

# Local Strategies International Ambitions

**Modern Art and Central Europe 1918–1968**

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## Centres and Peripheries: Language Barriers and the Cultural Geography of European Modern Art

*“There is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms.”*

Michael Foucault

*The Archaeology of Knowledge*

In October 1995, the Polish Academy of Sciences organized in Warsaw an international art history conference under the heading *Totenmesse. Modernism in the Culture of Northern and Central Europe*. The meeting explored the character of international contacts among Central and Northern European artists and intellectuals at the turn of the nineteenth century. Over the course of two days, twenty speakers from four different countries presented papers on the topic. The majority were Polish; however, there was also a small foreign contingent of Czechs, Germans, and Norwegians. As I sat in the audience listening to the papers, all of which addressed in some form the issue of international communication, I was struck by the language of the proceedings. Although there were no presenters from the U.K. or U.S., all papers were delivered in English. Considering the conference’s location, the roster of participants, and the year, English did not seem an obvious choice. Even though by the mid-1990s English was routinely used within Polish scientific circles and was being rapidly assimilated by the younger generation as a prerequisite for social mobility in the newly post-communist, free-market Polish economy, it was still not common among Polish art historians. This was especially true for the generation of scholars who received their degrees before the mid-1980s and whose foreign language training focused on German, French,

and Russian. Within this groups, which encompassed the majority of the Polish conference participants, a working knowledge of other languages, such as English, was most often determined either by their field of specialization or by specific international contacts. Since under communism there were exceedingly few opportunities for travel to the West, and those that presented themselves tended to focus on Central Europe, the majority of Polish art historians had little practical need for English. They tended to rely on German for international communication. Those that spoke English often acquired proficiency for personal, rather than strictly professional, reasons.

Considering that all foreign guests at the conference – Czechs, Germans, and Norwegians – could speak German and would have been just as comfortable, if not more so, in that language, why did the conference organizers turn to English? Moreover, why did they choose to publish the conference proceedings exclusively in that language?<sup>1</sup> In the mid-1990s, the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), the volume’s publisher and distributor, had no access to an external distribution network and no means of advertising its book list abroad, a situation that has changed surprisingly little in the intervening years. As a result, few foreign scholars were aware of new PAN publications. Those that learned about particular books by word of mouth and wished to obtain them faced sig-

nificant logistic obstacles. All PAN publications had to be ordered directly from Warsaw, which meant that one had to incur significant shipping costs, and they had to be paid for by a costly wire transfer, since the agency did not accept personal bank checks or credit card payments. Given this reality, it was safe to assume that the primary buyers of the *Totenmesse* anthology would be Poles, in particular Polish art historians. But if that were the case, then why publish the volume only in English, a language that made the book far less accessible and useful to that primary audience? On the other hand, if the anthology was not designed with the Polish scholars in mind, who was it really intended for and what function was it supposed to have, beyond the obvious one of collecting and preserving the conference papers?

Since 1995, I have been thinking about those issues and about what the decision made by the Polish conference organizers to use English suggests about art history as an academic discipline, about the cultural geography of its discourse, and about its future. Although my conclusions have been formed by my own research on Polish art, personal experiences, and conversations with Eastern European artists and art historians, I would like to suggest their broader relevance. The issues that orient this discussion, in particular the related problems of marginality and power (to define centres and peripheries, to determine significance and as such value, to define and impose paradigmatic explanations, and to structure the narrative of modern art) are as compelling and relevant for consideration of art and art history in a global context as they are for consideration of art in Europe in its expanded post 1989 geographic reach.

Seen from this perspective, the Warsaw conference should be viewed as an early indicator of a global trend, one that has gained considerable momentum since 1995. The decision made by PAN to embrace English as the conference language was not only consistent with a general global shift to that language within art history, but was also indicative of a growing recognition among scholars working outside the first world academic power centres of the absolute necessity of having to function in that language. This was certainly true of the former Eastern Bloc countries, where art historians were not only keenly aware of their absence from the Western discourse, shaped by the academic-publishing industry of the U.S. and U.K., but also of their often quite different perspective on the key issues which were emerging

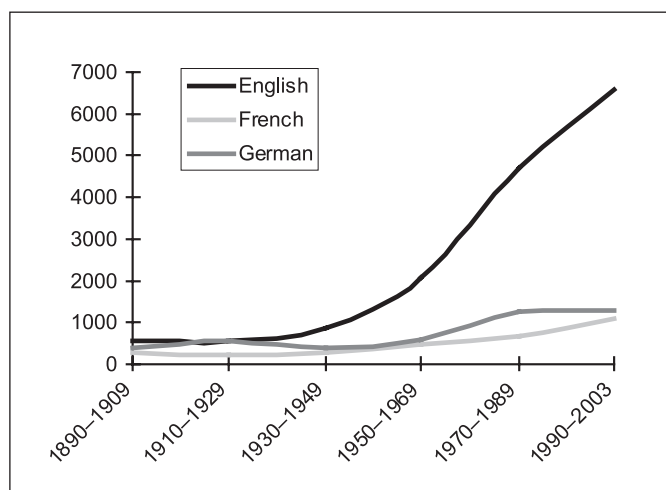
in the wake of post-modern reassessments of European modernism.

