Questionable History

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Introduction

Museums present their knowledge to a wider public. But where does the information come from? Even when we are successful in establishing hard facts, we will always find different ways to interpret them and make them part of a larger history. Usually, museum exhibitions offer a single point of view, neatly printed on the information label next to a display. As a result, most visitors are not aware of the discussions, disputes, fights and feuds behind even the simplest text sign. In this exhibition, we leave the traditional single-perspective approach behind by presenting multiple interpretations of the same work, which can be true and contradictory at the same time. These interpretations are separated on the following pages by a black line.

The Wende Museum gives special thanks to Fiona Chalom for her generous loan
Ion Panteli-Stanciu (1901-1981), *Great Constructions (The Building of the Palace Hall)*, 1959, oil on canvas, signed and dated lower right, Romania, Collection Fiona Chalom
Currently used as a concert hall, the Bucharest landmark “Sala Palatu-lui” (Palace Hall) was built in 1959-60 as a conference center that hosted meetings of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the World Congress on Population, and the World Congress on Energy, to name a few. By depicting the colorful and busy construction site, Panteli-Stanciu’s painting expresses pride in the urban development program that contributed to the rise of Romania’s capital city as a political and cultural center of the Eastern bloc.

Situated close to the National Palace, the construction of the Palace Hall in Bucharest started a process of thorough cultural destruction in the old city center. After the devastating 1977 earthquake that damaged or destroyed most buildings in the capital city, General Secretary Nicolae Ceaușescu implemented one of the most megalomaniacal building projects in the history of state socialism. Socialist urban development is generally characterized by a lack of sensitivity regarding cultural heritage, and Panteli-Stanciu’s painting reflects this shortcoming by his celebration of urban modernity.
Ileana Radulescu (1909–1981), *Landscape from Drumul Taberei*, n.d., oil on canvas, signed lower right, Romania
A typical example of socialist art, Radulescu’s painting obscures the gap between visual propaganda and everyday life. New city quarters like Drumul Taberei were advertised as the realization of a socialist dream world, but the reality was very different. Living conditions were generally poor, the buildings suffered manifold technical defects, and the urban beautification program hardly ever materialized. Radulescu’s softly glowing colors portray a world without conflict, set in a district that experienced severe social problems.

Radulescu depicts a scene from daily life with people strolling through a park on a sunny day in the district of Drumul Taberei in Bucharest, the capital of Romania. New housing complexes built in East Bloc countries, like Drumul Taberei, were in high demand for many families as they offered more privacy and a higher standard of comfort. These urban designs tended to be spacious and green. With its softly glowing colors, Radulescu’s painting captures the optimism and sense of relaxation offered to the residents by the well planned urban space.

Landscape from Drumul Taberei
Installation shot of *Great Constructions* (left) and *Landscape from Drumul Taberei* (right)
György Kádár (1912-2002), *Automation*, 1962, oil on fiberboard, signed bottom left, Hungary
Weary of the constraints of socialist realism, an idealized but naturalistic representation of daily life, György Kádár painted *Automation* in an experimental geometric style. Through his vibrant colors and areas of complete abstraction, he visually synthesized the experience of contemporary industrialization. In Hungary, abstraction in art was discouraged because it reflected capitalist bourgeois decadence and had no educational or ideological values to impart onto viewers. Socialist realist art, on the other hand, was encouraged by the state and was expected to be immediately accessible and understandable to the proletariat as a vision of a utopian, socialist future. *Automation* attests to the artist’s courage and creativity as he defied the rigid canon of socialist realism.

After the 1956 Hungarian uprising, socialist realism was remodeled by the State Examiner, the institution that commissioned and judged works of art. General Secretary János Kádár (no relation to the artist) wanted to set Hungary apart from the rest of the Eastern Bloc. György Kádár, a teacher at the Higher School of Fine Art in Budapest, supported the government’s efforts through his art. *Automation* is socialist in content, depicting workers in a modern workplace, but not in form, as it breaks away from traditional representation with vibrant colors and areas of complete abstraction. Standing apart from the socialist realist artworks in other socialist countries, this work succeeded in giving Hungarian art its desired distinctiveness.
János Blaski (1924–2015), *Demonstration*, 1970s, tempera on board, Hungary
With vibrant colors and merging shapes, Blaski catches the energy of a festive demonstration. Inspired by early modern artists like Robert and Sonia Delaunay, he depicts a May Day (International Workers’ Day) demonstration in highly abstracted way, structuring the sea of waving flags and banners into colorful shapes. After the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the government mostly welcomed artistic experiments, as long as the topics supported the state.

