instruments of ideological control. In Hungary for example the notorious '3 T's' system that distinguished between 'supported', 'tolerated' and 'forbidden' artistic practices was unevenly applied, with artists able to take advantage of the fluidity and vagueness of the three categories, as well as to 'directly and indirectly influence the composition of the jury', creating favourable conditions for mutually-beneficial negotiations between artists and representatives of the communist authorities.[8] In Czechoslovakia a distinction could also be made between the severity of official rhetoric during the normalisation era that reasserted the ideological purity of socialist realist art and the actual decisions made by the juries for artistic commissions. Especially significant for the socialist art economy were public commissions for architectural projects, for which a percentage of the overall investment was 'earmarked for decorating the structure with fine art'.[9] While the actual amount was calculated according to a sliding scale based on the size and social relevance of the construction project – ranging from 0.6 to 4.2 per cent – decisions about individual artworks were entrusted to a committee of representatives of the unions of artists and architects, with the 'opinion of the primary architect decisive' in the commissioning process.[10]

From the 1960s onwards, and in contrast to the direct repression of the Stalinist era, artists were exposed to subtler, largely economic and practical pressures to produce works that were aesthetically and ideologically suitable for public commissions and competitions. Dóra Maurer has for example distinguished between 'A' and 'B' versions of her artistic identity during the decade, with the latter consisting of realistic graphic works on socialist themes that were made to order for the Hungarian state in parallel to her experimental practice.[11] This represented a distinct advance on the situation during the early 1950s, when artists who were unable to wholeheartedly comply with the strictures of socialist realism adopted a strategy of 'double bookkeeping', which entailed producing ideological works for public display while continuing to pursue an individual practice in the privacy of the studio.[12] The establishment of governmental bodies tasked with making regular purchases of artworks compensated to an extent for the lack of an art market, further imbricating artists in the state-run mechanisms of the socialist art economy. The effects on artistic practice and individual careers of this peculiar non-market system of financial incentives combined with institutional positions is specifically addressed in several contributions to this special issue.

The modernising and expanding of the canon of socialist art during the 1960s was a factor in the decision of the majority of artists to stay within the bounds of the official art system. In Hungary for example, it has been observed that 'many of the artists who worked within the state-approved concept of art also experimented with form', notably drawing on contemporary European rather than Soviet 'figurative trends' in an attempt to renew the official artistic ideology.[13] The extent to which the politically-subservient and aesthetically-tepid works of official artists are deserving of reconsideration and recuperation – having been sidelined for the majority of the post-communist period – is a newly contentious issue for East European art scenes.

8   Júlia Perczel, 'The Art Sphere as a Grey Zone: Techniques of Power and the Context of Artistic Practices', in *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980*, op cit, p 63

9   Jana Kořínková, 'Four Per Cent Art?', in Pavel Karous, ed, *Aliens and Herons: A Guide to Fine Art in the Public Space in the Era of Normalisation in Czechoslovakia (1968–1989)*, Arbor Vitae, Prague, 2015, p 453

10 Ibid, p 456

11 Katalin Székely, ed, *Bookmarks: Revisiting Hungarian Art of the 1960s and 1970s*, Koenig Books, London, 2018, p 66. See also: László Beke et al, *Nyomhagyás / Nyomtatás: Maurer Dóra grafikai munkássága 1955–1980* (Printing: Leaving Traces: Dóra Maurer's Graphic Oeuvre, 1955–1980), MKE – SUMUS, exhibition catalogue, Budapest, 2017

12 Gábor Andrási, et al, *The History of Hungarian Art in the Twentieth* Century, John Bákti, trans, Corvina, Budapest 1999, p 123

13 Judit Borus and Eszter Kardos, eds, *Within Frames: The Art of the Sixties in Hungary (1958–1968)*, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2017, p 38

The East European neo-avant-garde has a particular status in accounts of the period, with its distinctiveness deriving at least partly from its close but combative relationship to the art system of actually existing socialism. The enduring appeal of their dematerialised art practices was also inseparable from their precariousness, with neo-avant-garde ephemeral manifestations relying on the audacity of young artists in outwitting the authorities to establish temporary spaces for experimental activities. Conducive sites for neo-avant-garde endeavours were found in smaller galleries and non-art exhibition halls that often operated under the aegis of other bodies – from culture houses to the offices of communist youth organisations – placing them at one remove from the artistic authorities in order to delay, if not avoid, bureaucratic intervention.