After 1989, the general interest in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc began slowly to translate for Eastern European art historians into opportunities for travel, as well as presentation of their research in the West. At least in theory, if not always in practice, they were now free and in many instances encouraged to present their perspective on the international arena. Ironically, for many the ability to take the advantage of this situation was often constrained by their less-than-perfect command of English. One could compare the situation facing Eastern European scholars to that of foreign guests invited to a party, at which everyone except them spoke a particular language. No matter how welcoming the hosts may be, in such situation, the burden of communicating is entirely on the visitors. The extent of their interaction and participation in the ongoing conversations is directly determined by the degree of their command of the hosts' language. Unless the guests achieve fluency, the language will always function as a real barrier determining the degree of their participation in the discussion and their ability to shape its direction.

The organizers of the *Totenmesse* conference clearly recognized that in order to be "heard" – to participate in the current art historical discourse and play a role in the production of disciplinary knowledge – they had to use an appropriate language. Releasing the conference proceedings in Polish was simply not an option given that objective. It would have effectively prevented the book from ever being read outside of Poland. Publishing it in German or French, would not have had the desired effect either. For the anthology to enter the art historical mainstream, which for economic and geopolitical reasons is today defined by the Anglophone academic-publishing industry, the only option was to publish it in English.

In reality, the fact that the *Totenmesse* anthology could not be easily obtained outside of Poland and that its conclusions and methodology did not challenge in a significant way established views, meant that despite the right language it has remained marginalized and is known today only to a few area specialists. Undeniably, the language of publication is not the only factor affecting a text's circulation and impact. There are a number of others, such as the identity and affiliation of the author, the profile of the publisher, the geopolitical context of the text's production, the access to the distribution and publicity networks,

as well as the methodology, conclusions, and the subject, that impact the status of a text and its position within the discourse. It is my contention, however, that even though the language of publication does not automatically guarantee an entry into the discourse, it is the only factor that



Year	1890-1909	1910-1929	1930-1949	1950-1969	1970-1989	1990-2003
English	550	542	840	2,075	4,694	6,587
French	257	233	286	449	656	1,099
German	372	537	376	594	1,229	1,272

Fig. 1 Number of books published in art history in English, French and German between 1890-2003, based on WorldCat database search, heading "art history," March 2003.

	1984-1993			1994-2002		
	All	Feature Articles	Peer Reviewed	All	Feature Articles	Peer Reviewed
English	144,927	98,737	2,880	194,933	141,513	14,742
French	14,803	8,282	407	19,038	1,1325	1,295
German	7,673	5,962	307	10,632	7,737	991

Fig. 2 Total number of articles, feature length articles, and feature length articles subject to peer review published in art history between 1984-1993 and 1994-2002, based on Art Abstracts database search, March 2003.

can definitively prevent a texts from ever being read and therefore considered by those operating within a particular discursive field. To put it simply, the language barrier functions as a real boundary that in effect defines the limits of the discursive field of knowledge.

The imperviousness of the language barrier is determined by the reach of a given language. The barrier has far less effect on texts produced in major European languages, i.e. French, German, or Spanish, which have a fair number of non-native speakers. It is, however, virtually insurmountable for languages such as Polish, in which most art historians cannot operate. What are the consequences of this situation for art history? They are significant, if one considers the question from the perspective of the production of knowledge within the discipline. In the last two decades, the structuring and mediating function of language in the production of disciplinary knowledge has been widely acknowledged across a range of disciplines from history, philosophy and linguistics to sociology and cultural studies. Although mainstream art history has been slow to follow this trend, a number of authors approaching the issue from a poststructuralist perspective have argued for a need to acknowledge the fact that art historical knowledge is not an a priori domain of empirical information, but rather a cultural construct, produced and embedded within a particular discourse.<sup>2</sup> In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michael Foucault described discourse as a network of intersecting and interacting statements occupying various positions within a complex set of power relations.<sup>3</sup> These statements, whether textual or verbal (published or delivered in a classroom, conference, or public lecture), always occur in language.

