

## explore art behind the iron curtain

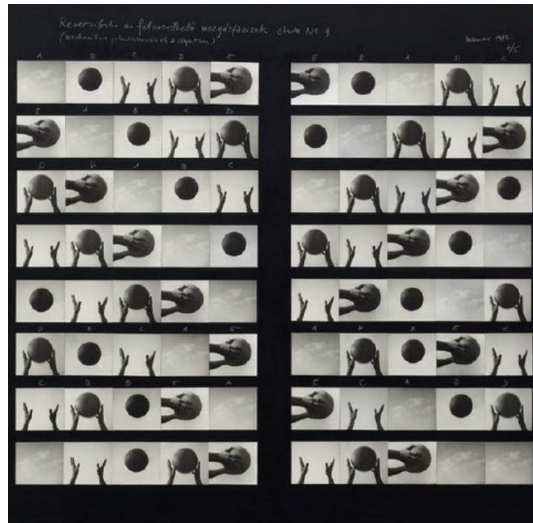
A new exhibition at The Arts Club uncovers the variety of responses to the politically charged atmosphere of the Cold War in the Eastern Bloc.



25 years after the fall of The Berlin Wall, and the opening up of the countries of the Eastern Bloc, the cultural world that existed behind the Iron Curtain is finally getting the respect it deserves. Nothing is leading the charge more than the art scenes of the era, which are finally getting the praise and evaluation they warrant.

Recently there's been exhibitions at The White Cube dedicated to Dora Maurer, and many of the epoch's artists were included in surveys at the Tate Modern and MoMA, and soon a retrospective of Edward Krasinski will open in Liverpool. But first, at London's Arts Club, there's *Displacements: Avant-Garde Eastern and Central European Art from the Cold War Period*, a appraisal of the various people working in the Eastern Bloc between the end of WW2 and the fall of the USSR.

The main question the exhibition seems to revolve around is the idea of how to make art when you're living under a dictatorship with a rigid system of creative censorship? Or rather what kind of art can be made under such a system, how you can turn art into a covert form of protest.

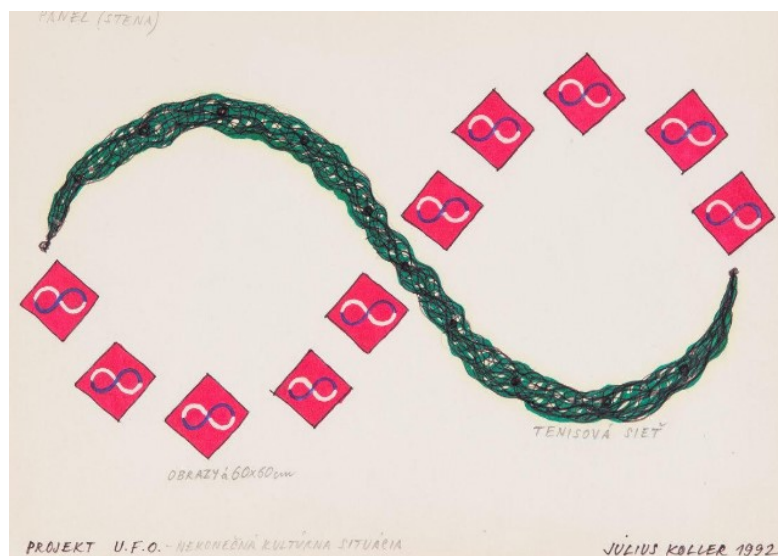


Dóra Maurer, Reversible and Changeable Phases of Movements, 1972

Sure, there are some artists who might slip across the borders, to forge a new free life in the free world. Others might stay and work away, and restrictions breed innovations out of necessity; if you're being censored or oppressed you have to find new or oblique ways to make political statements.

Where we stand on, interpret and appreciate art like this, or made under these circumstances, is at the heart of the exhibition, the assumption is that we should we expect "political" art to be obviously political, to offer up big easy critiques. But the kind of hit-you-over-the-head political art isn't really, openly, possible in such societies, and doesn't often produce art with much depth, longevity, or subtly.

The frisson of danger, rebellion, the sense of something much larger than the work itself being at stake, though, is a beguiling and alluring mixture. Which is what makes art made in the Eastern Bloc during the period covered by *Displacements* so interesting. There's nothing obvious or simple in these artists' critique of the world they live in.