The irreconcilable differences that regularly emerged in relations between the neo-avant-garde and the socialist authorities could be illustrated by the case of the Galeria pod Moną Lisą in Wrocław. Occupying a corridor space in the local International Press and Book Club, the gallery was forced to abandon its radical programme in 1971 after a dematerialised Concept Art exhibition managed to offend both modernist and Marxist critics. An 'increasing conflict' with the club's managerial board led to the resignation of neo-avant-garde curator Jerzy Ludwiński, after it became apparent that the 'gallery would no longer work in the form he had developed'.[14] In Hungary, the organiser of the Balatonboglár Chapel Studio tried a variety of techniques to defuse the hostility of the authorities to what had become a hotbed of neo-avant-garde activity, including submitting the exhibition programme to be officially juried and even attempting 'to evade the administrative method used against us by providing an ideological illusion of Marxist truth'.[15] Equally characteristic of the period of actually existing socialism was the authorities' reliance on bureaucratic measures and quasi-legal justifications, such as imposing fines for the infringement of safety regulations, in order to close this neo-avant-garde loophole in 1973. Another scenario permitted neo-avant-garde exhibition spaces to continue to operate under supervision, functioning as a safety valve for generational discontent. Even in the more tolerant context of third-way Yugoslavia, the seeming oasis of freedom of the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade was described by an observant visiting critic as a 'reservation which is completely closed and isolated from the culture in which it takes place'.[16] As several of the contributions to this special issue make clear, despite or because of a latent coalescence of utopian goals, ultimately there were limits to any rapprochement between the socialist authorities and the neo-avant-garde.

Neo-avant-garde artists were also regularly targeted by the secret police, who kept them under surveillance, periodically hauled them in for interrogation, and also spread an atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty by infiltrating their close circles. As discussed by contributors to this special issue, the role of police agents and informers in the artworlds of actually existing socialism was profoundly contradictory, many aspects of which remain elusive. The reports filed by agents appear at first sight to offer referenceable accounts of neo-avant-garde activities, but due to their 'often mutually misleading, manipulated or distorted' descriptions, the information they contain is primarily of value in reconstructing relations between artists and the security apparatuses rather than the 'precise reconstruction of events'.[17] Art professionals who after the fall

14 Piotr Lisowski, 'Performative Mythology: Curating Strategy of Jerzy Ludwinski', in Piotr Lisowski, ed, *Jerzy Ludwinski: Wypełniajac puste pola / Filling the Blanks*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Toruń, 2011, p 20

15 György Galántai, 'Chapel Studio of György Galántai Balatonboglár, 1970–1973 (the Pre-Story of Artpool)', in György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, *Artpool: The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, Artpool, Budapest, 2013, p 32

16 Achille Bonito Oliva quoted in Miško Šuvaković, 'Students' Cultural Centers as Reservations', in Prelom Kolektiv, eds, *The Case of Belgrade's Students' Cultural Centre*, Prelom Kokektiv, Belgrade, 2008, p 85

17 Kata Krasznahorkai, 'Surveilling the Public Sphere: The First Hungarian Happening in Secret Agents' Reports', in Katalin Kseh-Varga and Adam Czirak, *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-based Art in Late Socialist Europe*, Routledge, New York, 2018, p 134

of communism were exposed as police informers may also have acted from a variety of motives that preclude straightforward ethical judgements: they may have had little choice in practice over whether or not to co-operate with the secret police and often attempted to shield their fellow artists from the authorities, such as by giving partial information to their handlers.

