

# **‘Westsplaining’ in Art History**

**An online workshop  
28 June 2024**

**Abstracts / programme**

**Organised by**  
**Margaret Tali, Tallinn University/ Estonian Academy of Arts, Institute of Art History**  
**Magdalena Radomska, Piotr Piotrowski Centre for Research on East-Central European Art, Art Sciences Department, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań**  
**Matthew Rampley, Centre for Modern Art and Theory, Masaryk University Brno**  
**David Crowley, National College of Art and Design, Dublin**

# Programme

No registration needed

Zoom link

<https://zoom.us/j/92418806846?pwd=wRYtQKNFOo7l5b4i-7ZPU7g6SdwDejp.1>

passcode: 1SLH8Y

All times CEST

10.00 - Introduction

Session 1 - chaired by Matthew Rampley

10.10 - Lavinia Amenduni, *Eastspanation as Westspanation: Exoticizing Medieval European Art in Early Art Historiography*

10.50 - Olga Syngaivska, *Looking for the Origin. On Johann Georg Pinsel's Perception in Academic Literature and Exhibiting*

11.30 - break

Session 2 - chaired by David Crowley

11.50 - Oleksandra Osadcha, *Westplaining or Self-Eastplaining? On the Cases of Exhibiting Late Soviet Photography During Perestroika*

12.30 - Anne Pfautsch, *Westplaining in Germany: Othering East Germany*

13.10 - break

Session 3 - chaired by Magdalena Radomska

14.00 - Kuba Szreder, *Potemkin Museums or Institutions of the Commons? A Short Intervention in Current Debates about the Democratisation of the Polish Institutions of Contemporary Art*

14.40 - Zoltán Ginelli, *Hungarian Westplaining: West-centric Geographies of Colonial Difference, Competitive Exceptionalism and Non-comparative Victimhood in the Hungarian Colony*

15.20 - break

Session 4 - chaired by Margaret Tali

15.40 - Giulia Menegale, *Reframing Institutional Critique through the Work of Prelom – a journal for images and politics, a Belgrade-based magazine, 2001 and 2006*

16.20 - Magdalena Radomska *Is the Cold War Over If You Want It?- Westplaining the Transition*

17.00 - final thoughts

The term 'westplaining' became popularized amongst political theorists in Central and Eastern Europe in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and was used critically to denote the 'phenomenon of people from the Anglosphere loudly foisting their analytical schema and political prescriptions onto the [Eastern European] region' (Smoleński and Dutkiewicz). As such, it was a specific example of a wider, long criticized, problem to do with the colonial nature of knowledge production and the hegemonic status of (western) European and North American epistemic practices.

The critique was a response to debates in political theory, but it might be applied to many other domains of inquiry, including the humanities. It has gained increasing currency in art history, and this workshop aims to consider the different forms of art historical 'westplaining.' The term implies the need for an intellectual archaeology, a recovery of local discourses and intellectual traditions that have been eclipsed by hegemonic western discourses. The workshop thus seeks to explore such alternative models of art historical analysis. It asks:

- What is the 'West' in westplaining and who / what does non-western mean?
- What does it mean to use the term in the context of art history? What blindspots does it reveal?

Some have argued that in Central and Eastern Europe the critique of western hegemony has been used to shore up xenophobic nationalistic narratives. Consequently, the workshop also asks:

- When might it be right to dispute accusations of 'westplaining'?
- Is there a danger that such accusations can sometimes be used as an avoidance strategy, as a way of not engaging with external perspectives?
- Does the fact that certain schemas are hegemonic mean they should always be disputed?
- Does the fact that this call for papers and the workshop will be in English mean that this event, too, is vulnerable to criticism?

Lavinia Amenduni, *Eastspanation as Westspanation: Exoticizing Medieval European Art in Early Art Historiography*

Between the end of the C19th and the beginning of the C20th, as Asian art was beginning to be discovered and studied in North America and Europe, it was common to make use of Western art historical categories to explain artifacts coming from China, Japan and Korea. Early Chinese and Japanese statuary was often compared to classic Greek sculptures, while ancient landscape painting was seen through the lens of Impressionism.