Whether one looks to theorists, such as Foucault, or to the art historians who have embraced the poststructuralist position, one finds the term "language" invoked and used as an unproblematic given. Although the acknowledgement of the cultural and historic specificity of discourses has been a cornerstone of discourse analysis, the theory does not give the same recognition to this fundamental concept. When the term appears, it does not refer to a particular language, i.e., English, French, German, or Polish, but rather to an abstract construct functioning as a universal mode of communication. It is understood as a medium of discourse, one that exists outside of specific cultural and geographic boundaries. If the definition of the discourse is limited to a particular homogenous linguistic context, for instance eighteenth-century France, this characterization does not pose a problem. However, in the current era of instant communication, digital publishing and virtual conferencing, one must consider the global reach of discourse and take into

account its polyglot character. The abstract characterization of language in classical discourse theory assumes, quite counterintuitively, that differences between specific languages do not warrant consideration. This is particularly troubling considering the focus of discourse theory on power relations. Although theory acknowledges that the subject's position within a particular hierarchy defines his authority and, as such, affects the status of his statements,<sup>4</sup> it does not give the same recognition to the power hierarchy of languages within the discourse. It appears to assume, by failing to address the issue, that there are no consequences of using different languages; that in principle, it does not matter if a statement is made in Polish or in English. In other words, it does not account for the fact that the discourse itself is produced in particular languages, which occupying different power positions vis-a-vis the production of knowledge.

But of course it does matter a great deal whether one makes a statement in a dominant or a marginal language. The attention given to a text within a discourse does not depend solely on content, but also on the form of delivery. The language in which a text is written and published is an important factor determining its dissemination and legibility. If the current state of knowledge is a function of the discourse, and if different languages impact to a different extent the production of discourse, then the language of delivery must affect the statement's ability to shape the state of knowledge within a particular discipline.

One can not escape this conclusion when one examines the production of knowledge in a specific field, such as European art history. The narrative of modern European art is not simply a record of what happened, who did what and where. Despite significant methodological shifts that have opened new avenues for inquiry, it is still very much defined by a persistent modernist bias, which designates areas as centres and peripheries not simply from the point of view of geographic location, but also historic significance (a role played by a location within the unfolding of the grand narrative of modern art). The relative status of various phenomena within the narrative is determined by acknowledged experts speaking, or rather writing, from a position of authority. The experts – past, current and future – base their observations on what they know. What they know is determined, in turn, by what they can find out through their own research, or learn by reading research done by others. This process,

which begins with the introductory art history survey course, continues throughout the years of graduate training and beyond. Access to information is affected not only by the researcher's field of interest, but also by his or her ability to read particular languages. If information is published in a language which the majority of students and experts do not know, that information, for all practical purposes, does not exist. It will likely never enter the disciplinary discourse or play a role in shaping the perception of historic significance within the field.

The art historical discourse on modern European art has been defined since the late-nineteenth century primarily by three languages: German, French, and English. The importance of French can be linked to the centrality of French art to the narrative of modernism, and the historic significance of French as the language of Europe's educated elite; that of German, to the importance of the pioneering work of German art historians, and of Germany for the history of twentieth-century art. The continuing importance of both languages is reflected in the language requirements of the majority of graduate programs in art history in the U.S. as well as Europe. One could argue, however, that this emphasis has more to do with access to untranslated primary sources, rather than current research published in those languages.

The significance of English for art history is a more recent phenomenon. Even though scholars from English speaking countries have made significant contributions that in the recent years have defined the methodological direction of the discipline, the quality of their work does not fully account for the present hegemonic status of English. The English-language art historical texts are produced today not just by native speakers. Increasingly, they are written by scholars from outside the Anglophone linguistic sphere who either choose to translate work originally published in their native language or are more and more publishing exclusively in English. Although it is impossible to determine the full extent of this phenomenon, since there is no reliable statistical information available for all countries and all publishers, it is possible to get a sense of its scope by examining bibliographic databases, such as the WorldCat and ArtAbstracts. This is not a perfect solution, since only those publications that are catalogued by the databases enter the picture. On the other hand, one could easily argue that only those texts that can be located via such indices enter the discourse. Given the current publishing

volume, a text that is not catalogued is effectively lost and buried; if it is not indexed, it can not be found; if it can not be found, it is unlikely it will be read. The WorldCat database, maintained by over 9,000 member institutions from 80 countries, contains over 52 million records. Although it does not provide a perfect record of publishing, insofar as it contains only those items which are owned by libraries, it is the most comprehensive source of information available today on international publishing trends. Of the four hundred languages represented in the database, only fifty-two have more than fifteen thousand records. The top five are English (30,955,845 records), German (3,156,339 records), French (3,119,250 records), Spanish (2,160,728 records) and Japanese (1,263,231). Polish occupies fifteenth position with 251,377 records. The contrast between almost thirty-one million records for English and two-hundred fifty thousand for Polish is striking and needs no commentary. Even more staggering is the realization that the total number of records for all languages except English in the top fifty-two categories come barely to 17.25 million.<sup>5</sup>

