

Curatorial considerations on exhibiting design from the 1950s – What narrative for socialist modernism?

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In the field of architecture and design, discussions on *Ostmoderne* mainly focus on two periods: the age of the classical avant-garde, from the 1910s to the 1930s,¹ and the revival of modernism in the 1960s and 1970s.² The intermediary period, from the 1940s to the end of the 1950s, is quite difficult to assess. The following reflections on this issue are based on the experience of curating the exhibition *Cold Revolution. Central and Eastern European Societies in Times of Socialist Realism, 1948–1959 / Zimna Rewolucja. Społeczeństwa Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej wobec socrealizmu, 1948–1959*, which was held at Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw from May to October 2021. Presenting various media (fine arts, photography, cinema, design, architecture), the exhibition’s main topic was social transformation in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1950s. One part of the exhibition will be discussed in greater detail here: the table with design objects from the 1950s in the room entitled *pride of possession*, dedicated to the topic of consumerism and the role of objects during this period.

1. The arrangement of the table was indeed the subject of discussions between us as curators. In comparison with the periods before and after, design from the 1950s is not easy to approach, for several reasons.

First, the objects were created against a background of institutional chaos. Within a short time, Stalinisation and de-Stalinisation had led to considerable instability, with many careers and creative processes being interrupted. If the display of decorative objects provides a *sense of order*, to paraphrase Ernst Gombrich (i.e. the impression of



[1] *Cold Revolution. Central and Eastern European Societies in Times of Socialist Realism, 1948–1959*, exhibition view, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art

a stable world),³ such a trend contradicts the messy historical reality in which objects from the 1950s came into being. This disorder explains the fact that the history of each of these objects is complex, including the history of their preservation since the 1950s. The objects from this decade have been less frequently conserved than those of the later period, which means that some of them are known today only in the form of photographic reproductions. The vocabulary itself was uncertain; if the English word *design* was banished, a variety of names in different Central and Eastern European languages was used, often maintaining the confusion between industrial design and handicrafts that was typical for this period. In some contexts, like Romania, the absence of stable institutions could even give rise to the impression that design was absent during this time.⁴

Secondly, the evocation of the economic context of the 1950s in an exhibition is a challenge. Showing an object from a certain period creates the impression that the object was accessible during this period, whereas in this case it could have remained a prototype or been produced in a limited amount or for a specific purpose (such as dishware in hotels for foreign visitors). Even though the majority of the objects featured in *Cold Revolution* were mass-produced, they were distributed through various channels. Exhibiting can give a false impression of availability. It is contradictory to common knowledge of this time: the 1950s in Central and Eastern Europe was a period of penury.

This fact is crucial to understanding the decade and the disgruntlement among the population, which sometimes led to riots and uprisings. What makes historical reality even more complex is that the experience of shortages was not homogeneous. People living in the 1950s could compare their situation with the crisis of the 1930s or the extreme privation of wartime; in comparison, the material shortages they experienced in the 1950s appeared less drastic than before. This complex economic reality is particularly difficult to communicate in an exhibition without resorting to the use of long explanatory panels.

A third question concerns the modern characteristic of these objects. Should they be presented as modern or ›antimodern‹? Or should another category be used, such as ›discreetly‹ or ›marginally‹ modern? Should it be about ›divergent‹, ›peripherak‹ ›uneven‹ modernism, or the ›off-modern‹ proposed by Svetlana Boym?⁵ Should we insist on the continuities between the pre-war and the post-war period, as the contributors to the volume *Socrealizmy i modernizacje* are invited to do?⁶ If we speak about modernity, how should it be named? Should we use the German word *Ostmoderne*, which insists on the geographical issue and is highly dependent on the German situation and the constant confrontation between West and East Germany? Should we use the English word *socialist modernism*, which insists on the ideological context? Or should the exhibition simply avoid and ignore all of these questions? The period of the 1950s in Central and Eastern Europe was of course dominated by discourses rejecting the word *modernism* as a bourgeois, capitalist and outdated project; it is easy to find such condemnations, along with multiple quotations. But an exhibition brings the objects to the foreground and, when we look at the reality of the objects, their relationship to modernity is not easy to define. What do we do with the (anti-)modernity of these objects? What is the curatorial benefit of engaging in a discussion on modernity? The rest of this article presents and explains some choices that were made during the preparation of the design table.

2. One decision was to confront visitors to the *Cold Revolution* exhibition with this question through intriguing images, juxtaposing good and bad design. On one part of the table, the visitor can indeed look at a series of such images, realized by Horst Michel. Horst Michel was a professor at the Interior Design Institute (*Institut für Innengestaltung*) in Weimar, in East Germany, in the 1950s. In his archives, several boxes of slides for projected photography (*Dias*) are preserved under the name *Gegenüberstellungen* (confrontations), each slide giving one example of good design and another example of bad design. It was the teaching material that Michel used during his lessons; he also published numerous different texts on this subject, the drafts and published versions of which are also preserved in his archives. For the *Cold Revolution* exhibition, some of the slides have been digitized and presented to visitors on a screen.

The initiative by Horst Michel was not new and original. It is possible to find similar examples at various points in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in different ideological contexts (in the German context, during the Empire, the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich)⁷. It was one of the usual ways of educating the people, of teaching the differences between what is appropriate, tasteful and beautiful and what is inappropriate, tasteless and ugly. It was part of an education regarding consumption, the formation of a wise consumer. But, in the context of the 1950s, Michel's initiative was in keeping with the polarisation of the world during the Cold War, the clear-cut polarity between the capitalist West and the socialist East. Therefore, a clear visual opposition between modern and antimodern was to be expected considering this type of teaching material. Yet, and this is the important point, the interpretation of the dichotic images is not easy. Why is one good and the other bad? Which is good, and which is bad? Very often, visitors to the exhibition cannot figure out which is which.

