

Abstract Expressionism Behind the Iron Curtain



Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

Abstract Expressionism Behind the Iron Curtain

Conceived by Joana Grevers
Director, Fundatia Joana Grevers, Munich

Organized by Helen A. Harrison
with the assistance of
Joana Grevers and Guy K. Williamson

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Cover: Romul Nuțiu in his studio, at work on *Dynamic*, 1967
Title page: Cover of the catalog, *Disappearance and Reappearance of the Image: American Painting after 1945*, Bucharest, 1969

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LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

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Private collection, courtesy Fundatia Joana Grevers, Munich

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Helen A. Harrison

Abstract Expressionism Behind the Iron Curtain is the answer to a question planted in my brain twenty-five years ago.

In June 1992 I attended a conference in Vienna. One of the side trips arranged by our hosts was a visit to the city's Museum of Modern Art, where I was attracted to *Grün-Silber* (*Green-Silver*), a large allover gestural abstraction painted in 1962 by Dezső Korniss.¹ The artist was born in Romania in 1908 and died in Hungary in 1984; he immigrated in the 1920s to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest and was based there for the rest of his career. It seemed to me remarkable that he had produced such a non-objective canvas during the heyday of Socialist Realism, when artists in Communist bloc countries like Hungary, where an uprising against Soviet rule had been brutally suppressed only six years earlier, were required to adhere to an official style and politically dictated content.

I had thought—naïvely, as it turns out—that artists who didn't conform had to emigrate if they wanted to pursue unsanctioned forms of expression. Indeed, many of them did leave for France, Italy, Switzerland and the United States, but many others stayed behind the Iron Curtain, practicing their art in the face of repression. And in spite of censorship, they were conversant with trends in international modernism—including Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel, Tachism and Spazialismo—either through personal journeys to the West or through traveling exhibitions that went to Communist countries during various thaws in East-West relations. Korniss' 1959 poured painting, *Fekete és vörös - Hommage a Jackson Pollock* (*Black and Red - Hommage to Jackson Pollock*), is direct evidence of his exposure to Abstract Expressionism, most probably at the *National Exhibition of American Art* presented in Moscow that year.²



Dezső Korniss, *Fekete és vörös – Hommage a Jackson Pollock*, 1959
Oil on cardboard, 11 ½ x 15 ½ in. (29 x 39 cm.)

It was not until 2005, when the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center sponsored a conference on Abstract Expressionism's global context, that I discovered how deeply it had penetrated the Soviet Union and its satellites. Jane A. Sharp's paper, "Abstract Expressionism as a Model of 'Contemporary Art' in the Soviet Union," discussed the impact of French and American exhibitions during the 1950s. As she summarized the artists' responses: "By addressing the aims and formal concerns of Abstract Expressionism many came to perceive themselves not only as participants in the local and international art world, but as agents shaping their own era."³ The fact that much of their work was virtually unknown in the United States suggested that, while the Russian avant-garde and dissident artists have since been recognized, there was a much wider field to explore.

Finally, in 2014, I realized the potential of this rich and underappreciated body of work when Joana Grevers visited the Pollock-Krasner House and alerted me to the paintings of Romul Nuțiu. We discussed the extent to which he and others of his generation had persevered against the grain in Communist bloc countries, and the practicality of a small but representative exhibition. She knew who, from among many possibilities, could best exemplify the phenomenon and where to find their works. Her extensive knowledge and tireless efforts, and the commitment of her colleague, Guy K. Williamson, have brought this ambitious project to fruition, for which I am sincerely grateful.

Drawing on a lifetime of curatorial acumen, scholarship, and personal insight, Charlotta Kotík has written an illuminating essay that places the work of our five artists—one of whom is her late father-in-law—in the proper political and aesthetic context. Similarly experienced and gifted, Philip Rylands offers an introduction that expands our understanding of the Abstract Expressionist impulse, encouraging us to "make what we can of what we see." I am thankful to both of them for their contributions, and to scholars Branko Franceschi, Krystyna Czerni and Nadja Zgonik, and again to Joana Grevers and Charlotta Kotík, for their profiles of the artists. I also want to thank Peter Selz, whose 1961 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art introduced Americans to the work of 15 Polish modernists, for sharing his recollections of researching and organizing that show.

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Thanks are also due to Barbara Applegate, director of the Steinberg Museum of Art at Long Island University's C.W. Post campus, for graciously providing an additional venue for the exhibition, which has been made possible by funds from the Thaw Charitable Trust Endowment and the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

¹ An image of the painting is at <https://www.mumok.at/de/gruen-silber>

² The art exhibition was part of the *American National Exhibition*, presented in Moscow's Sokolniki Park from 25 July- 4 September 1959. In *Fall-out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), Michael L. Krenn described the exhibition's popularity: "Metal barriers had to be installed to protect the art from the crush of the massive crowds, averaging 15,000 a day. . . . [I]n the end, [curator Richard] McLanathan estimated, nearly 1 million Soviet citizens viewed the paintings." (p. 167). See also Gretchen Simms, "The 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow and the Soviet Artistic Reaction to the Abstract Art," Ph.D. diss., University of Vienna, 2007:

https://monoskop.org/images/3/3f/Simms_Gretchen_The_1959_American_National_Exhibition_in_Moscow_and_the_Soviet_Artistic_Reaction_to_the_Abstract_Art.pdf; and Nicholas J. Cull, "Crusading with Culture," in *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 162-168. A decade later, a traveling exhibition, *Disappearance and Reappearance of the Image: American Painting After 1945*, organized by the Smithsonian Institution, was presented at the Sala Dalles in Bucharest on the occasion of President Nixon's 1969 visit to Romania.

³ Jane A. Sharp, "Abstract Expressionism as a Model of 'Contemporary Art' in the Soviet Union," in Joan Marter, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 83. The publication comprises the proceedings of two conferences held at Stony Brook Manhattan in 2004 and 2005.



Visitors viewing Jackson Pollock's 1947 canvas, *Cathedral*, at the National Exhibition of American Art, Moscow, 1959

FOREWORD

Joana Grevers

I discovered Romul Nuțiu's work in 2007 as a member of the acquisitions committee of the new MNAC (Contemporary Art Museum) in Bucharest. The European Union gave us significant financial support to buy Romanian art from postwar to contemporary and create the museum's collection.

During a rainy week in November we were reviewing the applications of around 500 artists. Almost all the art we were looking at was figurative. Nuțiu's application stood out. His work was purely abstract and of a very high quality. It convinced the committee, and one Nuțiu painting was purchased for the collection.

Shortly after that, curious to find out more about the artist and his oeuvre, I went to Timișoara to meet him. It turned out to be a crucial encounter. His studio was full to the ceiling with works from the early 1960s to the present—decades of expressionistic abstract works in a chaotic atmosphere. Nuțiu himself was an extravagant character, full of joy and youthful energy. When I asked him if he related to Abstract Expressionism or Informel, he told me that at the end of the 1950s, when he started to work abstractly, he had only academic knowledge and knew little about contemporary art. Later, when he could travel abroad and came in contact with Abstract Expressionism, he found out that his approach had an affinity with what he was seeing.

Two years later I was asked to write a text for the catalogue of the upcoming Nuțiu exhibition, *The Pyramid of the Memory/ Elan Vital II*, at the Calina contemporary art space in Timișoara. Here I used the term "Abstract Expressionism behind the Iron Curtain" for the first time. As I researched abstraction in post-war Romania, it became obvious that Nuțiu was the only artist who stayed true to this path since the early '60s.

Nuțiu passed away in 2012 at the age of eighty. That year the Museum of Art in Timișoara presented a retrospective exhibition, *Romul Nuțiu: Life and Work*, organized by Liviana Dan and myself. We displayed works from six decades, demonstrating the semantic complexity of his oeuvre and its major role regarding expressive abstraction in Romania. People from the Western art world who made it to Timișoara were becoming aware that Abstract Expressionism also happened behind the Iron Curtain. I decided that sometime soon I would have to travel to the neighboring countries to find out if there were other like-minded artists from the first post-war generation.

In 2014 I went to the Hamptons with my daughter, Antonella. We visited the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center and met the director, Helen Harrison. I showed her some books about Nuțiu and proposed an exhibition of his work. She liked the idea, but suggested expanding the subject to include other Eastern European artists in this context. Then the adventure began.

I must express my gratitude to my American friend and art lover, Guy K. Williamson, who pushed me to leave my desk and implement the project. Together we went to appointments at the museums in Prague, Łódź, Zagreb and Ljubljana in order to find appropriate artists, expand the subject, and consolidate my theory of Abstract Expressionism behind the Iron Curtain. Thank you, Guy!