While those categories are themselves a form of Westspanation, my focus will be on the cases where, on the contrary, it was Medieval European art that was proposed, in its formal and spiritual qualities, as an inherently Asian product. If Greek-Asia comparisons had the effect of de-exoticizing the Asian artworks, placing them next to the pinnacle of the West, juxtapositions between Medieval and Asian art aimed at making sense of a tradition, with special reference to Gothic painting, whose ethereal linearism, loaded with spiritualist interpretations, found its source elsewhere. One of the most known examples of such attitude is Bernard Berenson's 'buddhist' interpretation of the Sieneese Painter Sassetta.

At a first glance, this might appear like a form of Eastspanation of a Western artwork that is otherwise struggling to find its place in the narration of the West. Still, it can be argued that the apparent Eastspanation is only the superficial layer that covers a subtle, yet stubborn form of Westspanation; a Westspanation that aims at defining both how Asian art and Medieval art should look and feel like. With this presentation, therefore, I will discuss how explaining Medieval art as Asian, though apparently inverting the traditional direction of the orientalist dynamics, is part of a (crypto)-Westspanation that characterized most of early scholarship on non-Western art.

Lavinia Amenduni is a doctoral candidate at the Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich, 2023-2024 holder of the Bayern Fellowship at the Central Institute of Art History in Munich, and in 2025 she will be recipient of the Gerda Henkel Scholarship. She is also a member of the Doctoral and Early Career Researcher Committee of the Association of Art History. Her research focuses on stylistic comparisons between Western and Far Eastern art in 19th and 20th century Euro-American scholarship.

Olga Syngaivska, *Looking for the Origin. On Johann Georg Pinsel's Perception in Academic Literature and Exhibiting*

My proposal analyses the presentation and interpretation in European exhibitions and academic literature of works of Johann Georg Pinsel, who is considered to be the most important representative of Western Ukrainian Baroque religious sculpture in the 18th century. With his distinctive style, characterized by highly dramatic expressivity, Georg Pinsel laid the artistic and stylistic foundations of the Lviv School of Sculpture.

Recent years have been marked by great interest in Pinsel's artistic oeuvre in Western Europe. Several major exhibitions dedicated to Pinsel's artistic legacy were held in the last two decades, e.g. Paris (2012), Vienna (2019) and Vilnius (2022). In addition to presenting the works of the Ukrainian master to the broader European audience, these exhibitions include attempts to interpret Pinsel's work as a derivation from major Western European (e.g. Southern German) artistic centers at that time. The lack of crucial biographical data and written sources offers a perfect projection surface for the transmission of the hegemonial Western European art historical discourse onto Pinsel's oeuvre.

Therefore, the aim of the paper is to analyze and critically to reappraise the art historical narratives in academic discourse regarding Pinsel's artistic novelty. One of the critical points of these approaches has been how they have ignored the influence of the local artistic tradition as well as the socio-cultural circumstances of the region. The paper will also point out the blind spots in current discourse and pose questions for further research of Pinsel's work.

Olga Syngaivska studied Cultural Studies (BA and MA) at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Ukraine). Afterwards she continued the studies at the University of Cologne (Germany), majoring in Art History (MA) as a DAAD scholarship holder specializing in Early Modern Art History, Modern Art History and the Art Market. Her masters thesis was dedicated to Spanish polychrome religious sculpture of the C17th.

## Oleksandra Osadcha, *Westplaining or Self-Eastplaining? On the Cases of Exhibiting Late Soviet Photography During Perestroika*

This topic stems from my research into the rhetoric surrounding the exhibitions of artists from the Kharkiv School of Photography during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Kharkiv School of Photography is an informal community that has been evolving since the late 1960s in Kharkiv, a major industrial and educational centre in Ukraine. Across three generations, this community aimed to challenge and question the limits of photographic language. The experimental drive of the early generations emerged in the realm of amateur photography clubs, which, at that time, provided one of the few “safe” spaces where deviating from the official Soviet photographic discourse was permitted.

Initially existing in the semi-shadow of amateur art, the projects of Kharkiv photographers received their first exposure beyond the Eastern Bloc in 1986 following the onset of perestroika. The works of two Kharkiv photographers, Boris Mikhailov and Roman Pyatkovka, alongside images by 31 other artists from various parts of the USSR featured in the book, *Another Russia : Through the Eyes of the New Soviet Photographers*, published that year by Czech photography curators Daniela Mrázková and Vladimír Remeš. This publication was followed by an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. “Another Russia”, that sparked significant interest in “unofficial” Soviet photography in the West, and led to subsequent shows in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Paris, and the USA. Almost all these publications that accompanied these exhibitions lumped Ukrainian, Belarusian, Lithuanian, and Latvian photography under the umbrella of Russian, defining the affiliation in the following years.