Although this work was sold with the title *Demonstration*, several labels on the back of the painting mention Ünnep, which translates as “holiday.” Therefore, the scene might depict a festive gathering of people. On the canvas, Blaski reduces forms from the natural world to geometric shapes. In its experimental style, this painting moves away from state ideology and instead showcases the private pleasures of the people in an orgy of exploding colors, giving expression to the intangible idea of community.
Alexei Pavlovich Solodovnikov (*1928), *The Divorce (Drama in Soviet Court)*, 1955, oil on canvas, signed and dated lower right, Soviet Union
The Divorce (Drama in the Soviet Court)

In his painting of the legal settlement of a divorce in the countryside, Solodovnikov fundamentally criticizes the effects of so-called “progress” and “modernization,” ideological catch words in Soviet society. The male protagonist with his fine clothes and modern wrist watch is an anti-hero, symbolizing the hypocrisy and superficiality of modern cosmopolitanism. With his expressionless face, he simply abandons his country wife and daughter in search of new career possibilities. The local residents who attend the hearing look at him scornfully, while expressing a lot of empathy for the wife and daughter.

The Soviet painter Solodovnikov radically broke with the “theory of conflictlessness,” which defined the visual arts under Stalin. According to this directive, artists were expected to depict the ideal socialist society and to refrain from showing real-world conflicts and tensions. Instead, two years after Stalin’s death, Solodovnikov addressed a serious social conflict in his painting: the legal settlement of a divorce in the countryside. Specifically, he confronts the urban modernity of the male protagonist, expressed through his fine clothing and modern wrist watch, who seems out of place in the provincial courthouse, surrounded by former family and friends in traditional attire. The painting suggests that progress comes with sacrifices, and that the ultimate realization of a conflict-free socialist society is not yet immanent.
Béla Czene (1911-1999), *Tractor Girl*, c. 1951, oil on panel; Béla Czene (1911-1999), *Dibbling at the State Farm of Fertőd*, 1969, oil on fiberboard, signed and dated bottom right, Hungary
Czene’s young woman with a red beret driving a tractor depicts a worker in the typical manner of the late Stalin period (1946-1953), gazing into the bright socialist future. The second painting by the same artist presents a group of women farmer workers dibbling seeds or bulbs and has a distinctly more modern look, partly due to the absence of a horizon and the visibility of the brush strokes. Following the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the government became slightly more permissive. Czene used this new artistic freedom to liberate himself from the constraints of propagandistic realism and develop a more personal and experimental style.

Czene, who in the late 1930s had accepted commissions from the fascist Hungarian government, changed his subject matter in the late 1940s to become one of the leading socialist realist painters in Hungary, following the artistic directives from the Soviet Union. Tractor Girl, with its reference to gender equality and agricultural and technological modernization, is a typical example. After the 1956 uprising Czene once again adapted his style, adjusting to the moderate modernism that became fashionable in the 1960s as seen in his painting Dibbling.
Sándor Pinczechelyi (*1946), *Star Coca-Cola*, 1988, oil on canvas, Hungary
In the late 1980s, irony became a favorite means of artistic discontent all over Eastern Europe. By superimposing multiple Coca-Cola logos over the Red Star of Communism, Pinczehelyi seems to imply that socialism is no longer presenting a viable alternative to Western capitalism. The painting suggests that it is just a matter of time before Hungary will finally be part of a global consumer culture.

*Star Coca-Cola*

In terms of rhetoric and self-presentation, the artist suggests in this highly ambiguous work that capitalism and communism have more in common than is usually understood. Both systems use iconic images and logos to impose their political or economic ideology upon the people. Moreover, the painting reflects the curious mixture of socialist and capitalist elements in late 1980s Hungary after a series of political reforms.
This silkscreen print of Vladimir Lenin with worker’s cap pays tribute to the American pop artists Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. From Warhol, Zala took the idea of serial printed portraits in different colors; Lichtenstein inspired him to imitate the Ben-Day dots seen in cartoons or low-resolution photographs. As Zala’s work clearly shows, in cultural terms, the Iron Curtain was far from impermeable. By representing the arch-father of Soviet Communism in the visual language of American Pop Art, the artist gives Lenin’s representation an ironical twist.

In Western art history, American Pop Art is usually interpreted as a new form of formal experimentation after Abstract Expressionism. This interpretation obscures the irony and ambiguous political references in many works by the Pop artists. Hungarian artist Zala did not fail to take this political aspect into account, appropriating it for his own use. In response to Warhol’s silkscreen portrait series of Che Guevara (1968) and Mao Zedong (1972), Zala presented his Lenin à la Warhol. However, it lacks Warhol’s ironic twist of representing the ideological enemy as a counter-cultural hero.
Artist unknown, *Speech in the Kremlin*, c. 1958, oil on canvas, Soviet Union
Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964, delivers a speech to a cheering crowd in the Kremlin. The painting, which is documented as part of an exhibition in Moscow in 1958, has been modified and defaced. After he fell from power in 1964, Khrushchev was half erased from the painting, leaving a ghost-like figure. This form of “iconoclasm,” the clearing of people from collective memory, has a tradition in the Soviet Union starting in the 1930s under Stalin.