One of the specific traits of the artworlds of actually existing socialism was the system's openness to, and support for, programmes of public artistic education. Originating in the campaigns of the early 1950s to expose the working masses to the motivational effect of socialist realist art, measures to introduce art to popular audiences subsequently adapted to changing artistic tastes and social conditions. As early as 1957, at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, members of the EXAT 51 group Ivan Picelj and Vjenceslav Richter were involved in organising the first 'Didactic Exhibition: Abstract Art', an educational show that travelled to fifteen cities across Yugoslavia designed to introduce the history and practices of abstract art to the public.[18] In Hungary during the 1970s, painter Imre Bak also for example used his position at the Népművelési Intézet (National Institute of Popular Culture) to organise talks and exhibitions at small venues across the country to educate people about the latest developments in the visual arts.[19] The field of amateur art served on the one hand as a source of income for neo-avant-garde artists through teaching classes and organising summer camps for a broad spectrum of art enthusiasts, while at the same time offering up secluded and unobtrusive settings to engage in experimental projects. Radical educational ideas circulating internationally in the 1960s and 1970s often took on a specific form in Eastern Europe, where such experiments were shaped in interaction with socialist traditions of giving industrial workers creative outlets through programmes held in factory houses of culture.[20]

The decline of the traditional communist role-model of the industrial worker during the 1960s and 1970s reflected technological changes to production processes and the diversifying of economic priorities from iron and steel to the chemical industry and consumer goods. It also brought changes to artistic engagements with industry, which in the 1950s were 'limited to compositions of workers and themes from working life', while in the following period artists 'recognised the amazing opportunities in terms of materials and technology' accessible on factory sites.[21] Correspondingly, from 1974 the Lenin Steel Works of the socialist new town of Dunaújváros in Hungary was host to annual symposia of metal sculpture, the tangible results of which were displayed in an outdoor park on a nearby island on the River Danube. Indicative of the mechanisms of the socialist art economy was that participants, who were either directly invited or selected through an application process, would spend up to six weeks on site, had their food, accommodation and all costs covered, and also received an artist fee.[22] In Poland, where such meetings were widespread, the newly built Puławy Nitrogen Plant was the site chosen for the 1st Symposium of Artists and Scientists in 1966, which broached the theme of 'Art in the Changing World'. Summer meetings at Łazy near Osieki were the occasion for neo-avant-garde actions and interventions that in the 1970s took on a more critical tone towards the goals of socialist modernity. This was accompanied by

18 See, Fokus Grupa and Jasna Jakšić, eds, *Didactic Exhibition*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 2016

19 See, Flóra Barkóczi, 'Creative (Dis)Courses: The Forms, Methods and Locations of Alternative Art Pedagogy in Hungary', in *Art in Hungary, 1956–1980*, op cit, pp 95–109

20 See, Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László, eds, *Creativity Exercises – Spaces of Emancipatory Pedagogies*, tranzit.hu, Budapest, 2015

21 Tibor Wehner, 'Iron, Steel and Sculpture', in *International Steel Sculpture Workshop and Symposium Dunaujváros 1974–1993*, Dunaferr Art, Dunaujváros, 1996, p 35

22 See the history page of the website of the International Steel Sculptor Workshop and Sculpture Park in Dunaújváros, http://steelsculpture.art/en/history/, accessed 14 September 2018.

more conceptual engagements with scientific knowledge and the rejection of the 'traditional model of an artist and artistic output' in favour of the notions of 'process and idea'.[23]