Analysis of these publications also reveals recurring themes presented as essential for understanding the “new Soviet photography”: profound spirituality; the victimised status of photographers; and attempts to align their work with the lineage of the “Russian” avant-garde. While carrying an evident orientalist undertone, these tropes were simultaneously fostered within the USSR. This paper will explore how unofficial Soviet photography was perceived by Western institutions as well as the ways in which it was utilised as leverage mechanisms for Soviet/Russian soft power.

Dr Oleksandra Osadcha became the curator and researcher of the Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography in 2018, focusing on the preservation and research of late Soviet and contemporary Ukrainian photography. Since 2021 she has taught the history of photography at the Kharkiv State Academy of Culture. In 2022-24 Osadcha was a postdoctoral fellow at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, working on the photographic donation by Hans Belting.

## Anne Pfautsch, *Westplaining in Germany: Othering East Germany*

With the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990, the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) was integrated into the political, economic and social system of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). East German life, culture and politics however were rapidly erased from the German public sphere as the FRG ‘was tacitly acknowledged to have “won” the struggle between rival German cultures and ideologies’ (Hogwood, ‘After the GDR’, 46.). The GDR was viewed as a concluded period of contemporary history and its examination was subject to Western concepts and ideas, which were oftentimes inadequate or inapplicable. Nevertheless, the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall was characterised by a lack of knowledge about and an enormous interest in the former GDR. Yet, the hegemony of West Germany reinforced a consolidation of negative stereotypes and resulted in the characterisation of East Germany as other. Photography plays an important part in this othering; the visual representation of Easterners helped to reinforce misconceptions and clichés.

In my paper, I showcase this development by discussing OSTKREUZ, a Berlin-based photographers’ agency whose foundation in 1990 served as a survival strategy in the tumultuous post-reunification period. Hailed as ‘experts of the East’ by West German magazines and newspapers, most of the commissions in reunified Germany took place in the East and the founding members were hired to portray their compatriots. I examine Ostkreuz’s assignments and commissions in the 1990s to address the question of whether the photographers had to adhere to or were able to counter a stereotypical depiction of the former GDR. In so doing, I investigate the question of who does westplaining, for whom and on whose behalf, and what impact does it ultimately have (for today).

Dr Anne Pfautsch is a freelance art historian, curator and lecturer. In 2024, she was fellow at the Central Institute for Art History, which also awarded her the Jutta Held Prize 2023 for her dissertation ‘Ostkreuz - Agentur der Fotografen: Tracing the Legacy of the German Democratic Republic in Post-Socialist Photography and Exhibition Making’. She is associate lecturer at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and has previously taught at the School of Art at Kingston University, London. She publishes in journals, exhibition catalogues and feminist archives, including *Miejsce*, *Humanities* and *Art and Politics*. Anne is currently preparing her habilitation project on ‘The Perpetuation of an Othering and Self-Othering of East Germany in the Photographs of the “Third Generation East”’. Her research interests include photography, cultural and gender politics in late and post-socialism, memory and identity after 1989 and horizontal art historiography in Central and Eastern Europe.

Kuba Szreder, *Potemkin Museums or Institutions of the Commons? A Short Intervention in Current Debates about the Democratisation of the Polish Institutions of Contemporary Art*

Instead of directly addressing the notion of “westplain-ing”, in this paper I will build a transversal perspective on this debate by referring to the commons-related institutional theory and practice that informs current discussions about the post-authoritarian future of institutions of contemporary art in Poland and abroad. Following arguments I sketched in a polemical piece in *Szum*, a Polish magazine of contemporary art, I will discuss cultural policies in the aftermath of the recent, democratic turn in the Polish politics. I will argue for the structural changes that institutions of contemporary art should undergo in pursuit of their radical democratisation.