Edo Murtić, Jan Kotík, Andrej Jemec and Tadeusz Kantor turned out to be the right choices. In 2015 and 2016 we went back to the Pollock-Krasner House with the new material, Helen agreed to make the exhibition, and we all are very thankful for the opportunity to have this expanded view of Abstract Expressionism.

Looking at Abstract Expressionist Painting

Philip Rylands

In the twentieth century there was a widely accepted conviction, at least among those who set out to look at, enjoy, and criticize art, that art “was a language for the communication of feeling and emotion.”¹ In his 1878 study, *Aesthetics*, Eugène Véron had codified this in the concept of the “emotive symbol,” the embodiment, most frequently in a painting, of an emotion. It is a short but resounding distance from this to René Huyghe’s affirmation, in *Art and the Spirit of Man* (1962), that art is the language of the human spirit. Huyghe referred to the art of all ages, but an abstract art which, through the renunciation of a language of geometry in favor of the freely brushed, the painterly or indeed any other application of colored material which does not rely on line, draftsmanship, or preconceived shapes, and which offers itself as emotionally expressive, falls into this net. Huyghe’s reference to “spirit”—a word all understand but none define—evokes Vasily Kandinsky’s claims in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912). Indeed Kandinsky stands at the fount of an expressionist art that is abstract rather than representational (Die Brücke, Oskar Kokoschka, Chaim Soutine *et al.*). It was with reference to Kandinsky that Alfred H. Barr, Jr. first used the term “abstract expressionist,” in 1929.

Abstract Expressionist art folds into itself therefore the encapsulation of feeling and the language of the spirit—a spirit specific to the time of the work’s production: the *Zeitgeist*. As Kandinsky wrote: “Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions.” The Scottish painter Alan Davie thought of this impulse as “an organic life force, as if he was somehow separate to it and as much in awe of the finished article as the spectator.” He believed that “there was ‘some kind of primal spiritual, almost sexual force’ which urged him to create. Davie stated, ‘when I am working well I work with some sort of unconscious creativity.’”²

The implication is that the work of art is the nexus of two different situations: it is first the outpouring of an emotion by the artist—Kandinsky’s “inner necessity”—and it must then cause the same emotion in the sympathetic or susceptible viewer. In the process the work converts from its private, introspective meaning, to a shared, externalized one. Tolstoy’s conception of art, as expressed in *What is Art?* (1898), was just this: “Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man [*sic*] consciously, by means of external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, so that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.” The differences between these two accounts, Davie’s and Tolstoy’s, lies in the unconscious activity of the former and the conscious activity of the latter; in the abstract language of Davie and the realistic scenes intended by Tolstoy.

Beginning with the Romantic view of art as the expression of feeling, Surrealism from the 1920s introduced the notion that such feeling should best reverberate from deep in the artist's unconscious. The process of reification enacted in the craft of art ranges from the superficial re-creation of a mere sensation—the sight of flying ducks for example, such as Kandinsky derided—to the embodiment of an emotion (fear? anger? love?), to the vibrations of the artist's spirit (!), and even to supra-personal archetypal patterns.

This notion of the artist as a vessel for the transmission of emotion from the realm of the spirit or of Jungian archetypes is not, however, shared by all. In *The Meaning of Art* (1932), Herbert Read is quite clear that the artist aims only to please, and does so through “a unity or harmony of formal relations among our sense-perceptions.” This is not as simple-minded as it might seem. Like a good shaking, it brings us back to the only material thing with which we have to deal: in the present context, the oil, or mixed media, on canvas. As has often been pointed out, it is not given to us to know what goes on in the minds of artists,³ and when we attribute to the artist recourse to the unconscious in the realm of private psychology or universal archetypes, this is unknowable by definition, being unconscious. Artists themselves, in such cases, like Davie's, are ignorant. The use of what André Breton defined as “pure psychic automatism,” an undeliberated, unwitting way to get started, to initiate work on the blank canvas, was a practice of American painters in the 1940s.

Our effort, therefore, must be—by the force of our own intellects, or our aptitude for lyrical and intuitive thought—to go beyond the “harmony [or not] of formal relations” and make what we can of what we see. Might the glow of light from behind Andrej Jemec's charred barricades be metaphorical for a message of hope, for example? His cosmic *chiaroscuro* drama has something of conflict about it, but offers aesthetic pleasure, too. There are intimations of frenetic, even automatist psychic activity in Tadeusz Kantor's 1958 *Composition*—though we know nothing of his state of mind— and of a Dadaist disregard for art-making's “formal relations,” even within the novel conventions of the abstract. The standoff between the organic and the mechanistic in Kantor's later *Chelsea* lends menace to the figure on the right: is it predatory? If squeezed, would it detonate? Or has it already done so, given the centrifugal pattern on the left? Or is it a critical fallacy of the weak-minded to allow narrative and time to creep into one's perceptions?

Like Kandinsky, Jan Kotlík creates parallel worlds of marks that signal, of forms that swirl, with the emphatic *matière* that so honestly speaks of painting. The paintings of Edo Murtić, too, have much of European *Informel*—pictorial effects of brushwork and surface texture, with images that are proxies for landscape or collage. The dizzying spatial effects of Romul Nuțiu equate to mental landscapes that, like František Kupka's before him, suspend or enhance consciousness. Each work has its technical virtuosity and induces the simple pleasure for us of seeing something never seen before, conjured from the artist's materials. And thus we marvel at the “how” of their coming into being.

Each artist has his or her ineffable personal calligraphy, which rewards the connoisseur as he or she comes to recognize it, and with this recognition the capacity to assess the more or less accomplished works in the oeuvre. We are not able to judge if the artist's practice is spontaneous or deliberated, or rather, to what degree it is somewhere in between. The corollary of this is that we are not even able to measure the degree of subjectivity in the artist's work, an element usually but incorrectly taken for granted. New York School artists such as Adolph Gottlieb and Richard Pousette-Dart would certainly deny any subjectivity whatsoever. If ever we think we perceive visible evidence of the artist's "emotion"—if the transmission from the private to the public thought may have been fulfilled—it remains impalpable, beyond our imaginative reach, indescribable in words, and at the very least as subjective for the viewer as it had been (more or less, or if at all) for the artist at the time of his or her intuition and of the painting's execution.

Even the notion of an Ariadne thread that connects the "action" of the arm, retrieved in the apparent movement of the paint, with some vestige of the mental "emotion" with which the image was instigated, is insufficient to pull the viewer through the nexus, the painting, to a symbiotic understanding of the artist's impulse. We the viewers are, as it were, on our own.

¹ For this and what follows see Harold Osborne, *The Art of Appreciation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, pp. 93ff.

² See Sarah Mate, "Alan Davie, In the Making," David Wade Gallery, Harrogate, UK:
<http://www.davidwadefineart.com/news/alan-davie-in-the-making/>

³ See, for example, John Carey, *What Good Are The Arts?* London: Faber & Faber, 2005.

Painting and Politics

Charlotta Kotík

The exhibition *Abstract Expressionism Behind the Iron Curtain*, a brainchild of Dr. Joana Grevers of the Joana Grevers Foundation in Munich and Bucharest, introduces works created in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1950s and '60s that greatly diverge from the doctrine of Socialist Realism, then the reigning art style in that part of the world. The artists' efforts to pursue individual rather than collective vision, and not to be silenced by the cacophony of dictatorial voices, were brave attempts to assert creative and personal freedom.

Although growing from vastly different circumstances than the work created slightly earlier in the United States, paintings from behind the Iron Curtain nevertheless display the hallmarks of Action Painting or Abstract Expressionism in their impulsive gestures—frantic encounters of lines and colors often overflowing the confines of the pictorial field—in the spattering and dripping of colors, and in a distinct spontaneity. Some of the sociopolitical factors of that era must be highlighted in order to appreciate the works on view.

The cataclysm of World War II left Europe in shambles. The Allied victory over Nazi Germany was officially declared with the German surrender on May 8, 1945 while the war in Asia continued; its end was marked by one of the most catastrophic deeds in modern warfare—the use, in August 1945, of the atomic bomb.

With armed conflict officially over on all fronts, the nations began to rebuild their material infrastructure and lay foundations for the economic, cultural and political future. Europe's historical cultural heritage and former hegemony was tainted by its inability to lessen the carnage of the war and thus was greatly diminished. The war-strengthened economy of the United States began to exert its influence not only on the material recovery of Europe but on its intellectual environment as well. While the Allied powers seemed to be united in the midst of a struggle for survival and during the brief period of victorious euphoria, that unity began to unravel. The profound distrust among the Allies, ever-present during the war but suppressed due to common cause, came into the open, and the cracks in former alliances became manifest in rhetoric and deeds.

The tragic decision to use the atomic bomb fueled an already existing mistrust and led to poisoning of the postwar atmosphere with suspicion and fear. The former allies were turning into adversaries, as if to comply with the simplistic dictum that to prove one's own power, one needs an enemy.