A search of the WorldCat database for the heading "art history" reveals a similar pattern (Fig 1). However, when broken down into twenty year periods, the data demonstrates a relatively recent origin of the phenomenal growth in the number of English art history texts. In the pre-World War II period, English-language publishing, though significant in terms of volume, remained relatively constant, keeping in step with the publishing volume for German and French. Predictably, this situation changed after the war. Although there was a significant increase in publication volume for all three languages in the post-war period, by the 1980s the growth in the number of art history books published in English surpassed by a factor of four the number published in the other two languages. The figures available for the past thirteen years (1990-March 2003) give one pause. Compared to 2,371 art history books published collectively in French and German, there were 6,587 titles published during the same period in English.<sup>6</sup>

A search of the Art Abstracts database, a leading source of bibliographic information for journal articles, which catalogues 378 international art periodicals, provides further confirmation of this trend (Fig. 2). The data table reveals a steep increase in the 1990s in the number of journal articles published in art history in all three languages. It is particularly startling to note the dramatic

increase in the number of peer-reviewed, feature-length articles published in English during this period. From less than three thousand published in the 1980s, the number rose to almost fifteen thousand in the 1990s, a four hundred percent increase. Since this category contains only peer reviewed texts and as such is an indicator of the current state of knowledge within art history, it clearly demonstrates that today English-language publishing dominates the production of disciplinary discourse, and hence the production of knowledge in art history.

What accounts for such an explosive growth of English publishing in the post-war period? The mass exodus of German scholars to American universities in the wake of the World War II clearly played a role in shifting the geographic focus of art history. It also had a profound impact on its development as an academic discipline in America. The European, primarily German, émigrés were responsible for training a new cadre of American scholars who would assume leadership in the subsequent decades. One must remember how recent, after all, is the entry of art history into the American university system. The first graduate courses in art history began to be offered at American universities only in the 1890s. The Princeton Ph.D. program in art history was established in 1908. Harvard conferred its first Ph.D. in the discipline in 1913, and the College Art Association, the national organization for art historians and artists, was established in 1912. The influx of students into American colleges and universities after the Second World War under the GI Bill contributed to a rapid increase in the number of academic degree programs in art and art history. The growing enrollments, which created a demand for faculty capable of teaching graduate-level courses, produced within a relatively short period a supply of candidates qualified to fill the new positions. The imperative to gain recognition as a professional within the field was from the beginning based on a publication record.<sup>7</sup> However, it was not until the early 1980s that the increasing competition within the job market combined with contraction of enrollments began significantly affecting tenure standards for art history within studio-based programs, which account today for the bulk of current academic positions within the discipline. Since then, the familiar publish-or-perish dictum has become the norm for art history in America. If we consider the number of art history graduate programs in existence today in the

U.S. and the institutional politics and pressures of the tenure and promotion system, the publication statistics no longer appear surprising. According to *Directory of Ph.D., M.A. and Related Programs in Art History* published by the College Art Association, in 1999 there were 60 Ph.D. programs, and 70 terminal M.A. programs in art history in the United States. These numbers have to be augmented by the number of art history programs within art schools and art departments that do not confer graduate degrees, but still employ full-time, tenure track art historians.

What all those figures unambiguously reveal is that English has become since the 1950s the most important language of art historical discourse. Since the 1990s, it has de facto achieved a hegemonic status. The English-language publishing industry, hand in hand with the American academic system, have become the discipline's knowledge industry. English is the new Latin as far as art history is concerned. Should this situation be a cause for concern? What are the real consequences of such absolute dominance of the discipline by a single language? Obviously there are advantages and disadvantages inherent in this situation. It is not just an issue of language after all. Those who publish in English also determine the other "language" of the discipline, that is, its methodology. Given the industry politics and pressures, simply publishing in English is today insufficient. In order to participate in and shape the discourse, one has to engage in discussions that are most central for the field in a manner that is appropriate, relevant and exemplary. A connoisseurship study may be of interest to a small number of specialists, but will have no impact and will not register with the discipline as a whole. More importantly, given the interests and concerns of the academic publishing industry's "gatekeepers" it has little chance of being published.