I will contextualise these arguments by discussing institutions of contemporary art in the context of the authoritarian cultural policies, spearheaded by the Law and Justice government after their electoral victory in 2015, that utilised art as an instrument in culture wars. In their Polish iteration, accusations of cultural mimicry and absorption of Western fashions were used to legitimize the seizure of such leading art institutions as CCA Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw or Museum of Art in Łódź by the alt-right. This backlash can be understood by understanding previous, only partly successful attempts at ‘modernisation’ and ‘Europeanisation’ of the Polish public sphere, a leading discourse of the Polish post-communist transformation. Institutions of contemporary art supposedly contributed to this transformation. However, they can be also seen as metropolitan ‘Potemkin villages’ of Western aspirations. Whereas the ‘West’ was profoundly mythologized, and the structural deficits of American and European art worlds – such as the domination of art market or the dependence on structures of class privilege, private patronage and corporate sponsorship – were uncritically taken for granted.

Rather than discussing whether the exploitation of underpaid artistic labour is an indigenous phenomena or a cultural import, I will adopt a materialist perspective on the matter, bridging between current debates in Poland and other European countries. Instead of merely describing the democratic change, I will actively advocate for it. I will present several practical postulates for the actual democratisation of artistic institutions in Poland (some of which may be more universal than others), such as their unionisation, self-management, and feminisation. I will discuss the role played in this process by such agents as the art workers’ associations, trade unions, citizens’ assemblies, consortia of postartistic practitioners, and plena of care workers, whose distributed efforts can be understood as modes of instituting nascent forms of the commons.

Dr Kuba Szreder is a graduate of sociology in the Jagiellonian University. In 2016 he was awarded PhD by the Loughborough University School of the Arts for the thesis on social aspects of independent curating. He is an associate professor at the department of artistic research at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, teaching sociology of art, artistic theory and practice in the expanded field of art.

Zoltán Ginelli, *Hungarian Westsplaining: Westcentric Geographies of Colonial Difference, Competitive Exceptionalism and Non-comparative Victimhood in the Hungarian Colony*

This paper travels through a non-logocentric fluidity of epistemically disobedient nomadism to deconstruct the geographies of coloniality/modernity behind colony:race cultural politics in a strategically essentialized ‘Hungary’ from a (counter-)self-reflexive, politically incorrect, canceled under-empowerment of ‘not-quite-whiteness’ in hybrid subaltern Hunglish. Museum collections, cultural festivals, and art exhibits systematically erase ‘coloniality’ in ‘exceptionalist Hungary’, a Zaubergarten outbraving the Iron Cage of one-way omnilateral universalism. Yet a strange ambivalence lurks behind how Hungarian politics forcefully captured ‘coloniality’ vis-à-vis the ‘West’, while ‘West’-oriented anti-colonialism rejects any systemic criticism of Hungary-centered global colonialism(s). On the full political spectrum, Hungarian culture became a hotbed of self-colonizing mimicry, a staged ‘West simulacrum’ populated by turn-key imports of ‘the West’. However, no one has addressed the geographies behind ‘West imaginaries’, the divisions of labor in ‘colonizer/non-colonizer’ difference-making, the non-comparative ‘colonial identity politics’ of competitive nativist victimhood, or the controversial, multi-layered, imagined, yet unitary concept of ‘the West’. This competitive denial of comparative, dialogical, and geographical critique is also true for recent ‘decolonial’ exhibitions. Decolonizing cultural heritage in Europe produced a posh vanguard of exhibiting socialist era relations with the Global South, uncovering ambiguous continuities in colonialism and racism, coupled with commodified postsocialist nostalgia. Berlin, Kaunas and Ljubljana recently hosted such state-supported exhibitions that are unimaginable in Hungary. Yet there is no regional dialogue, only competition for ‘decolonial capital’, Global South artists and cultural relations. In Hungary, the George Floyd incident in 2020 spawned a dubious ‘decolonial’ art project and a ‘BLM statue’, while a waning ‘West’ and Hungarian ‘freedom’ was addressed at ‘Hungarian Indian’ exhibitions or Turanic festivals. ‘Westsplaining’ discourse follows a false moral compass of either embracing or denying ‘Western’ recognition, obscures the material interests behind the Hungarian ‘culture war’, and silences the complicated Hungarian global positioning strategies articulated in coloniality and race.