While at first sight it seems that Khrushchev was erased from the painting, an analysis of the layers of paint suggests that he is still half visible not because his erasure was incomplete but because he was partly resurrected. The black of Khrushchev’s suit is painted under the brown podium and the soft pink and green background. This indicates that after the painting was completed, someone repainted the podium and the background to cover and obscure the figure. At some later stage, the new layers of paint were scraped away, revealing the presence of the former Soviet leader.
Artist unknown, *Adolf Hennecke*, 1950s, porcelain, East Germany
The Meissen porcelain factory near Dresden is one of Europe’s finest producers of porcelain tableware and small sculptures since the early eighteenth century. Between 1949 and 1989, the company fabricated commemorative plates and socialist sculptures along with the decorative pieces for which they are known. This sculpture represents the East German miner Adolf Hennecke, who initiated an “activist movement” among the working forces by exceeding the standard quota for coal mining on one single day by almost 400%. He was honored as a hero of labor by the ruling Socialist Unity Party, which accepted him several years later in its Central Committee. Hennecke is shown bare-chested in a typical pose with miner’s cap and miner’s lamp.

While this sculpture was acquired by the museum as an image of the East German miner Adolf Hennecke, an identification confirmed by a visiting former worker of the Meissen porcelain factory, a comparison with historical photographs suggests that this might actually be Alexei Stakhanov, Hennecke’s Soviet example. A miner as well, Stakhanov exceeded his daily quota in 1935 by 14 times, initiating the “stakhanovite” movement of intense labor productivity. If the sculpture represents Stakhanov rather than Hennecke, it shows the importance of Soviet imagery for the socialist satellite states.

A comparison with other Meissen sculptures reveals that this artwork may represent an anonymous miner from the later years of the Third Reich. The only other documented example of a white porcelain sculpture of a miner from Meissen dates from 1943. Stylistically, there seems to be little difference between Meissen sculptures from the Third Reich and those from the early years of the German Democratic Republic.
**Pink Lenin**

Mass-produced plaster busts of Lenin, such as the one presented here, typically decorated Communist party offices and other institutional spaces in East Germany. The bust was spray-painted by protesters during one of the so-called Monday demonstrations in the city of Leipzig. These were weekly gatherings that attracted large numbers of people who demanded radical reforms in the German Democratic Republic. By spray-painting the bust of the iconic father of East Bloc state socialism, the campaigners ultimately ridiculed the oppressive system under which they had suffered for forty years.

Spray-painted during one of the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, this Lenin sculpture bust signifies that not everyone protesting the East German government wanted to leave socialism behind. The campaigners could have smashed the sculpture to make their point, but instead they decided to turn it into a flashy pop icon, suggesting that not the system as such but its overly oppressive, bureaucratic and humorless implementation was the object of their scorn.

This flashy painted Lenin bust, with colors only available in the West, was reportedly carried around during one of the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall. So far we have not been able to find photographic evidence for the participation of *Pink Lenin* in one of these demonstrations. Consequently, the sculpture might have been spray-painted any time between 1989 and its acquisition by The Wende Museum in 2004, possibly without any political intent.
Klaus Georgi (*1925), *Solitude in the Forest (Bungalow)*, 1976, Animation, DEFA Studio for Animated Films, Dresden, super 8mm; silent; color, East Germany
All over the Soviet bloc, the genres of science fiction and children’s literature were a sanctuary for experiment and social criticism. The same holds true for science fiction movies and animated films. In a time of growing environmental consciousness in East Germany, film director Klaus Georgi makes fun of the people who, in their quest for a romantic solitary experience in the unspoiled woods, collectively start to build their own dachas, destroying both the woods and the very idea of solitude. With simple and humorous means, Waldeinsamkeit (“solitude in the forest”) criticizes the herd mentality of people living under state socialism. Therefore, the film can be read as counter cultural.

Georgi’s humorous animated film might be interpreted as a fundamental criticism of the Western, “bourgeois” way of living. Under capitalism, every individual claims his own space and property, no matter the paradoxical consequences. The film illustrates the herd mentality of people in a consumer society; the reference to Bavarian or Austrian mountain hiking, and the English term “bungalow” instead of “dacha,” which was commonly used in the Eastern bloc, seems to situate the action in the West. Therefore, the film can be read as a creative illustration of socialist propaganda.
**Lenin’s Death Bed**

*Lenin’s Death Bed* presents an ideological encounter between varieties of Soviet Communism: Leninism, Stalinism, and Gorbachev’s Glasnost and Perestroika. Embodying these divergent political understandings, Stalin and Gorbachev are paying their last respects to Lenin. Stalin holds a candle, indicating his leading role in Lenin’s funeral. Politically, he put Lenin’s theories about industrialization and collectivization into practice. Gorbachev, depicted with the significant birthmark on his forehead, declared his reform policy based on Lenin’s demand for economic modernization. In the silkscreen, Lenin’s feeble body symbolizes the decay and death of Leninism.

*Lenin’s Death Bed* gives an idea of the last intimate moment of the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution. Christ-like, Lenin’s bare, frail, and scarred body is exposed to the gaze of the figures crowding around him including his successor Stalin. His hands are held in prayer, suggesting that he is still alive. As a religious symbol, the burning candle illustrates the permanence of the soul. As the wax of the candle wanes, the flame representing the divine will guide Lenin’s soul to the afterlife.
Questionable History was organized by Chief Curator Joes Segal.

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Learn more about the objects in this exhibition by visiting our online catalog at <http://www.wendemuseum.org/collections/main.php?module=objects>.