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Citer ce compte rendu

Bojana Videkanić
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Postwar Yugoslavia occupied a singular position within the geopolitics of the Cold War: it was a socialist country that lay outside Moscow’s orbit while having access to both Cold War camps, and it was the sole European member of the Nonaligned Movement (NAM), which was mostly comprised of countries from the Global South. The bold decision by Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito to break with Stalin and to gradually embrace nonalignment as a guiding principle for Yugoslavia’s foreign policy paid off: a country at risk of marginalization within either Cold War bloc succeeded in assuming a position of leadership within a broad association of countries. Bojana Videkanić’s art history of postwar Yugoslavia, Nonaligned Modernism, seeks to perform a similar move: by stressing Yugoslavia’s fundamental difference from both Soviet and Western models of artistic production, it argues for the country’s central place within the burgeoning art historical field of “global modernism,” which seeks to rid the study of twentieth-century art of its longstanding North Atlantic bias.

Hence a term in the book’s subtitle that is not often associated with the art histories of the region: postcolonial. Postcolonial discourse has occasionally (and, one could argue, unconvincingly) been used to describe the status of Eastern European countries that had been previously in the Soviet sphere of influence and were “decolonized” in 1989–91.1 Videkanić’s argument is in sharp distinction from this line of thinking. Rather than viewing state socialism as a quasi-colonial system, she argues that socialist Yugoslavia and its culture were always already post-colonial—culturally closer to recently decolonized countries in Africa and Asia than to its European neighbours.

The argument unfolds over four chapters, which follow a loosely chronological order. The first chapter, “From Socialist Realism to Alternative Yugoslav Aesthetic, 1945–1954,” focuses on the brief interlude in Yugoslav art history when Socialist Realism was a viable option for artists. The author analyzes the Yugoslav art system in the early postwar years in a detailed account that privileges institutional structures, such as artists’ unions, associations, and schools, over individual actors. This approach, taken from social art history and conveyed from a bird’s-eye view, is perhaps the defining method of the book. It, along with the author’s stated political commitment to reclaim (and, quite often, openly praise) the cultural politics of Yugoslavia, leads to book’s privileging of official art.

This is a welcome and historically accurate corrective vis-à-vis the excessive focus on “underground” or unofficial practices that still dominate many art histories of the former socialist countries. One work in particular receives extensive examination: Boža Ilić’s oil painting from 1948 entitled Exploratory Drilling in New Belgrade. In a compelling analysis of this and a few other works, Videkanić argues for the “hybrid” (and therefore transgressive) nature of Yugoslav Socialist Realism as a blend of elements of “orthodox,” Soviet-style Socialist Realism with latent modernist elements (32, 39). While this is true, such hybridity is not entirely unique to Yugoslavia. Similar examples can be found in art produced in Soviet satellites, as well as in works by communist artists (such as Renato Guttuso, André Fougeron and others) who were active in the West, and who sought to reconcile Socialist Realism with the liberal-democratic context within which they operated. Such complexities of Western art of the time are absent from the book: whenever the “West” and its art are mentioned, they function as foils against which the “nonaligned” modernism of Yugoslavia is articulated. While the book’s determined focus on the Yugoslav perspective is laudable and necessary, the contextualization of Yugoslav art in the greater international context of the time could benefit from a more nuanced discussion.

Indeed, as the book progresses, Yugoslav art is examined in increasingly transnational contexts. Chapter Two focuses on Yugoslav’s participation in the Venice Biennials of the 1950s, as constitutive of a distinct “socialist modernism” that became the official art of the country. Videkanić’s focus on institutional structures leads to a focus on exhibitions, whose centrality in the story is clearly laid out: “… exhibitions, as a form of cultural diplomacy, served as mechanisms in creating and representing what Yugoslav political elites called democratic socialism” (64). Exhibition history is a major line of investigation that runs through much of this book, as it focuses on their organization, their critical reception, and their political and economic contexts. The chapter’s ample archival evidence offers a detailed account of how modern art came
to be embraced by the state during the second half of the 1950s—a process that was not devoid of contradictions. The subsequent account of the 1956 exhibition of American Art, organized by MoMA in Yugoslavia, is rich in context yet it raises some questions that remain unanswered, such as the effects (if any) of the exhibition in the development of Yugoslav art.

