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Book Review[1]
Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015, viii + 299 pp., ISBN 9789633860687

Maja Fowkes, in her book *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism,* discusses the environmental activism of artistic groups and individuals on the other side of the Iron Curtain during the 1960s and 1970s. These groups include Pécs Workshop from Hungary, OHO from Slovenia, and TOK from Croatia (Slovenia and Croatia were part of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia at the time these two were active), and Rudolf Sikora from Slovakia and Petr Štembera from the Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia at the time). Several aspects figure prominently in the analysis of these groups and individuals, including the Anthropocene as a planetary phenomenon; the different status of ecology as a scientific discipline and field with dissident potential in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia; the complex relation between neo-avant-garde art and the environment; and the issue of historical contextualization of neo-avant-garde art from the so-called Eastern Bloc within Western and global art history.

As Fowkes notes, the book is "intended as a contribution to the environmental history of art" and it "considers the intricate artistic practices formulated as responses to perceived transformations in the environment as a result of ecological crisis, which in the early 1970s was for the first time felt to exceed national borders and span the globe" (3). These transformations in the environment caused by human activity are today acknowledged by the term "Anthropocene", naming a new geological epoch after the Holocene. Anthropocene marks the period of substantial environmental change as a consequence of human activity, and several historical dates have been proposed, including the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (when substantial fossil fuel extraction as well as the accumulation of carbon-related emissions in the atmosphere began), the first atom bomb testing (with deposits

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of radioactivity), and the invention of plastic. In the Eastern Bloc, anthropogenic change was a consequence of a "distinctive socialist version of industrial modernity, which was founded on the belief that communist goals were to be achieved through growth and lay at the heart of the project of the 'building of socialism.'" However, instead of "benefits of a promised better future", this project "left 'the land disfigured, [the] water poisoned, the air polluted,' and its citizens 'experiencing growing environmental degradation'" as a consequence of "the priority of economic development at the cost of relentless exploitation of natural resources" (4). It is in this context that Fowkes reads the artistic practices of Pécs Workshop, OHO, TOK, Sikora, and Štembera, paying close attention to the specificities of each country within which they were active, especially when it comes to the availability of information on the state of the environment as well as ecology as a scientific discipline and social cause.

Pécs Workshop performed their pieces on the outskirts of the town of Pécs on "the borders of cleared areas and woods, a stone mine, a sand mine, and a deforested wood – in short, sites altered by the human exploitation of natural resources." As Fowkes writes, "although in their land art practice there is no explicit social or environmental message, their systematic selection of sites that had been entirely transformed through industrial exploitation of raw materials indicates a critical attitude" (52). In other words, the natural environment is not a neutral background for artistic practice, although there was no systematic engagement with the question of preserving the natural environment in the form of ecological discourse, considering that information on ecological concerns was not freely shared in Hungary until 1985 and the appearance of the Danube Circle. A similar situation regarding the availability of ecological discourse was present in Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring as a consequence of the process of "normalization", that is, the silencing of all dissident voices. In Slovakia, the turn to nature and cosmos in the practice of art was a reaction to the backlash after the Prague Spring, while in the Czech Republic artists turned to themselves. All through the 1970s, Sikora in Slovakia produced some of the most engaged ecological art. He also used the ecological aspect in his neo-avant-garde practice to broach national and ideological boundaries while examining the global, the planetary, and the cosmological in his art. On the other hand, in the Czech Republic, Štembera, in his performance and body art pieces, "broke the barriers alienating humans from other species in his direct, technology-free, and nonhierarchical approach to animals, attunement to plants, and awareness of natural elements and processes", which can be understood as a reaction to instrumentalization of nature (214).

The situation regarding environmental discourse and ecology was very different in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia compared to Hungary and Czechoslovakia at the time. The main reason for the difference lies in Yugoslavia's nonaligned position after breaking with the Soviet Union in 1948. Yugoslavia had since formed its own version of socialism called "self-managed socialism" and had a more open stance toward the West in terms of the flow of information and people across borders. As Fowkes writes, it was a matter of "tolerant oppression" (116). Fowkes reads the eco-art

actions taken by the artistic group TOK in Zagreb, such as transparent trash cans, postcards with factories instead of scenic views, and performances that turned attention to air pollution due to a sudden surge in the number of privately owned cars on the streets (as a sign of prosperity under socialism), "as a substitute for the voicing of direct political issues on the one hand, while on the other hand containing an unstated denial of the political implications raised by environmental problems" (117). OHO in Slovenia went through several stages in their practice, from purely conceptual *reizam*, artistic experiments with various natural materials, to the countercultural and mystical-cosmological Šempas commune as an experiment in living in attunement with nature. However, "it would be wrong to assume that OHO's engagement with the environment happened on a neutral territory, where worldly realms such as the social system had no influence or consequence for their extraterrestrial concerns", since the commune was kept under surveillance during the time it existed (109).

At the end of the book, Fowkes writes that "the attitudes and approaches to [the] environment of the young generation of Central European artists were on the one hand synchronous with other artistic impulses from around the globe which voiced unprecedented awareness of the looming ecological crisis, while on the other hand the specific circumstances in which the many filters of the Iron Curtain acutely influenced the flow of information and exchange resulted in exceptional contributions to the convergence of art and ecology" (264). This book is a rare example of research on the history of environmental concerns at the cross-section of art and politics from the "other side" of the Iron Curtain. It is a welcome addition to the growing body of Anthropocene studies, as well as the history of East and Central European art.