With its populations and territory ravaged by war, the Soviet Union began slow and painful reconstruction. All ends and means had to be explored and absolute consolidation of power in the hands of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin began to fully exert its influence on the small democracies of Central and Eastern Europe that were ceded to him in the last months of the war during the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences.

In response to Soviet expansionism, Western allies formulated the Cold War doctrine in 1947 to contain and to challenge Soviet power. With that declaration of hostility, the Soviet Union exerted stronger pressure on the nations in its sphere of influence. During the winter of 1947-48, with the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, the abdication of King Michael in Romania, and the strengthening of Communist party rule in Yugoslavia, the stage was set for the absolute consolidation of power in the one party system. Communist parties in the Russian satellite states were now under the complete control of the Communist Party's central Politburo in Moscow. The overwhelming power of the byzantine state apparatus regulated every aspect of economy and culture, with no liberty left for independent intellectual and artistic development.

The postwar economic boom in the United States accorded the artists a vastly different experience.

By nature, the majority of artists are anti-status quo, and in the United States the highly individual platform of Abstract Expressionism began to assert itself as the dominant style. Antithetical to the collective spirit that was partially detectable during the Depression era and the war effort, Abstract Expressionism put all the emphasis on the inner need of the individual artist. While the American political structure was not directly vested in support for the arts, the overall cultural policy was not of prime interest to the existing power establishment. This was in a sharp contrast to the Soviet dominated part of the world.

In the totalitarian Soviet regime, where everything was organized and overseen by the government, cultural production was yet another area that needed to fall in line with official ideology. In the visual arts, it was the strict adherence to Socialist Realism, a figurative style easily understandable by the masses and thus a useful tool in state propaganda.

The dictum of the economy made it almost impossible for artists in communist countries to break free. In most countries of the Eastern bloc private property was non-existent, thus there were no commercial galleries or alternative places that could carry individual artists' work. The state and municipal galleries were funded by Ministries of Culture that firmly controlled exhibition policies. Concentration on the individuality of the artists or their inner needs was considered at best bourgeois remains of the past, and at worst subversive and therefore criminal activity. Since there was no freedom to assemble without official permission, to organize an exhibition in one's studio was also deemed subversive and therefore

dangerous. The artists' means of support were in various applied art fields, for the lucky ones, and in all other possible types of employment that might have been available.

Although the situation differed slightly from country to country, it was the prevailing air of state-imposed ideology that was uniformly stifling. It took a great deal of courage and deep conviction to depart from the prescribed mannerism and to begin to express oneself in a mode independent of the almost surreal depictions of happy workers and farm hands listening in awe to the political speeches of great leaders or celebrating with exalted merriment the victories of Socialism over Capitalism.

With severe restrictions on the flow of information, as well as on personal travel, connecting with the art world beyond the Iron Curtain was curtailed. The atmosphere of anti-West propaganda was at its highest in the early 1950s. With Stalin's death in 1953 the tone began to change, exposing deep fissures in the Eastern bloc—fissures that were to accord a certain amount of freedom to artists and the population as a whole.

Historical circumstances were partially responsible for the degree of independence the individual countries were able to carve out for themselves. Poland, where the relationship with Russia, and later the Soviet Union, has always been particularly fraught, seemed to be singularly prepared to assert a degree of independence. The *International Conference of Twentieth Century Music* in Warsaw in 1954, fully devoted to atonal compositions, was followed by the *Arsenal* exhibition of young painters in 1955. This exhibition featured examples of paintings freed from strict realism and pointed toward independent pictorial practices.¹

The undertones of pre-war expressionism and abstract geometric tendencies could be discerned in the work of young artists in Poland, one of whom was Tadeusz Kantor, who was soon to become internationally recognized. Born in 1915 in Galicia,² Kantor began his quest for a purely personal journey early on, while he traveled to Paris in 1947. Shortly after the war, Paris was still recognized by many European intellectuals as a wellspring of ideas. The opportunity to travel there, and to follow the left-wing weekly, *La Lettre Française*, when available, provided a degree of information. French *Art Informel*, represented by artists such as Jean Fautrier and Georges Mathieu, was studied by younger Eastern Europeans extensively and exerted a great degree of influence.

Kantor created works of abstracted shapes and moved into full non-objectivity in many paintings of the late 1950s, such as *Composition* (1958). Here the energetic impulsive gestures result in encounters of colors and lines, building a complex structure of interwoven elements. The surface of the work seems to be almost frenzied in its desire to fill the canvas and possibly to reach beyond the picture plane. In the center of the piece there appears to be a vortex from which the energy radiates into surrounding space as if propelled by an invisible explosion. True to his ever-inquiring mind and boundless energy, Kantor soon

began exploring the possibilities of assemblage that spilled into installations, happenings, performances and stage design. In 1965 he spent seven months in the United States, reflected in his canvas, *Chelsea*, which references a sojourn in New York City. He also traveled extensively in both Western and Central Europe and exerted a great degree of influence on other artists, such as young painters and performance artists in Prague.

While the situation in Poland was culturally less restricted, Czechoslovakia was more under the domination of Soviet dictum. Czech artist Jan Kotík, born in Turnov in 1916, began to move from the stylized depiction of figures and interiors of the 1940s into a more nonrepresentational style during the 1950s. Kotík's composition, *Calligraphy* (1961), bespeaks the artist's preoccupation with the Asian art of calligraphy, especially Chinese. Inquisitive by nature, Kotík strove to learn much about the various philosophical systems as well as about art of the world's cultures. An occasional writer, critic, and admirer of books, he was fascinated by the magical shapes of Eastern calligraphies. He translated them into numerous compositions in which the white gestural lines and specks of white contrast with uniform black backgrounds. Kotík's participation in the *First World Conference of Situationists* in Alba in 1956 established a friendship with Asger Jorn of the CoBrA group that brought him into contact with the art world's developments.

It is important to note that exhibitions such as *Modern Art in the United States*, which traveled in Europe during 1955-56, and *The New American Painting*, which toured Europe in 1958-59—both organized by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art—were at least partially intended as instruments of political Cold War propaganda by raising issues of artistic freedom. They were, however, essential sources of knowledge for the artists and general public in the information-deprived environment of the Eastern bloc.³ Whatever the intentions of the organizers, these projects brought eagerly anticipated news to truly isolated places. Visits by critics such as Pierre Restany from Paris and Dore Ashton from New York were equally important. They offered connections and feedback that encouraged artists to continue working under dire circumstances.

As noted above, not all countries were equally repressive. Under the presidency of Josip Broz Tito, a highly decorated general and leader of the Partisans, Yugoslavia was able to assert a degree of independence from Moscow. That certainly affected the artistic opportunities of Edo Murtić, born in 1921 in Croatia. As with most of the young artists and intellectuals in prewar Europe, he was influenced by socialist ideas and during World War II joined resistance and liberation forces. After the war, Murtić was able to travel not only in Europe, where he encountered *Art Informel* and *Taschism* in France, but also, in 1951, to Canada and the United States, where he saw Abstract Expressionism first hand well before it was recognized as a dominant postwar artistic tendency.

The rectangles of color floating through the pictorial plane of Murtić's *White Background* (1959), as if in an unceasing entering and exiting of the painting, exude the feeling of persistent gentle movement. There is a striving for balance, as the segment of the bottom left black rectangle has a counterpoint in the corresponding shape in the upper right. The white background that gives the painting its title is also a strong compositional structural element as it frames and thus accentuates the floating forms. There is an atmospheric quality to this work, corresponding to Murtić's love of the Istrian coast and the magic of its ever-changing light. Always attracted to coastal imagery, Murtić created a very special brand of lyrical abstraction often endowed with discernible references to the natural elements.

Slovenian Andrej Jemec, born in 1934,⁴ also grew up in a world less restricted by Communist ideology. After his studies in Ljubljana in the 1950s, he was awarded a Preseren Foundation grant to travel and to study in both Paris and London in the early 1960s. His painting, *In the Forest* (1960), is an excellent example of work that could be approached either as a highly abstracted reflection of reality or a total abstraction. The predominant elements of the composition are wide intersecting bands of jagged black lines. They seem to provide structural underpinning to an otherwise chaotic composition, certainly suggestive of trees in the primeval forest felled by the cataclysm of a storm. The dramatic intensity of the overall composition is underscored by the source of light that emanates from the depth at the very center of the painting, either to illuminate the drama of the composition itself or to emphasize the almost post and lintel quality within the work.