The socialist modernism of Chapter Two is contrasted with the “nonaligned modernism” that is the focus of Chapter Three. Videkanić is clearly in favour of the latter, while characterizing the former as more “reactive” or less politicized (72). Nonaligned modernism is an appealing term, and Videkanić constructs an elaborate historical framework around it. Some of the strengths of the book are the various contextual vignettes that demonstrate the increasingly international orientation of Yugoslav culture, as well as its place in larger constellations of anti-colonialism. An example is the story of Tibor Sekelj, an esperantist and internationalist who sought to devise an experimental museum of world cultures that would be devoid of the coloni

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in as comparisons, such as the case of Nigeria explored by Chika Okeke-Agulu. On the other hand, this discussion begs a comparison to other forms of “socialist postcolonialism,” such as the networks of anti-colonial artistic exchange that proliferated within the Soviet bloc at about the same time. Still, the problem of integrating national stories into greater, transnational narratives is a key challenge in the field today—a challenge that Nonaligned Modernism takes head-on. With its emphasis on larger socio-political forces and the institutional structures they engendered, the book offers a thorough, well-researched cultural history of a country that still deserves a more prominent place in the art histories of modernism, “global” or otherwise. 

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François-Marc Gagnon
Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatist Movement
trans. Donald Winkler
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Ray Ellenwood

First of all, let me declare my complete lack of social distancing. All those involved in the writing and editing of this book, from the author and translator through to individuals thanked by the publisher for help with editing after François-Marc Gagnon’s death in March 2019, are long-time friends of mine. When I first began my own research for a book on the Automatists in the late 1970s, Gagnon was already a well-established authority on Borduas and the movement. He was extraordinarily generous in making available his extensive files of newspaper clippings and other documents; and he was consistently, over the years, a great source of information and encouragement to me and many other scholars. In the mid-1980s, Gilles Lapointe was working as a graduate researcher with André-G. Bourassa on the writings of Borduas. I met him then, and we have often collaborated since. Lapointe has established himself as the most important successor to Gagnon, and it is no surprise that McGill-Queen’s asked him to see this book through the press, with eminently qualified advice from Janine Carreau, Yseult Riopelle, and Ginette Michaud. That said, I must admit I haven’t always agreed with everything my friend François-Marc wrote, and the same applies to some passages in this book.

This publication brings together several threads of enquiry that Gagnon had been following in the past thirty years, branching out from Borduas into a more general look at the Automatist movement and its participants. Having published his important Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960): Biographie critique et analyse de l’œuvre (Montréal: Fides, 1978, reworked, translated, and published by McGill-Queen’s in 2013), he and Dennis Young also made available in the same year a bilingual edition of a selection of Borduas’ writings, including Refus global (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art, 1978). There followed many articles, catalogue publications, television appearances, along with work on a Borduas catalogue raisonné published on the internet through Concordia University. This focus on Borduas eventually expanded into what I consider his magnum opus: the Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois (Montréal: Lanctôt éditeur, 1998). It was around this time he began to shift his attention more towards Riopelle. The bibliography on Riopelle was already very extensive, with biographical and critical studies by international critics such as Pierre Schneider and the well-known Quebec art historian Guy Robert. In 1999 came the first volume of an ongoing work that is undoubtedly the major source of information on Riopelle and his work: the very ambitious Catalogue Raisonné, edited by Yseult Riopelle (Montréal: Hibou Éditeurs, 1999). This was followed by four volumes (Vol. 2, 2004; Vol. 3, 2009; Vol. 4, 2014; Vol. 5, 2200), each covering roughly ten years of Riopelle’s production, plus a special number devoted to prints (2005). Authors of critical articles in the catalogues are an international group including Michel Waldberg, Yves Michaud, David Moos, and Monique Brunet-Weinmann (who wrote two fine articles for Vols. 1 and 3). François-Marc Gagnon’s quite novel approach, as discussed below, can be seen the fourth volume.

But to return to Gagnon’s Chronique du mouvement automatiste, it was there that readers found more detail than we had seen before (one of the main contributions of Gagnon to his field of study was an astonishing attention to detail concerning exhibitions, works shown, press coverage) about Riopelle’s early