

Arteast Collection. The art of Eastern Europe in dialogue with  
the West. From the 1960s to the present: Mika Bialski,  
Zdenka Badovinac, Peter Weibel (1997), Innsbruck, 2001  
Arteast: Retroavantgarde (2001)

Peter Weibel

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The distinction between the avantgarde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the neo-avantgarde after 1945 can be described as a political line. Futurism, constructivism, Bauhaus, de stijl not only developed an autonomous visual language that could be applied from painting to sculpture, from flat screen to furniture, from two-dimensional work to three-dimensional work or from plates to architecture, but their aesthetic was built on the machines which created the first industrial revolution, and was linked to the social transformations caused by these machines. For a historic moment there was a convergence of aesthetic and political revolution.

The neo-avantgarde of the West, which came about after the destruction of the early avantgarde through the totalitarian systems of Nazism, Communism and Fascism, continued only the formal visual aspects of the early avantgarde, such as monochromy, abstraction, material culture. It was separated from its sources in the machine-based industrial revolution and its social consequences. In fact this neo-avantgarde was more related to the mass-media and the emerging culture industry. Modernism, therefore, could be described as a formalistic revision of modernity. The modernistic approach of the neo-avantgarde deprived the early avantgarde of its historical experience, it emptied the avantgarde of its social roots. The void was glorified on stage, in cinema, in books, and in the gallery space as a symptom of this loss of socio-political experience. This could be done easily in the West in the hegemony of consumer culture, culture industry and mass media. It was nearly obligatory not to insist on historical experience – indeed, the opposite was the case: the extinction of historical experience built the basis for the enjoyments of the products of culture and consumer industry.

The art in the East was in a different situation. There also the early avantgarde was destroyed by a totalitarian system. But the political system still continued after 1945. Thus there was no opportunity to continue the early avantgarde; the same source that had abolished the avantgarde would not allow these avantgarde ideas to continue or to restart. Officially you could only produce art that conformed to the political system: socialist realism.

This art practice evidently lacked the visual vocabulary of the avantgarde and therefore the West denounced it as conservatory if not reactionary. But the West overlooked the fact that, in the best cases, socialist realism did not miss historical experience.

The young avantgarde artists of the East could see both, but since a consumer and culture industry did not exist in their countries, the young artists could not provide a product conforming to this system like pop art to capitalism.

Drifting back to the early avantgarde, neither did they produce anything conforming to the political system. Therefore the only solution for them was to converge, blend and melt the formal achievements of the former avantgarde with the historical experience and the formal language of socialist realism and other traditional cultural sources of their countries (folklore as a found object, for example).

So they created a third way, a third avantgarde between early avantgarde and neo-avantgarde, which in 1992 I called "Retroavantgarde".<sup>1</sup>

The art of the East as Retroavantgarde remembered not only the great and central contributions of the East to Western modernity, from Malevich to Ionesco, but also thematized remembrance, and therefore stayed aware of the historical social experiences of this modernity. The art of the East could not compete with the visual formalism of the neo-avantgarde, and therefore it was considered as a step back, as "behind", as "peripheral". But this was just a cold war perspective. Now we can recognize that the art of the East is just the opposite: it is the future of Western art (as it was partially the case in the early avantgarde).

**Peter Weibel** (1944) is an artist, curator and theoretician who focuses predominantly on new media. He studied film, mathematics, medicine and philosophy at universities in Vienna and Paris. From 1981 to 1986 he lectured at universities worldwide, from 1986 to 1995 he was an art consultant, since 1992 art director of *Ars Electronica* in Linz, Austria, and from 1993 to 1999 art director of the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum in Graz. He was also commissioner of the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and since 1999, he has been in charge of the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe.

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<sup>1</sup> EDITORIAL NOTE: Peter Weibel used the term in the context of the specific art tendencies presented in the "Retroavantgarde" section of the exhibition *Identität: Differenz* (Neue Galerie, Graz, 1992). In fact the term itself dates back to 1983: it was introduced – and programmatically determined – by the Laibach group in their exhibition *AUSSTELLUNG LAIBACH KUNST – MONUMENTALNA RETROAVANTGARDA* (Galerija ŠKUC, Ljubljana, 1983).