The issue of methodological relevance has been a nagging problem for the Eastern European scholarship. The Cold War effectively blocked the free flow of information into the former Eastern Bloc countries. Although some publications always made it through, the methodological character of the art historical research in countries such as Poland, until very recently, was based mainly on locally developed assumptions. Those tended to focus on and perpetuate traditional methods of object-based scholarship. Since 1989, the situation has changed significantly. The growing emphasis on English-language

training and the free flow of literature from the West, restricted solely by financial considerations, has resulted in rapid retooling, especially by the younger scholars. A range of initiatives sponsored by various government agencies, European and U.S. universities and private foundations, in particular the Getty Foundation in the U.S., which ranged from individual travel fellowships, summer institutes, individual research grants to institutional grants for library acquisitions and technology, have helped Eastern European art historians to make rapid gains as far as methodology and "state of knowledge" within Western art history were concerned. Although the academic systems in the region have suffered due to severe lack of funding, new funding sources have allowed many scholars to travel abroad and to participate in international conferences and meetings. Proficiency in English has also allowed a growing number of students from Eastern European countries to come to the United States and Britain for graduate education. Finally in the most recent years, the phenomenal growth of the Internet and e-mail has fundamentally changed the communication and dissemination of information within the discipline, effectively bridging the gap between Eastern Europe and the West.

Perhaps most importantly for our discussion, as a consequence, a generation of art historians who learned English in the 1990s have begun publishing their research abroad. For now, this is still not a widespread phenomena, and is hampered by the lack of fluency and the expense of translation. It indicates, however, the direction in which the field is inexorably moving. What the Eastern European art historians have to say about European modern art, given their very different vantage point and different perception of the geography of cultural significance within the modern period, is sure to affect the way the discipline maps not only European modernism, but also post-modernism and contemporary art practice.

The absolute dominance of English within art history does not necessarily have to be a liability. Even though the hegemonic status of English can be linked to unequal distribution of power resulting from the U.S. driven economic globalism, it offers a unique opportunity to those outside the traditional power centres to participate in dialogue and exchange of ideas that will likely lead in time to redrawing of the cultural geography of Europe and of European modernism. Considered in this context, English

should no longer be defined as a particular language, attached to a specific cultural environment, but rather as an idiom, a term denoting a transnational, transcultural communication medium that could potentially allow for leveling of geographically based distinctions and hierarchies.<sup>8</sup> Whether adoption of English as the language of scholarship by art historians working outside of the traditionally English-speaking countries will create a leveled playing field within art history remains to be seen. Other factors, in particular economic and institutional ones, will no doubt play a role. However, there is an opportunity – one that, judging by our gathering here in Prague and other similar efforts, promises to fundamentally change the power relations within the disciplinary discourse. As

the Eastern European scholars begin to participate in the discussions that are central to the whole discipline, the traditional definitions, perceptions, and assumptions will come under increasing scrutiny. In time, it is inevitable that this participation will not only lead to the acknowledgement of the marginalized areas, to recognition of the heterogeneity of modern art practice, or rather practices, within the European and global context, and the complexity of interactions within European art scene past and present, but will also force radical reassessment of the current geographic mapping of European modernism and of the assumptions and conceptual paradigms that structure knowledge production and evaluation within art history as a discipline.

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All figures and statistics in the essay reflect the situation in 2003. Although in 2006 the specific numbers have changed, the general trends have remained in place.

1. *Totenmesse. Modernism in the Culture of Northern and Central Europe*, ed. Piotr Paszkiewicz, Warsaw 1996.
2. See for instance, Keith Moxey, *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History*, Ithaca 1994; Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven 1989; Norman Bryson, *Art in Context*, in: *Studies in Historical Change*, ed. Ralph Cohen, Charlottesville 1992.
3. For definition of discourse see Michael Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York 1972.
4. Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 50-55.

5. OCLS, "WorldCat facts and statistics," accessed July 2003, <http://www.oclc.org/worldcat/statistics/default.htm>
6. We should note here that these figures do not take into consideration publications issued in other European languages. English, French, and German dominate the field to such an extent that they define art history outside of specialty subfields in which knowledge of other languages is required.
7. For discussion of the rise of art history as an academic discipline in the U.S., see Howard Singermann, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, Berkeley 1999.
8. For discussion of English as a global or international language within the field of linguistics see Tom McArthur, *World or International or Global English – And What Is It Anyway?*, in: James E. Alatis and Ai-Hui Tan, eds., *Georgetown University Round Table on Language and Linguistics 1999*, Washington 2000, pp. 396-403, and David Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge 1997.