Devoted primarily to abstraction, Romul Nuțiu, born in 1932 in Romania, began to experiment with a new technique in the late 1960s. Calling it an "aquatic experience," he poured water and industrial car paint into shallow vats. Those substances cannot really mix, but they created a residue of paint on the canvases suspended into the liquid containers. The artist then used a large wooden bar to direct the shapes of the paint's imprints. This physical interaction and its influence on the results of the imprints on canvas was the artist's individual expansion of the idea of Action Painting. He later collaged the canvas segments onto large relief-like compositions such as *Dynamic* (1967), which hover between the two-dimensionality of painting and the objectness of sculpture. In this way Nuțiu created a unique style very much his own.

Although works in the present exhibitions are not numerous, they represent the wide spectrum of divergent tendencies that are generally associated with Abstract Expressionism. Ranging from works where the energetic brushstrokes leave indelible marks of entangled lines and streaks of color, to works where there seems to be a striving for balance and the accent is on the defined areas of colors, there is a richness of ideas and forms. These artists, whose work might have been stifled by the political forces that required the subjugation of the individual to the dictum of societal needs, proved that the quest for artistic freedom irrepressibly growing within the artist's self can overcome external pressure, however forcefully it might be imposed.

¹ The 1959 exhibition, *Contemporary French Painting*, organized by Jean Cassou, and one-person exhibitions of works by Emilio Vedova in 1959 and Henry Moore in 1960 in Warsaw offered other connections to the world of art beyond the Iron Curtain.

² Prior to World War I, Galicia was part of Austria-Hungary. It was partitioned after the war, when a large part of it was integrated into Poland.

³ Michael Kimmelman, "Revisiting the Revisionists: The Modern and its Critics, and the Cold War," in *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid Century/ Art Home and Abroad*, in the series *Studies in Modern Art for MoMA*, distributed by Harry N. Abrams (New York, 2005), pp. 38-55, gives a succinct overview of the issues involved. The exhibitions referred to are *50 Ans d' Art Modern aux Etats-Unis: Collections du Musée d'Art Moderne de New York*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris (1955), which comprised selections from the museum's collections. It traveled to the Tate Gallery, London, in 1956 and later the paintings, sculpture and prints traveled to Zurich, Barcelona, Frankfurt, The Hague, Vienna and Belgrade, the only city in Eastern Europe that hosted the exhibition. In 1959 another exhibition, *The New American Painting*, organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art and the Arts Council of Great Britain, took place at the Tate and later traveled extensively in Europe. Belgrade was the only city in the Communist bloc to host the exhibition.

⁴ Both Edo Murtić and Andrej Jemec were born into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which was created in 1918 as a merger of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs with the Kingdom of Serbia. In November 1945 the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was established, but was broken up into individual republics during 1990-92, following the fall of Communism in the rest of Eastern Europe.



Andrej Jemec



A student of painting wanting to follow his own artistic vision during the 1950s in communist Yugoslavia could not avoid conflicts with professors if not prepared to reiterate clichés depicting an elaborate world of socialist ideology. If interested in exploring pictorial elements, shape, colour and light – like Andrej Jemec, who enrolled to study Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana in 1953 – one had to cautiously seek balance between one’s ambitions and the socio-cultural norms. Yugoslav society was then dominated by the materialistic philosophy of Marxism-Leninism that saw abstract art, which had abandoned materialist elements and focused on spirituality, as ideologically unacceptable. The artist had to stem from the actual world, and not from speculative ideas.

Shifting from figurative to abstract painting became easier for artists at the end of the 1950s as Yugoslav policy began to tolerate modern tendencies, wanting to appear less indoctrinated than the other Eastern bloc countries. Instead of the ideologically laden human figure, Jemec chose still-life as the starting point of artistic exploration. This “materialistic” motif was neutral enough in meaning to allow the visual transformation of the visible world in the manner of analytical and synthetic cubism, similarly to the painter’s idols of the time, Picasso and Braque. Jemec took the path of “de-objectifying objects,” as he defined his interest at the time.

Through systematic and gradual artistic analysis of the object world, Jemec realized that freedom in painting can be achieved by surrendering to its expressive potentialities and liberating the image of all commitments in transmitting narrative content. As he embarked on his independent art career in 1959 after graduating, it was no longer the world of concrete objects, but non-materialistic colour and light, which gained a central position in the syntax of his paintings. He began placing bright colour spots in the centre of the painting, using a central position as a semantic tool to display his artistic beliefs about light as the central problem of painting. This meant a turn from the modernist concept of the decentered composition to the traditional, yet this is how he emphasized the value of his discoveries.

He increased the effect of light and glowing colour by developing a dark grid over the light lower layer built of short, expressive strokes in gray or black, to which he added blue or red pigments to heighten the effect of special colour depth. Expressive, dark strokes spaced in fast rhythms are carefully controlled to compose a flat grid. So the light coming from behind began to contend with the dense tissue of the gesturally strung strokes stretching across the entire surface of the painting. He then crossed the central composition plan of the painting with new accents of its lateral spreading, forming the concept of the centre using the modernist *all-over* principles. The meaningful titling of the paintings also directs our reading through symbolization, whereby replacing the *Untitled*, typical of abstract expressionism. The paintings entitled *Battle* and *In the Forest* of 1960 warn of dramatic pictorial events and are concurrently intoned by the painter’s personal feeling of that time.

Jemec's progress into abstract expressionism came individually, as a carefully thought-out process, due to his systematic artistic nature. Experiences from the painting tradition, knowledge of contemporary developments in art, and reflections on the political reality of the time intertwined during its course. He realized his thought: "light is synonymous with freedom for me," consistently in painting, using painterly means, unhindered by any imposed structure, ideological or creative.

Nadja Zgonik

Translated by Arven Šakti Kralj Szomi



Andrej Jemec
In the Forest, 1960
Oil on canvas, 43 ½ x 45 ½ in. (110 x 116 cm.)
Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

Andrej Jemec

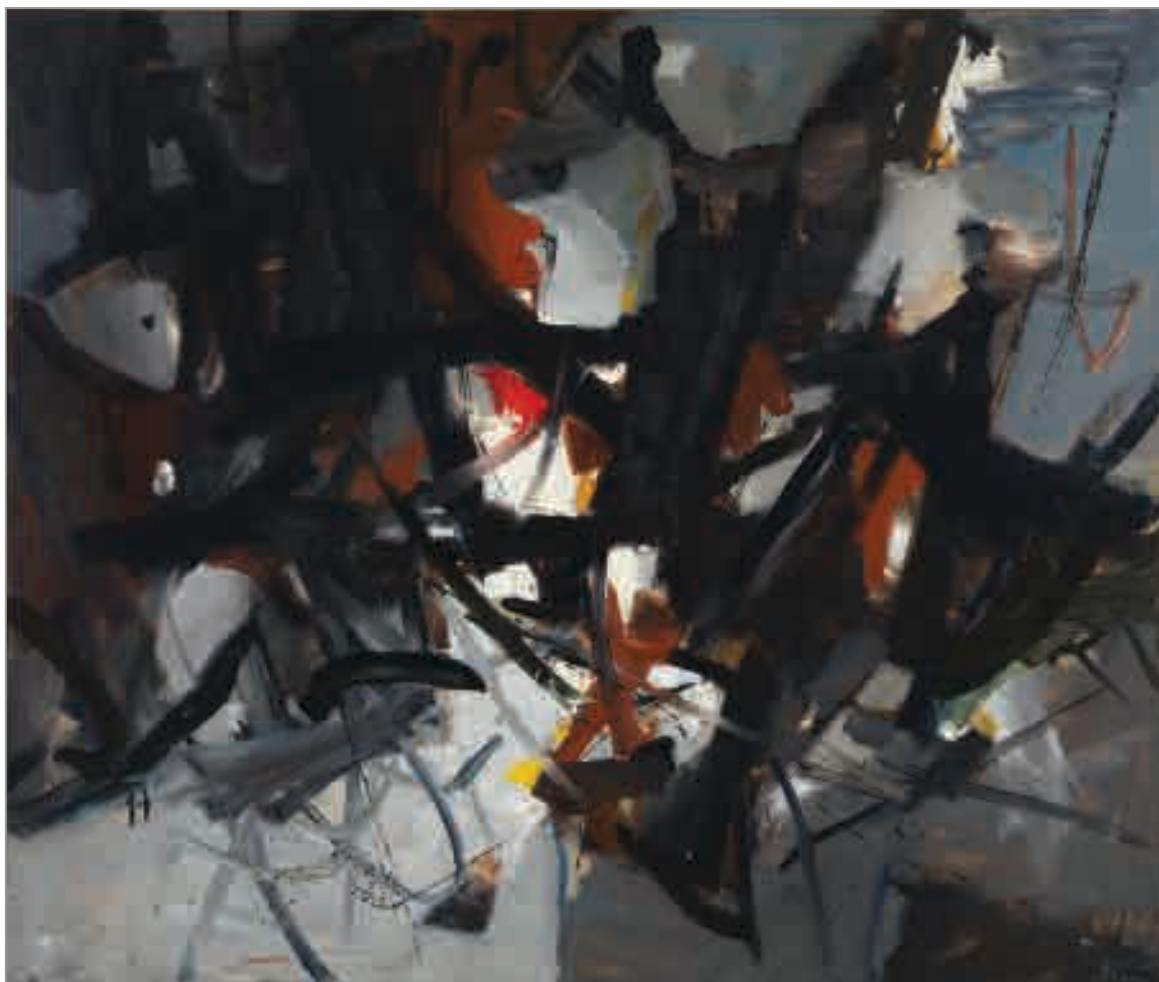
Born 29 November 1934, Vižmarje, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia.

