

Kristóf Nagy (2023) *East Central Europe*, Vol. 50. No. 2-3. pp. 404-407.

Published pdf: https://brill.com/view/journals/eceu/50/2-3/article-p404_012.xml

Esanu, Octavian. *The Postsocialist Contemporary: The Institutionalization of Artistic Practice in Eastern Europe after 1989*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021. 288 pp. ISBN 9781526158000. Language: English.

Critical analysis of the postsocialist transition and condition in Eastern Europe is not a novelty in historical or social scientific scholarship. Indeed, within the historiography of Eastern European modern and contemporary art, dominant threads of inquiry are socialist-state practices and dissent. Given this disciplinary context, Octavian Esanu's book *The Postsocialist Contemporary*, which offers a thorough critique of postsocialist artistic production, is a pioneering work.¹

In what ways did changes in the art scene mirror the post socialist transition? How did artistic trends relate to the political-economic transformations taking place in the former Eastern Bloc? *The Postsocialist Contemporary* aims to answer these questions by investigating the Eastern European network of Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA). Rather than offering an in-depth history of George Soros's philanthropy or the SCCA, the volume focuses on historicizing the notion of contemporary art and explaining how neoliberalism infiltrated post-1989 cultural production in the region. The volume skillfully experiments with a historical-materialist approach to art and culture, which the author defines as a "Marxist-sympathetic form of art critical and art historical analysis." This review will not debate with the analytical frame; instead, it will focus on the strengths and inconsistencies of this approach.

¹ This review relies on the author's contribution to a roundtable organized about the book in November 2022 at the Central European Research Institute for Art History. The recording of the event is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5l8yrwYAGs>

Historicizing the rise of contemporary art across Eastern Europe, Esanu does not consider it a conscious and autonomous project but argues that the emergence of contemporary art was a byproduct of the postsocialist transition. In adopting this analytical frame, the volume goes against approaches that analyze artistic and cultural changes by separating them from broader political-economic shifts. The author defines contemporary art as an “aesthetics of problem-solving” that deals with specific social issues in an antipolitical and technocratic manner. Consequently, Esanu links contemporary art to the often-technocratic politics of postsocialist and contrasts it with modernism, which was often engaged in mass politics. Since Esanu's objective is to write a social art history (4), his analysis of technocratic neoliberalism in the arts could have been deepened by engaging with the vibrant historical and social scientific scholarship on postsocialism that has developed over more than three decades. By now, this polyphonic scholarship fills libraries, but it is barely touched on in the volume.

Esanu describes the rise of this technocratic model of art in Eastern Europe as a process that accompanied the fall of the state-socialist Artists' Unions, which were mass organizations that united all artists in a formally democratic institutional structure. The volume contrasts this welfarist model with the project-oriented organizational model of contemporary art introduced in Eastern Europe first by the SCCA network. As Esanu argues, the SCCA was the antidote to the fine arts of state socialism due to both its antipolitical content and management structure. The latter was based on small, project-oriented institutions primarily composed of curators and, rarely, artists. Therefore, in the context of the 1990s, even the formally democratic management of cultural production ceased, and it became the territory of curators experimenting with exhibitions adjusted to the Popperian-Sorosian idea of a liberal “open society.” The managerial mechanisms of the network play a key role in Esanu's arguments about SCCA as the vehicle of neoliberalism in the local art scenes of the region. As Esanu states, the Soros Centers of Contemporary Art neither promoted market values directly nor acted as art dealers; rather, the

Centers introduced new rules to the local art scenes, and these activities laid the groundwork for the neoliberal turn of local arenas of cultural production (31).