Július Koller, 1992

It's an exhibition that takes in all the variety implied by such a broad time and space to cover. It includes Dora Maurer's geometric repetitions; Boris Bucan's take on pop and consumerism; Edward Krasinski's formalist experiments in mixing painting and sculpture; Katalin Ladic's radical, feminist, funny, performance pieces. It's an art scene though, that's been undervalued and relatively undiscovered. It's also a scene and generation, almost in defiance of the ready-made journalistic story expected of it, rejects many political or formal assumptions we might lazily make of it.

Pernilla Holmes, curator at The Arts Club and Director at Wedel Art, explains how "for so long 20th century art history was the story of modernism emanating mainly from Paris and New York, with a few exceptions. In recent years there's been a kind of 'correction' taking place - a strong move among academics and museums, and eventually the art market, to shift away from that blinkered view and to explore the vast amount of great, thoughtful and highly radical art being made in other regions." What much of the exhibition reveals is the way this generation had to deal with the situation they found themselves living in, and the variety of responses they formulated to stand up against it.



Katalin Ladic, *Poemim*, 1978

Dora Maurer is probably the best-known artist in the show, and undergoing the biggest shift in the west's knowledge of her work. The past five or so years have seen her introduced not just to the art market, but the critical world as well, and as one of the few female artists in the avant-garde/conceptual art world canon, she's obviously looked up to by many. Her work here stretches from the early 70s experiments in repetition and movement, and her more recent works that explore overlappings of colour. These works reach towards a universalism; they are communicative, full of possibility, hopeful. They are though, like many of the works on display, are not openly political, not political in an angry or abrasive way, anyway. Throughout her career she's fastidiously rejected all social, political, feminist, etc interpretations of her work.

Many of this generation, maybe out of necessity, took a similar approach. Edward Krasinski, for example, is a Polish sculptor and painter who's about to be subject to a Tate Liverpool retrospective, and is one of the most enigmatic and innovative artists of the time, but equally his work defies easy political pigeon-holing. The political readings must be oblique, metaphorical; how do we interpret the ways his work breaks down art's systems, conventions and constructions? Boris Bucan, who was recently included in a Tate exhibition on the pop art around the world, might be the most obviously political artist in the show, still laces his politics with a humour than subverts it.



Edward Krasinski

The most explicit theme to emerge is that the art is a definitive backlash to the government-pushed forms of Soviet Realism; figuration is a dirty word. Abstraction, geometry, and mathematical systems of creation all take precedence. So there's little surface hint of the political tension that underpins the avant-garde in these countries. In a system of both overt and covert repression, the importance is as much on saying anything; placing the act of creation outside the political system is a political act in itself. This is political art because everything done in the Eastern Bloc during this era was political.

"Many artists working in Eastern and Central Europe in the 60s and 70s were doing so in varying degrees of political turmoil and repression," Pernilla explains. "In many cases it was the anti-institutional politics of the era that led to these ground-breaking works. The artists we're showing wilfully negated what had gone before and forged new ground both aesthetically and conceptually." Take Imre Bak for example, another Hungarian working in Budapest during the same era as Dora. Imre's works as dynamic, colourful geometric abstractions; they deal in structure, and lack of humanity, a counter in this way, to Dora's more explicitly humanistic work. Both of course are valid positions to take up in response to a situation; much of the work falls in between the two poles.





Stano Filko, World Maps, 1967

Despite the inherent political nature of these works, much of it deals as much with art history as it does politics; Krasinski often uses innovative forms of art making as a way to challenge ideas of authority. Katalin Ladici's work prefigures the ideas and iconoclasm of Marina Abramovic. Boris Bucan refigures Warhol's comments on consumerism for a society without much experience of Coca Cola or Campbell's Soup. And in experimentation with new forms, it offers too, a kind of freedom.

"They are not solely political artists," Pernilla states. "Though certainly many of the works came out of politically charged situations and philosophies. It's important to recognise the ground-breaking nature of these works within art history. These are aesthetically and conceptually important works independent of the politics of the time. These works are a lesson in the best kind of audacity of the human spirit, expressed through radical art."

**Displacements: Avant-Garde Eastern and Central European art from the Cold War Period at The Arts Club, London, is open now by appointment only.**

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Credits

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