Academy of Fine Arts, Ljubljana, 1953-58. Studied in Paris and London, 1963-64.

Lecturer, Academy of Fine Arts, Ljubljana, 1973-1984; professor of drawing and painting, 1984-1999.

Selected exhibitions: International Biennial of Graphic Art, Ljubljana, 1963-1999. Grand Prix International, Fourth Print Biennial, Tokyo, 1964. Prešeren Fund Award, Ljubljana, 1965. XXXV Venice Biennale, 1970, 1972. Bienal de São Paulo, 1971, 1977. "Yugoslav Art from Prehistory to Today," Paris, 1971. Medal of Honor, Third International Biennial of Graphic Art, Frechen, Germany, 1974. Third International Biennial of Graphic Art, Ljubljana, 1975. Silver Medal, International Print Triennial, Osaka, 1991.

Prešeren Award for life's work, Ljubljana, 1994. Golden Plaque, Ljubljana University, 1998. Austrian Honorary Cross for Science and Art, 2005.



Andrej Jemec
Battle, 1960
Oil on canvas, 45 ½ x 54 ¼ in. (116 x 137.5 cm.)
Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

Tadeusz Kantor



Tadeusz Kantor was once called “the best artist of the world from amongst Polish artists and the most Polish one from amongst artists of the world.” Already during his life, some considered him a genius, and others a master of mystification or only a clever imitator. Today, no one should doubt that Kantor was one of the greatest creators of twentieth century art, even though it is difficult to explain what the phenomenon of his imagination was based upon. He was a versatile artist—a “total” one, as he used to say—thus it is very risky to divide his output into individual disciplines. Being a stage designer, poet, actor, and stager of happenings, he made a name for himself as a man of the theater, but even in that domain he remained first of all a painter who thought with images and used actors and props instead of paints.

Even though he did not like the term, Kantor used to say that a good painting should be “directed.” “When somebody says that I am a director, I don’t agree,” he argued. “When he calls me a painter, I agree, because it’s an old term of enormous tradition, but the director? Only about two hundred years.” Painting was for him an actual laboratory of ideas, a private scene of dialogue with tradition, the avant-garde, and the whole world. It is worth looking at the pictures that explain successive steps of Kantor’s artistic path. In them he comes into view sometimes more clearly than on the stage.

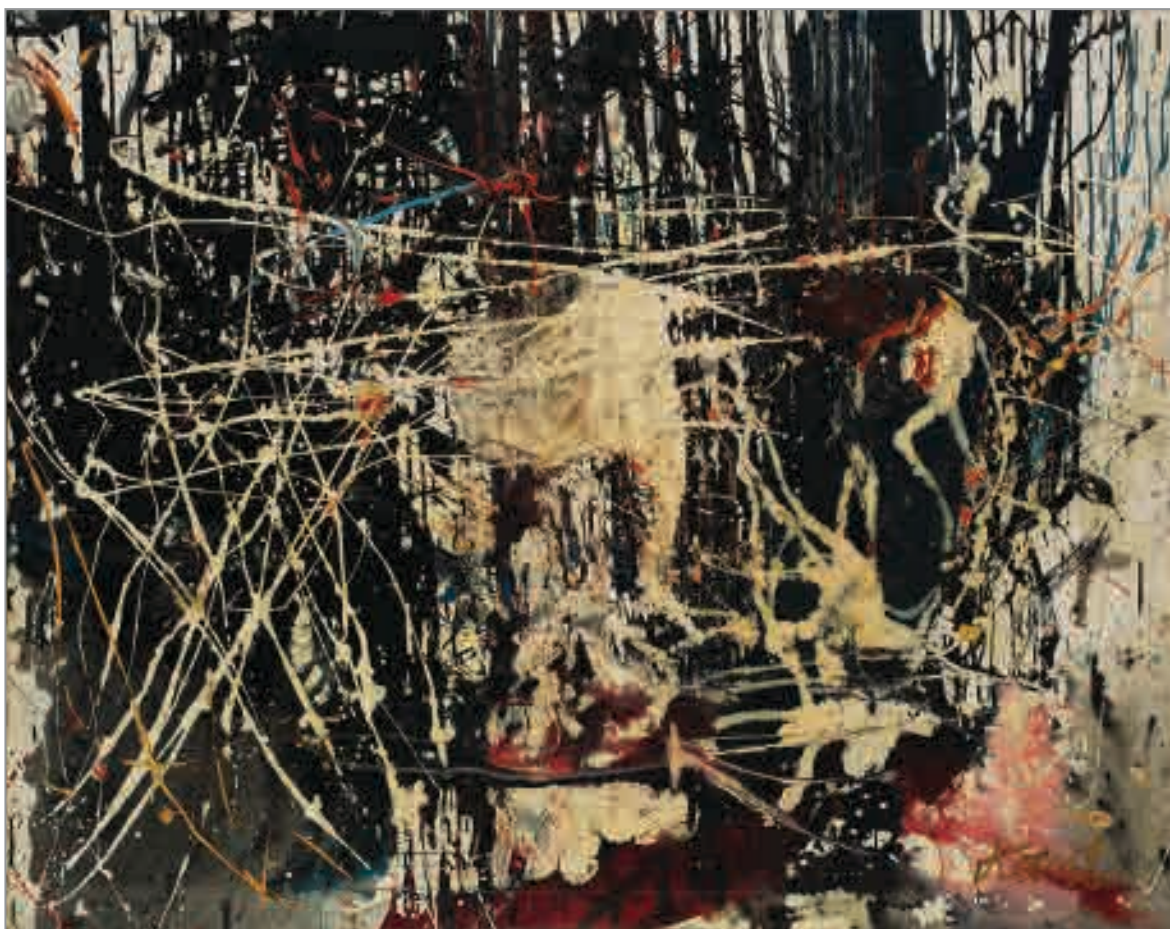
His “metaphoric pictures” painted in the 1940s, full of tangled and deformed figures, were his way of getting over the war and post-war traumas. Those pictures explained psychic entanglements by means of the language of spatial tensions. His abstract informel canvases of the 1950s, such as *Composition*, “dispelled with the wind of chance” are, in turn, the record of impetuous gesture, manifestations of freedom, but also the germ of drama. As Kantor remembered: “It was a secretion of my INSIDE where passions, desires, despair and delight, regrets of the past and all its longings were whirling along with the memory of everything and with the thought that fluttered as a bird during a storm.”

When eventually Kantor became bored with abstract art, and when returning to illusionistic painting seemed to be impossible, he began including real materials and objects into pictures. He concealed the reality under wrappers; hence his famous *emballages*. After that he made art from everything. As he used to say, “Metaphysics must have its own physics.” The most common garbage, all the “reality of the lowest rank”—bags, umbrellas, notes, crumpled rags and pieces of paper—all this could become that kind of physics. He directed all his energy to transgressing conventions: hence his numerous actions, happenings, and conceptual ideas. His series *The Vicinity of Zero* and *Everything's Hanging by a Slender Thread* sounded as the obituary of painting. But in the end Kantor always appeared to be a true and actual painter who often returned to the easel. At the end of his life he painted surprisingly traditional and sentimental pictures having the virtue of personal confession.

Krystyna Czerni

Translated by Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska

Courtesy of Centre for the Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor CRICOTEKA, Kraków



Tadeusz Kantor
Composition, 1958
Oil on canvas, 47 ¼ x 59 ½ in. (120 x 151 cm.)
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

Tadeusz Kantor

6 April 1915, Wielopole Skrzyńskie, Austria-Hungary – 8 December 1990, Kraków, Poland.

Kraków Academy of Fine Arts, 1933-39. Professor, State School of Fine Arts, 1947.

Founded the Underground Independent Theatre, Kraków, 1943. Founding member, Young Visual Artists' Group, 1945. Organized First Modern Art Exhibition, Kraków, 1948. Founded Cricot 2 Theater, 1955. Involved in creating the Krzysztofory Gallery for contemporary art, 1957.