Zoltán Ginelli is a geographer and global historian in Budapest, Hungary, at the Ludovika University of Public Service. His academic work follows a world-systemic and decolonial approach on the Hungarian global histories of race and coloniality, and the relations between Eastern Europe and the Global South. Since 2014, he has taught at numerous institutions, digitized archival collections, and worked in major research projects such as ‘Socialism Goes Global’ and ‘1989 After 1989’. In 2021, he curated the exhibition ‘Transperiphery Movement: Global Eastern Europe and Global South’ in Budapest and Kyiv. His most recent research topics include (post)colonial travel writing, ‘Indian play’ and Blackness in Hungary.

Giulia Menegale, *Reframing Institutional Critique through the Work of Prelom – a journal for images and politics, a Belgrade-based magazine, 2001 and 2006*

The genealogy of the term 'institutional critique' can be circumscribed to a peculiar (Western) location and a few actors. These are New York City of the 1980s and a debate between October's art historians, a few artists around the Whitney independent programme, and eventually, some art practitioners gathered around the journal *The Fox*. Nonetheless, as an art historical category, institutional critique provided a privileged theoretical framework of analysis for a larger and heterogeneous array of artistic and curatorial practices that extended far beyond its initial locations and temporality. Generally speaking, it has been applied to post-conceptual practices and later, to curatorial methodologies, that, using different strategies, revealed the inconsistency of the claim of art's autonomy and neutrality in respect of the hegemonic class's economic and political interests.

Some of the first attempts to rework this art-historical category were held in the first decade of the 2000s, when curators and art historians applied it to artistic and curatorial practices in Latin America, the Western Balkans and the Eastern bloc. Drawing on these attempts to rework institutional critique's canon, the paper will engage with the following questions: what shortcomings and, at the same time, opportunities might arise when art historians and curators reframe Western-centric art historical categories within a specific geo-political area?

The paper will focus on the work undertaken within *Prelom – a journal for images and politics*, a Belgrade-based magazine, run by a collective of art theorists and practitioners between 2001 and 2006. It will analyse how they have reworked the notion of 'institutional critique' in thematic issues and research-oriented exhibitions.

Giulia Menegale is a PhD candidate in Analysis and Management of Cultural Heritage at IMT (School for Advanced Studies), Lucca. Her research focuses on critical institutional practices from 2008 to today in Europe.

Magdalena Radomska, *Is the Cold War Over If You Want It? - Westplaining the Transition*

Analysis of art emerging after 1989 in Post-communist Europe allows us to question the poles of transition, which are based on binary oppositions. I show that they are a cliché of the Cold War binary structure, based on the binaries of East and West, communism and capitalism, etc. The model according to which the 'necessarily totalitarian' communism was replaced by democracy coupled with capitalism is questioned in works by artists from the region. They point both to the persistence and relevance of certain elements of the communist project after 1989, as well as to the totalitarian inclinations of democracy coupled with capitalism (Boris Buden refers to it as to the false equation of these two concepts), and finally - to the democratic elements of the Marxist project. They therefore question the narrative rooted in the binary model of transition from 'totalitarian communism', towards neoliberal democracy, free from any authoritarian attachment.

My theoretical proposal - based on a comparative analysis of the works of Eastern European artists - is that the concepts assigned to the binary poles should rather be seen as rewriting themselves in the form of a dynamic and dialectical structure. Drawing on texts by Derrida and Lenin, I argue that there are two images of the Cold War - the binary, and the non-binary, illustrated by El Lissitzky's work 'With a Red Wedge Beat the Whites'. Such a dual image is the starting point for reevaluating the structure of the transition, which, as I demonstrate on the basis of the analysis of artworks, appears to be based rather on a dialectical relationship of concepts that the region's art histories present as binary. These analyses are particularly timely in the context of the role of the EU and NATO after Russia's attack on Ukraine and serve as a reflection on the recent return (in 2022) of the Cold War rhetoric practiced by both Russia and the West.

Magdalena Radomska is Post-Marxist art historian and historian of philosophy, Assistant Professor in Art History Institute at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, a founder and a head of Piotr Piotrowski Center for Research On East-Central European Art. Radomska is engaged in research on East-Central European art, especially recent art, completing a book *Post-Communist Art in Post-Communist Europe*, which is a critical monograph reevaluating art form the region from 1989 until now, as well as criticism of capitalism in contemporary global art (book *Plural Subject. Art after the Crisis of 2008-Shifting the Paradigm* - manuscript). Her previous activities and publications can be accessed online: <https://piotrpiotrowskicenter.amu.edu.pl/meet-us/>