Another thread linking East European artworlds and the goals of the socialist state was the agenda of solidarity with the 'Third World' expressed through the principles and programme of socialist internationalism. Although most closely associated with the 1960s and 1970s, precursors have been identified in artistic exchanges of the Stalinist era that were framed in terms of expressing support for decolonial struggles in which the Soviet Union had strategic interests, such as the Korean War. Polish socialist realist painter Aleksander Kobzdej was for example amongst those artists who in the 1950s had the opportunity to travel to East Asia to observe the revolutionary strivings of Chinese and Vietnamese workers and peasants.[24] The founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in Yugoslavia in 1961 as an international coalition that refused to comply with the ideological division of the world into two opposing camps was an indicator of a new geopolitical orientation. Correspondences could also be observed in the domain of culture, with for instance the organisation of several editions of New Tendencies exhibitions in Zagreb during the decade that challenged geographical hierarchies through their openness to art practices and critical positions from West and East European, as well as South American contexts.[25] Within the Soviet Bloc, sympathy for anti-imperialist campaigns arose both in the sphere of official art and within the circles of the neo-avant-garde, with for example both mainstream and younger experimental artists participating in an exhibition of 'Artists Against Fascism' held at the Hungarian National Gallery in 1965. International protests over the mistreatment of civil rights activists in the United States in the early 1970s held a quixotic appeal for the neo-avant-garde, due to the parallels with repressive state methods closer to home and the evident hypocrisy of official Eastern Bloc campaigns on such issues. Attention to the transversal flows of socialist internationalism, as exemplified also in this special issue, offers a countervailing perspective to the assumed primacy of a binary division of the international artworld during the Cold War.

The frustration of trying to mark a clear division between the spheres of official and unofficial art is the starting point for Tomáš Pospiszyl's article on the career of Czech sculptor Olbram Zoubek entitled 'Artists in the Service of the Public'. His attentive analysis locates the artist's position within the changing artistic economy and value system of the Czechoslovak artworld, before, during and after the normalisation era. Tomasz Załuski also delves into the embeddedness of artists within the socialist art economy, although in this case examining the stance of an artist duo who took it upon themselves to critically reflect on the failings of the internal mechanisms of the Polish artworld. His text on 'KwieKulik and the Political Economy of the Potboiler' charts their campaign to expose the inequities of a system in which artists were obliged to execute works in the manner of craftspeople in order to survive in an artworld monopolised by state commissions. He also analyses the telling ways in which such objects featured in and were the subject of their critical art practice. In her article 'Exhibition as Diplomatic Tool: in Search for Artist Solidarity', Zsuzsa László deals with one of the most enigmatic aspects of the history of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, namely its

23 Luiza Nader, 'Towards Criticism of the Visual: the 8th Meeting of Artists and Theoreticians of Art in Osieki', in Ryszard Ziarkiewicz, ed, *Avant-garde in Plein-air: Osieki and Łazy 1963–1981*, Museum of Koszalin, Koszalin, Poland, 2008, p 89

24 Andrzej Szczerski, 'Global Socialist Realism: The Representation of Non-European Cultures in Polish Art of the 1950s', in Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski, eds, *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945–1989)*, Series: Leipzig Studies on the History and Culture of East-Central Europe, Central European Press (CEU), Budapest, 2016

25 Armin Medosch, *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)*, Leonardo Book Series, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016

highly ambivalent engagement with the officially-endorsed cause of international protests against American imperialism. The complexity of their collective and individual positions is analysed with reference to the history of socialist internationalism, the neo-conservative turn in Hungarian art and society during the 1970s, and individual experiences of anti-Semitism and political repression.

In his wide-ranging article entitled 'Amateurism under Socialism: The Politics of Art Education in the work of Milan Adamčiak, Július Koller and Jiří Valoch', Daniel Grúň illuminates the contrasting approaches to popular artistic education taken by three highly individualistic figures of the Czech and Slovak art scenes. He also charts their trajectories through the challenges of the normalisation era, from finding in amateur art a liminal zone between official culture and free-time activities, to striking a precarious balance between promoting experimental art and collaborating with the authorities or withdrawing completely from collective public performances. Candice Hamelin expands the coverage of this special issue into the particular context of the GDR in her 'Sibylle: An Alternative Venue for East German Art Photographers in the 1960s': a women's fashion magazine is revealed as a rare public platform in which artists could publish socially-critical and experimental photographic works, at a time when the authorities were carefully controlling the institutions, galleries and publications of East German photography. Photography is also the main focus of Hana Buddeus's reassessment of the career of Czech performance artist Petr Štembera. In 'Infiltrating the Art World through Photography: Petr Štembera's 1970s Networks' she describes the importance of photographic documentation in enabling information about his work to spread internationally, as well as his fundamental ambivalence towards such processes of decontextualised artistic transfer.