Selected exhibitions: Dom Plastyków, Kraków, 1955. Second Modern Art Exhibition, Krzysztofory Gallery, 1957. Samlaren Gallery, Stockholm, and "L'art du XXI- siecle. Rendez-vous de l'avant-garde international," Palais des Expositions, Charleroi, France, 1958. Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, and Documenta 2, Kassel, 1959. Saidenberg Gallery, New York, and XXX Venice Biennale, 1960. "15 Polish Painters," Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961. Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden, Galerie de l'Université, Paris, Galerie Handschin, Basel, and Galerie Pierre, Stockholm, 1966. "Happening and Fluxus," Kölner Kunstverein, Cologne, and International Exhibition, "Galleries Pilotes," Lausanne and Paris, 1970. Museum of Art, Łódź, and Kulturhuset, Stockholm, 1975. Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1976; Galerie Ricard, Nuremberg, 1976, 1977. Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome and Palazzo Reale, Milan, 1979. Galerie de France, Paris, 1982. Maison de la Culture, Grenoble, 1984.

Traveled widely in Europe; to the United States for seven months, 1965.

Rembrandt Prize of the J. W. Goethe Foundation, Basel, 1978.



Tadeusz Kantor
Chelsea, 1965
Oil on canvas, 31 ½ x 35 ½ in. (80 x 90 cm.)
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

Jan Kotík



Jan Kotík was born into the family of a painter, Pravoslav Kotík, in the city of Turnov in Northern Bohemia, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Since his early youth Kotík was an active participant in contemporary art, culture and political debates, and was able to address several disciplines and theoretical standpoints. While working as an apprentice in a Turnov print shop, he developed a life-long interest in book art and typography. In 1935 he entered the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague and studied with Jaroslav Benda, a celebrated book designer. Still a student, he exhibited at the 1937 *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* in Paris, where Benda's atelier was awarded a medal in the Typography and Book Section.

After completing his studies, during World War II Kotík became a member of Skupina 42 (Group 42). The group's predominant subject was city life, without romanticizing its bleak aspects or diminishing its inhabitants' mundane experiences. During the 1940s the urban environment influenced Kotík's choice of subjects, which he interpreted using expressionist distortions of figures and objects and a colorful palette. After the group's demise in 1948, he largely abandoned figuration and began to explore gestural abstraction, which remained the predominant style for the rest of his career. Nevertheless, some of his early typographical experiences can be detected in a number of his later abstract works, where the compositional division alludes to the pages of books and calligraphic forms reminiscent of lettering may be discerned.

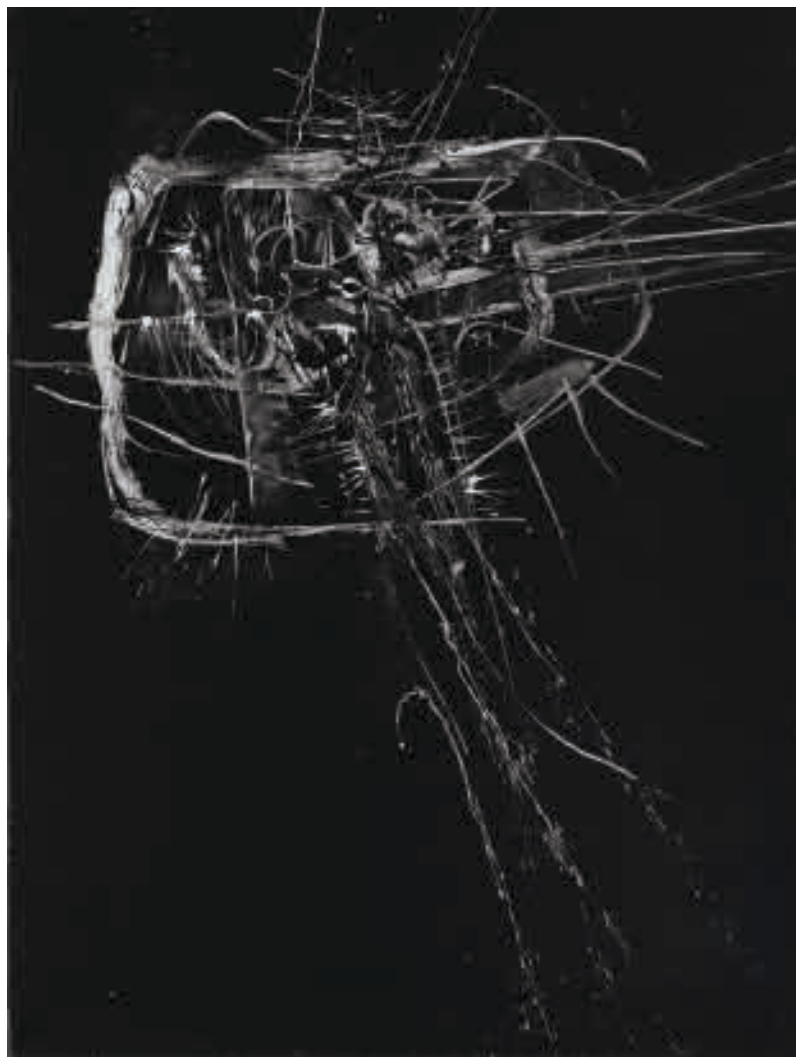
Although radically left leaning, Kotík was an early opponent of Socialist Realism, the only style tolerated after the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948. Because of his non-conformist approach he was prohibited from exhibiting; in spite of this, he was an active member of the postwar Czech art world. From 1947 he was head of the workshops and studios of the Ustředí lidové a umělecké výroby, or *úluv* (center for folk art and craft). He edited the magazine *Tvar (Form)* for the first three years of its existence in the late 1940s and early '50s, and began publishing texts and theoretical essays in *Tvar* in 1948. In the fall of 1957, during a temporary thaw in the government-regulated cultural policy, he had a solo exhibition in the gallery Československý spisovatel (Czechoslovak Writer) in Prague, one of the pre-eminent exhibition spaces, known in the past as Galerie u Topiče (Topič Gallery). This was the first exhibit of non-conformist art in Prague after 1948. Although Kotík was working primarily as a painter, he was deeply invested in issues of design. In the 1950s and '60s he designed objects for the Škrdlovice glassworks in northern Bohemia, and also occasionally designed tapestries and earthenware. He participated in the World Expo 58 in Brussels, where he was represented by a glass mosaic titled *Slunce-vzduch- voda (Sun-Air-Water)*. In 1962 he completed a decade-long translation of the canonical Chinese texts, *Tao Te Ching*.

After the Russian-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 Kotík lived in Sweden and later, after being awarded a German Academic Exchange Service Fellowship (DAAD), he moved to West Berlin. He became increasingly known internationally, with numerous exhibitions in Germany (Museum Bochum in 1978, Museum Folkwang, Essen, in 1986, and the Gropius House, Berlin, in 1997), in the United

States at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, in 1984, and after 1990 in Czechoslovakia. He died in Berlin in 2002.

His multidisciplinary background led Kotík to formal inventiveness. He became a visual “researcher,” something most apparent in his conceptual, experimental works from the 1970s and 1980s. He moved freely from the two dimensionality of painting to three dimensional objects, some of which he might later dismember and recompose into new configurations. His choice of materials was equally unorthodox; he believed that anything could be used to express an idea. He is represented in numerous public and private collections around the world. In the fall of 2013 the National Gallery in Prague held a major retrospective of Kotík's work, and the catalogue raisonné of his oeuvre was published simultaneously.

Charlotta Kotík



Jan Kotík
Calligraphy (Black Painting), 1961
Oil on canvas, 51 x 38 1/8 in. (130 x 97 cm.)
Petr Kotík, Brooklyn, New York

Jan Kotík

4 January 1916, Turnov, Austria-Hungary – 23 March 2002, Berlin, Germany.

Academy of Applied Arts, Prague, 1935-41. Active in the resistance against Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia.

First album of prints, "Testament of Burning Country," 1939. Founding member of Skupina 42 (Group 42), 1942.

Selected exhibitions: Galerie Contemporaine, Brussels, 1959. Galeria Skandinavia, Stockholm, 1968. Staatliche Kunsthalle, Berlin, 1972. Gallery Tanit, Munich, 1973. Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin, 1979. Orangerie, Schloss Charlottenberg, Berlin, 1979. State University of New York, 1983. Albright-Knox Art Gallery Buffalo, NY, 1984. Folkwang Museum, Essen, 1986. Gallery Ueda, Tokyo, 1988. Flaxman Gallery, London, 1989. City Gallery, Prague, 1991. Staatlich Kunsthalle, Berlin, 1993. Kinsky Palace, Prague, 1996. National Gallery, Prague, 2002 (memorial exhibition). Veletržní Palace, Prague, 2013.

Bronze medal for Graphics, Exposition Internationale, Paris, 1937; Silver Medal for glass sculpture, Expo 58, Brussels, 1958. Fred Thieler Award for Painting, Berlin, 1997.