The volume presents the emergence of contemporary art in Eastern Europe not only as the antithesis of the state-led cultural production of socialism but also as a product of developmentalist modernization. To understand the global context of the postsocialist transition, Esanu critically reiterates Habermas's theory on Eastern European "catching-up revolutions," demonstrating how the adaptation of contemporary art intertwined with the region's both desired and forced embrace of Western standards. This claim is supported by various evidence – from the network's public launch, which targeted an international audience of art experts at the Venice Biennial, to the fact that in the local languages of Eastern Europe, the term "contemporary art was often pronounced and written in English" (26–27). Esanu's analysis of this uneven development unfolds through an analysis of the most significant exhibitions launched by SCCA networks' in the 1990s, which (1) framed the transition as a return to normality; (2) proposed issue-based micropolitics as the only legitimate form of socially engaged art; (3) proposed a post-national vision for contemporary artists; (4) and outlined a techno- and specifically internet-optimist vision for the region. As Esanu demonstrates, the SCCA's antipolitical project was more than an ideology: grant recipients had to sign contracts that stated they could not use the money for mass political purposes (171).

While the volume approaches 1989 primarily as a rupture in the region's cultural production, it also emphasizes that contemporary art evolved from preexisting forms of alternative culture in some localities. In fact, Esanu identifies two different origin experiences: places where the seeds of the contemporary art paradigm had already been planted and, thus, actors had only to be converted to the new model, and places where the paradigm had to be established from scratch (28). This heterogeneity concerning the pre-1989 period also shaped the uneven development of the SCCA that – in contrast to its democratic networking ideology

– was directed in a centralized and authoritative manner from the Soros foundation's headquarters in Budapest. The essential tool for realizing this centralization was the SCCA Procedures Manual, nicknamed the Bible and Talmud in the organization's internal jargon, which provided detailed instructions for setting up a new SCCA (53).

A core strength of Esanu's volume is that it goes against the area-studies-based understanding of contemporary art and offers a multi-site and multi-level understanding of the phenomenon. He explores the postsocialist triumph of contemporary art in relation to its emergence in the United States and the Soviet Union (in the former, the renaming of the Boston Institute of Modern Art – to the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1948 signaled the emergence of the concept; in the latter, the concept emerged in the post-Stalinist Soviet thaw); thus, the book offers an interpretation of its successes informed by this fruitful comparison. Esanu highlights that the rise of contemporary art in all three cases was entangled with a depoliticization that meant the abandonment of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics in the Soviet case and, in the US case, the exclusion of radical forms of modernism (193–196). This comparative perspective – supplemented by a discussion of the emergence of contemporary art in the Middle East after 2000 – stresses the structural conditions and power relations behind the emergence of contemporary art in different local contexts.

In most of the volume, the ideological and political-economic aspects of the analysis are developed organically, following the volume's ambition to produce a Marxist-sympathetic inquiry. However, the third chapter, which focuses on Cold War liberals (Popper, von Mises, Hayek, and Gombrich) as the precursors of the postsocialist contemporary, separates the mental from the material to construct an argument that addresses only the ideological influences and similarities of these figures. Since Esanu does not make concrete historical connections, it is unclear (and unproven) whether the countless similarities between Cold War liberalism and the postsocialist contemporary (such as the antipathy toward holist ideas) are correlations or

whether one caused the other. While the chapter undoubtedly provides a careful and thorough analysis of Cold War liberals' views on art, culture, and society, it makes a too-direct connection between Hayekian and Popperian theory and the concrete practices of the SCCA, and intermediate actors and experts responsible for transmitting – and distorting – the ideological project are missing from the picture. This analysis of the ideological similarities between neoliberalism and the postsocialist contemporary is questionable because it perceives neoliberalism as a set of ideas without their material counterparts, and because it borrows vital terms, such as the *aesthetics of problem-solving*, from Cold War liberals as if they alone determined the SCCA's practices and operations. As a result, this final chapter does not strengthen the central arguments of the book, although they remain intact without it. Furthermore, the chapters in which the author dives into the historical sources and provides a sensitive analysis of the SCCA network's really existing neoliberalism amply compensate for the weakness of the last chapter. Overall, this study is essential for those who aim to critically assess the postsocialist emergence of contemporary art across East Central Europe.