As Alina Șerban argues in the 'Sigma Group: Negotiating New Spaces for Art', it was during the reformist period at the beginning of Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule that this Timișoara-based group of artists were able to benefit from short-lived official support for their interdisciplinary approach to visual research. This enabled them to devise proposals for cybernetic interventions in public space, projects for collaboration with socialist industries and experimental educational programmes, until the political climate changed in 1974. The conditioning role of the socialist state in defining the scope of artistic activity is also investigated by Raino Isto in 'The Dictator Visits the Studio: The Vlorë Independence Monument and the Politics of Socialist Albanian Sculpture, 1962–1972'. The notion of artistic collaboration receives an expanded interpretation in order to account for the multi-sided co-operation between the artistic collective, the commissioning authorities and even leader Enver Hoxha involvment in erecting public monuments. Also examined is the significance for Albanian cultural production of the local communist party's brief flirtation with the anti-Soviet, radical leftist ideological orientation of Maoism.

The ambivalent legacy of Hungarian film-maker Gábor Bódy, who was both a leading figure in the neo-avant-garde until his alleged suicide in 1985 and a police informant during the 1970s, is addressed by Sonja Simonyi in 'The Man Behind the Curtain: Gábor Bódy, Avant-garde Film Culture and Networks of State Control in Late Socialist Hungary'.

Setting out and extrapolating upon the various interlinked explanations for his secret collaboration with the authorities and untimely death, she uses his case to further illustrate the inadequacy of the binary interpretative division between heroic resistance and complete subservience under socialism. The dynamic relationship between the radical agenda of experimental artist groups and the ideological red lines of the authorities around the national currency, the myth of brotherhood and unity and the cult of Marshal Tito is brought into focus by Marko Ilić. In 'A Taster of Political Insult': The Case of Novi Sad's Youth Tribune, 1968–1971', he exposes the discrepancy between public endorsement of artistic freedom as a principle of socialist self-management and the willingness of the state to use Soviet-style methods of repression in response to the political upheavals of the early 1970s. Armin Medosch, who sadly passed away during the production of this special issue, pinpoints the moment in the later 1970s when the illusion that self-managed socialism could be renewed through an infusion of radical New Left ideas evaporated. His 'Cutting the Networks in former Yugoslavia: From New Tendencies to the New Art Practice' follows the decline of one of the region's most distinctive artistic platforms from a position of near hegemony in the mid-1960s to virtual oblivion by the end of the 1970s.

Together the contributions to this special issue on 'Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism' locate East European artists within the complex settings in which they worked during the 1960s and 1970s, revealing these region-specific contexts as not only political and ideological in character but also grounded in economic and institutional realities. Artists found themselves from the outset inextricably embedded in the subtle control mechanisms of an official artworld that relied on a non-market-based system of financial incentives and institutional compensations to secure collaboration. As a result, the usual distinction made between those who opted to work within the bounds of official art and a significant minority who steered clear of state-supported art institutions loses much of its explanatory power. A more nuanced assessment of the neo-avant-garde is emerging, which depicts them not just as a rebellious clique in direct opposition to the state, but in light of the actual dilemmas they faced as de facto participants in socialist artworlds, the compromises they made in order to sustain themselves, as well as the occasional overlaps and shared interests that existed between experimental artists and reformist tendencies in the party. The political and ideological crisis of actually existing socialism identified by Bahro was anchored in an economic and technological malaise that reflected the failure to reform and modernise a decaying social system. By the end of the 1970s it was apparent that there was no way forward for the version of socialism that was put into practice in Eastern Europe, a diagnosis that also had irreversible implications for the future prospects of its artworld.