Jan Kotík
Painting 22 (Whiteboard), 1964
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 57 ½ x 63 ¾ in. (146 x 162 cm.)
Petr Kotík, Brooklyn, New York

Edo Murtić



Edo Murtić's oeuvre is perceived as the pinnacle and the ideal, optimistic embodiment of the aesthetic phenomenon known as Socialist Modernism, which marked Croatian art and Yugoslav culture in the second half of the 20th century. In the field of visual expression, Murtić's painting, with its vivacious intensity—especially during the 1950s and '60s—optimally reflected the positive aspects of the then state politics, which introduced non-alignment and self-management Socialism into the global Cold War context. For my parents' generation, Murtić's energetic colouristic explosions marked the end of post-war Socialist society's proverbial greyness.

The Copernican turn in Yugoslav society occurred in 1948 when its ruler, Marshal Tito, severed all ties with Stalin, thus enabling the state to come out of the Soviet bloc political shadow. This political change permitted the development of a vibrant and permissive cultural environment in the following decades. It prompted abandonment of the aesthetics of Socialist Realism and an opening up to the international tendencies of high modernism. In the visual arts, it led to the prevalence of variations of Abstract Expressionism.

At that time Murtić was already one of the leading painters. He was creating in the style of lyric realism, but already showed a tendency toward abstraction. Murtić strengthened this trend during his stay in the United States from 1951 to 1952, where he befriended Jackson Pollock and met James Brooks, Willem de Kooning and Richard Diebenkorn, thus experiencing action painting at its very source. The result was his exhibition, *Experience of America*, which would tour Yugoslav cultural centers in 1953. With its abstract elements, the show caused reactions after which nothing on the local art scene was ever the same again. In the spring of that year, in the gallery of the Society of Architects in Zagreb, a group of artists EXAT 51 (1950 – 1956) presented the first exhibition of abstract art in the Socialist world.

These exhibitions mark the beginning of the rift that determined a certain duality in the local art scene. The trend of which Murtić is the best known representative evolved into a prevalent art movement known locally as Socialist Modernism. The other creative line developed its aesthetics on the heritage of Constructivism, from which stemmed multiple neo-avant-garde movements. Locally it is known as the art of the "second line," which despite its strong presence in galleries and public spaces has achieved its full affirmation and institutional valorisation only during recent decades.

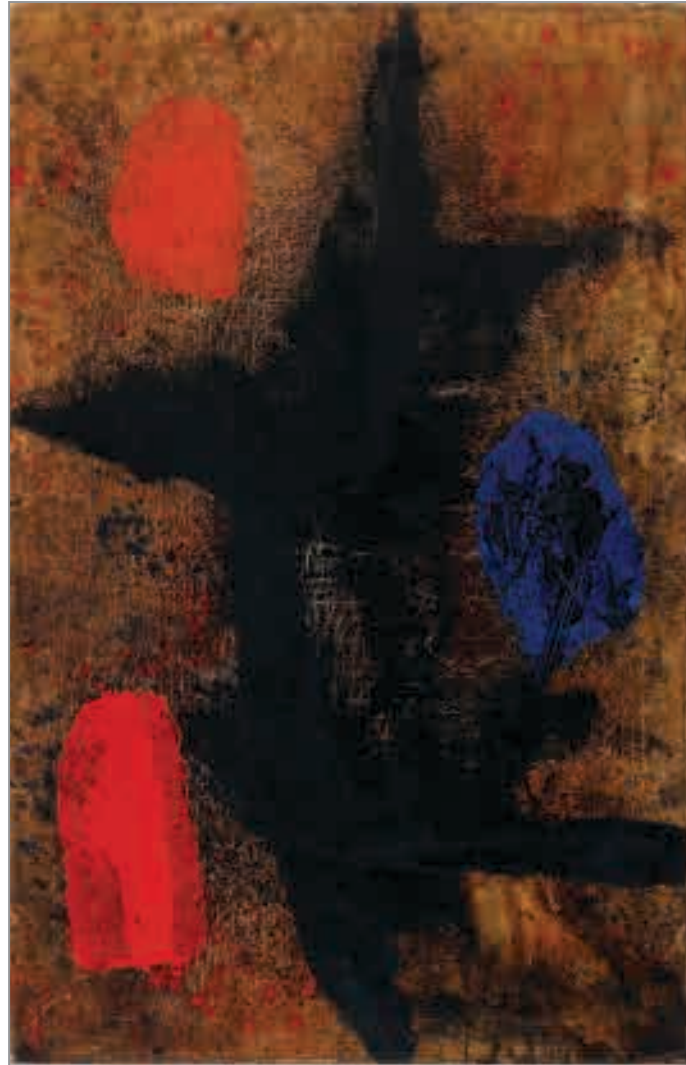
The co-existence of these two opposing art directions, which often resulted in rivalry and controversy, represented the richness of local art scene, and thus made it completely different from the rest of the proverbially monolithic, rigid Socialist societies. Murtić's generation of artists was the first in local history and its context of eternal periphery to create in sync with the international aesthetic paradigm. They formed a cultural environment that allowed the following generations to be in the forefront of subsequent international art movements.

The energetic gesture, powerful colorism, and general vitality of the cycle, *Experience of America*, announced an aesthetic paradigm that Murtić would further develop during the 1960s into monumental abstract compositions in his trademark idiom. In the 1950s his style was closer to art informel and tachisme—the European variants of Abstract Expressionism. It was precisely this type of painting, rich in pictorial dynamism, which brought him his first success abroad and established him as an internationally relevant artist. After his renowned presentation at the 1958 Venice Biennale, Peggy Guggenheim knocked on the door of his Zagreb atelier and bought a few of his paintings.

During the country's greatest economic development and building boom, Murtić was commissioned to create monumental works that decorate public buildings, luxury hotels, and churches. He also capitalized on his artistic success to become an influential cultural advocate. In 1969, together with a group of artists, he founded the still active Forum Gallery in Zagreb, which gained its high reputation with exhibitions, not only of local artists, but also of Murtić's international colleagues such as Emilio Vedova, Antoni Tàpies, Joan Miró, Rafael Canogar and Eduardo Chillida.

The Murtić family has offered the donation of a large number of his significant works to the City of Zagreb. In addition to the artist's personal archives and documentation, the donation includes a museum which, under the patronage of the Murtić Foundation, will exhibit his oeuvre, work by his contemporaries, and art that continues the aesthetics of high modernism and the values of liberal democracy which Murtić promoted with his work, standpoint, and reputation.

Branko Franceschi



Edo Murtić
Untitled, 1959
Oil on canvas, 67 x 30 ¼ in. (170 x 77 cm.)
Foundation Murtić, Zagreb

Edo Murtić

4 May 1921, Velika Pisanica, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – 2 January 2005, Zagreb, Croatia.

Craft School, Zagreb, 1935-39. Academy of Fine Arts, Zagreb, 1939, 1941, interrupted by study in Belgrade, 1940.

Founding member of Mart (March) group, 1956. Founding member of Forum Gallery, Zagreb, 1969.

Selected exhibitions: Partisan Art Exhibition, Topusko, Dubrovnik, Split, Šibenik, Zadar and Zagreb, 1944-45. Umelečka beseda Gallery, Prague, 1946. Trojica (The Three) exhibition, Zagreb and Belgrade, 1948. Exhibitions in New York, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and San Pedro, California, 1951-52. III Biennale, Tokyo; "Impressions of America," Association of Croatian Visual Artists, Zagreb, and Association of Serbian Visual Artists, Belgrade, 1953. Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1955. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, 1956. XXIX Venice Biennale, Carnegie International Exhibition, Pittsburgh, Documenta, Kassel, 1958. "New Painting from Yugoslavia," Boston, Washington and New York, 1960. "L'Art Contemporain en Yougoslavie," Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, also Stockholm, Rome and Bari, 1962. XXXII Venice Biennale, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, 1964. IX Biennale, São Paulo, Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, 1967. Palazzo Reale, Milan, 1971. III Biennale of Graphic Art, Tokyo, 1972. Galerie d'Art International, Paris, 1980. 17th São Paulo Biennale, 1983. Museum of Arts and Crafts, Zagreb, 1990. City Museum Revoltella, Trieste, 2000. Museum of Contemporary Art, Ibiza, 2002. Harrach Palace, Vienna, 2004.

Traveled to Rome, 1941, Paris, 1948, the United States and Canada, 1958; to the United States, 1951-52, 1987, 1994.

Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres, France, 1988. Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1997. Vladimir Nazor Award for life's work, 2001. Prize for lifetime achievement, Premio Lissone, 2003.



Edo Murtić
White Background, 1959
Oil on canvas, 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 52 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (106 x 134 cm.)
Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb

Romul Nuțiu



“Abstract expressionism and the European informal made me understand that I have to keep my own authenticity and sensitivity.”

--Romul Nuțiu¹

Romul Nuțiu developed his personal approach to action painting in the late 1960s. According to his account when I met him in 2007, and later from his daughter's description, this act of creation, called “the aquatic experience,” can be imagined in the following way:

First Nuțiu installed several troughs of approximately five feet square and four inches deep on the ground in front of his studio. The troughs were filled with water and colors of industrial paint were poured into them. This produced various scrolls, bubbles, and swirls, as the oil-based industrial colors were not absorbed by the water. Nuțiu then used a stick to “play” with the floating material. Like a magician, he moved rhythmically from trough to trough and created various accidental configurations.

When it seemed that the effect had been “finished,” the canvas was positioned on the surface of the water and absorbed the paint. Always interested in the third dimension, Nuțiu also inserted shaped wooden pieces into the troughs. He finally intervened with strokes and obliteration. He was creating these works in his private world, while outside, socialistic realism was the doctrine of the day. This approach was as new in the '60s in Romania as were Pollock's poured paintings from 1947-48 in the USA.

Nuțiu graduated from the Fine Arts Institute in Cluj in 1957 and settled in Timișoara. At the end of the '50s he started using folk elements inspired by Banatian carpet² and discovered abstract signs, which he then repeatedly integrated into the vibrant surfaces of his paintings. In the early '60s he began to create so-called modular compositions, in which the material itself is fragmented and then recomposed in dynamic chains of deviated perspectives.

Years later, in 1975, the art historian and curator Coriolan Babeți, who also lived in Timișoara, proposed a solo exhibition of Nuțiu's “aquatic experience” works. The exhibition, *Dynamic Universe*, at the Helios gallery (Artists Union gallery), was a breakthrough in the Romanian art world and in fact the first exhibition of an indigenous Abstract Expressionist painter. Shortly after, it was also shown at the Art Museum in Cluj. In the catalogue, Babeți describes the artist as a creator and witness of a genesis, and speaks about his “humble repetition of the demiurgical³ act.”

With this exhibition Nuțiu caught the attention of several art critics, such as Mircea Deac, Vasile Dragut, and Mircea Toca, who were starting to open themselves up to different types of art. An exhibition shown in Bucharest, Cluj and Timișoara, *Disappearance and Appearance of the Image: American Painting After 1945*, organized by the Smithsonian Institution in 1969, certainly contributed to this change. This historical exhibition, realized in the context of President Nixon's visit to Romania, was a

turning point that triggered not only the imagination of many artists, but also influenced the mindset of art critics for a short period of time.

The link of Nuțiu's work to Abstract Expressionism was only recognized by Romanian art historians late in his life. Many solo exhibitions took place after 2000; catalogues and books were written by well-known critics such as Ruxandra Demetrescu, Liviana Dan, and Alexandra Titu. On the occasion of the 2011 exhibition at the Brukenthal National Museum in Sibiu, Liviana Dan wrote:

"Eloquent in power, line, fragility, painting, object painting [and] action remain profoundly interconnected in Nuțiu's art. Departing from the restrictive data of Abstract Expressionism, Nuțiu has constantly examined how painting reacts in an expanded context and space. Affected by theory, he has discovered different methods to look at painting. The pictorial investigations lead him slowly, but undoubtedly, to comprehensive installation. An illusion ever reformulated by color. A rule that helped him exist."

Joana Grevers

¹ Romul Nuțiu. "Elan Vital - Interview with the artist." Bucharest: 418 Contemporary Art Gallery, 2008 (1st ed.), p. 4.

² "In [the] Banat and Maramureș regions, they used to weave wall carpets in panels; on the surface of those they used to represent either geometrical forms or vegetal, zoomorphic or even anthropomorphic motifs. . . . In Banat, the carpets are made in a technique mixing the Kelim type with the Karamani way of weaving each form independently." See <http://peasantartcraft.com/traditional-wall-carpets/>

³ A demiurge is a Platonic deity who orders or fashions the material world out of chaos.



Romul Nuțiu
Compozitie Modulara IV, 1966
Oil on canvas, 51 x 51 in. (130 x 130 cm.)
Private collection, courtesy Fundatia Joana Grevers, Munich

Romul Nuțiu

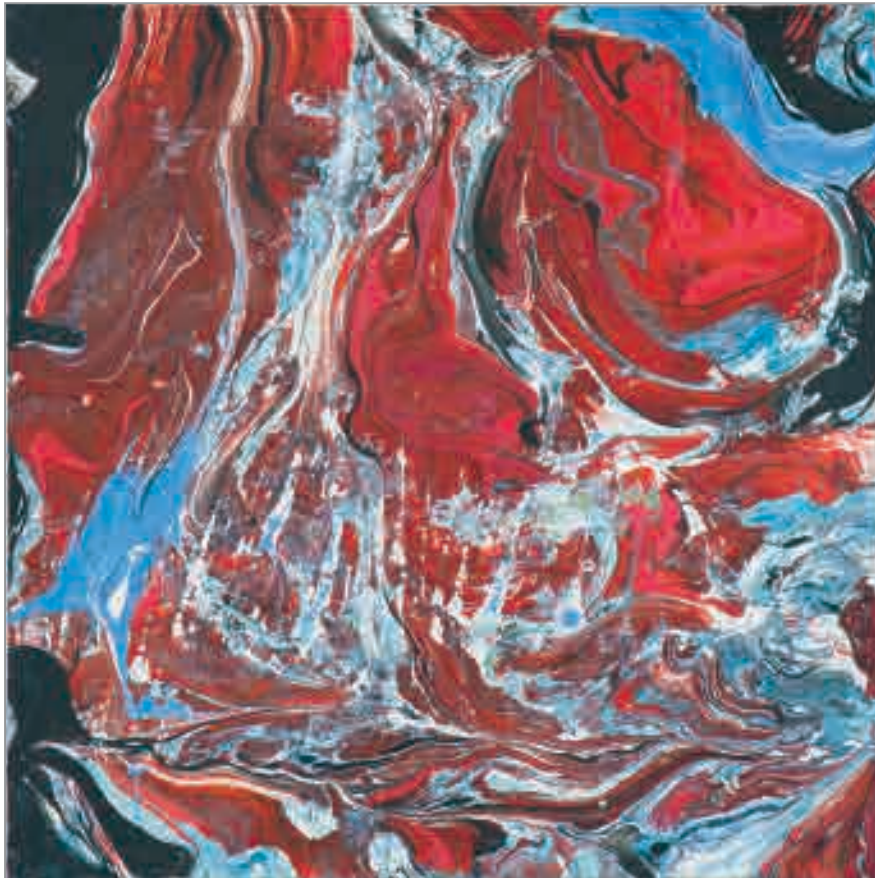
28 July 1932, Bilbor, Harghita, Romania – 5 April 2012, Timișoara, Romania.

Fine Arts Institute, Cluj, 1951-57. Fine Arts Institute, Bucharest, 1958.

Joined Romanian Artists Union, 1961. Lecturer, Drawing Faculty, University of Timișoara, 1961-79. Professor, Art Faculty, West University, Timișoara, 1992-98; Associate Professor, 2002.

Selected exhibitions: Annual Fine Arts Salon, Timișoara, 1957 and thereafter. Romanian National Biennial, Bucharest, 1959. Annual Salon of Graphic Arts, Bucharest, 1964-65. Romanian Art Exhibition, Torino, Italy, 1970. Helios Art Gallery, Timișoara, 1975, 1988, 2004. Art Gallery, Aeugensterthal bei Türlensee, Switzerland, 1979. Barsinghaus Nieteuscheid, Germany, 1980. XI International Fair of Culture, Art, Journalism, Beogradski, Yugoslavia, 1985. Romanian Art Exhibition, ICA, London, 1986, and Glasgow, 1987. Sparkasse, Karlsruhe, Germany, 1996. Romanian Cultural Center, Vienna; Key Gallery, Springfield, Mass., 1998. National Art Museum, Szeged, Hungary, 2000. Yehudi Menuin Hall, European Parliament, Brussels, 2005. 418 Contemporary Art Gallery, Bucharest, 2009-17. Deux Clochers Gallery, St. Génis des Fontaines, France, 2010. Timișoara Art Museum, 2012 (memorial exhibition).

First Prize, Painting, Romanian Artists Union, 2004.



Romul Nuțiu
Dynamic Universe XXIV, 1970
Mixed media on canvas, 47 x 47 in. (120 x 120 cm.)
Private collection, courtesy Fundatia Joana Grevers, Munich

CONTRIBUTORS

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Branko Franceschi is the director of Museum of the Avant-garde in Zagreb. In addition to his many curatorial projects, he has created residencies for Croatian artists at MoMA PS1 and Art in General in New York. He is currently the president of AICA Croatia.

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