Reading Horst Michel's texts (which are not present in the exhibition) does not give us a clearer idea of his thoughts on modernity. For instance, the following quote, repeated in different texts, does not clarify his apprehension of modernity: »It is our effort to make things beautiful, comfortable and functional: they should not bear the stamp of pettiness or false ostentation: but neither should they be yesterday's petit bourgeois, ascetic purism and formalistic extravagance.«⁸ The first part of the sentence, with its focus on beauty, comfort and functionality, fits in with modernist ideals, and could be written by any modernist. But then the list of condemnations creates a constellation of countermodels based on visible and moral features, which makes it impossible to know what is expected. Another of Michel's texts is entitled ›Warum ist das Angemessene modern?‹ (›Why is the adequate modern?‹), but the body of the text does not engage in a discussion on modernism.⁹ This is why we are interested in Michel's slides, and why we have decided to include them in the exhibition: they show that an opposition between modern/antimodern is probably not completely relevant for this period and area.

3. Another discussion that evolved during the arrangement of the table is the way in which the objects themselves are shown. We decided not to create a ›period room‹, i.e. to reconstitute a typical interior from the 1950s (as was common practice in design exhibitions in the 1950s¹⁰). We chose not to transform the exhibition space into an immersive environment by showing different objects in a unique and meaningful interior. On the contrary, the curatorial choice was to present various objects on a single table. They are different from each other in many ways. They come from different countries, they are different in size, they served different purposes, they belonged to different spheres: the workplace, the domestic interior, the interior of pub-

lic spaces such as houses of culture. The objects, in a relatively small number, are all on the same level.

One major goal of this display is to draw the attention of the visitor to the materiality of the objects. Because each object is isolated and removed from its immediate national and functional context, the visitor, standing just above it at the level of the surface, can appreciate its material quality. Different materials are on display: wood, glass, ceramic, steel, textile (we decided not to include plastic from the late 1950s). What is noticeable is not only the diversity of materials, but above all the treatment of the surface. The piece of textile, for instance, presents quite an interesting surface. It is a jacquard made by Zofia Matuszczyk-Cygańska in 1950–1954 in Warsaw. The fabric, inspired by rural artisanal textile, has a rudimentary and crude aspect at first glance. It appears rough in the tactile sense of the word. Although it looks handmade, it was actually factory-produced. When we take a closer look, we see that the surface is not as rugged as expected. It also has a soft and quite gentle quality. The double feature fits in perfectly with the conditions of production of the jacquard: such fabrics were created in Cepelia, the Polish institute whose history has been described in detail by Piotr Korduba.¹¹ The art historian shows that this institution inherited objects from pre-war experiments, which were sold in cities through a network of cooperatives. They were addressed to the new urban populations, who could maintain a link to the countryside while building an urban life.

In the exhibition, visitors cannot touch the objects, which are under glass covers. However, around the table, we display many advertisement posters showing people handling and taking hold of such commodities. This was the meaning of advertising in a socialist context – it was not intended to highlight the competition between products (indeed, such competition did not exist), but to show how enjoyable consumption was. Alongside the posters, there are movies that convey the same ideas. The film *Az eladás művészete* (*The Art of Selling Goods*), produced in Hungary in 1960 by Miklós Jancsó and Márta Mészáros, is very significant in this regard. The nature of this 13-minute film, which shows the interior of a large shop, is somewhere between a commercial, a newsreel and a propaganda film. It starts off with people looking at shop windows, but the majority of the scenes take place inside the shop, where salesmen and customers are shown touching the commodities, the textiles, the dishes, the meat. We see them packing and unpacking, folding and unfolding fabrics. It is a visual ode to sensory experience.

Most of the selected objects shown in the exhibition, such as the shoes made in Zlín or an ashtray made in Włocławek, have this haptic quality in common. The objects are simple in the sense that they are modest and designed for a specific use; however, they also

give the impression of being pleasant to touch. The socialist sensual surface has already been analysed for Soviet design. Emma Widdis recorded the history of the sense of touch in the Soviet Union through the analysis of various journals and movies.¹² From the Constructivist interest in the ›texture‹ (фактура) of raw materials to the many discussions on Soviet interiors, she shows the recurrent significance of haptics. She stresses the importance of self-made products in Soviet interiors, implying a direct contact with the material. »Making things – with one’s hands – is an *a priori* tactile experience. Such articles were aimed not only at the satisfaction of a need; they offered luxury objects, certainly, but they also – and crucially – offered the luxury, or pleasure, of making«.¹³ Emma Widdis’ argumentation (centred on the period from the 1920s to the 1940s) invites the reader to revisit the issue of modernity and antimodernity. The haptic and sensual feature is related to something that is neither especially modern nor especially anti-modern. It is more of a crosswise characteristic, confirming that the opposition of the two is not necessarily relevant.

4. Another goal of the chosen display is to draw attention to the shape of these objects, which is another tricky point if we wish to discuss their modernity. Modernism cannot be reduced to formal questions, but formalisation is one of the key features of modernism. The objects from the 1950s have a specific way of dealing with this issue. For instance, the pot with a heating cartridge, made in East Germany by Rudolf Kaiser in 1950, presents an interesting form. The pot appears simple (an unadorned round form with a small opening) and robust (with three large legs and a thick handle). It is entirely dedicated to its function, without participating in a functionalist aesthetic. Its form proves that it is made to last – after the destruction of war and in a context of penury, objects were rare and had to be durable. It is a solid and massive object, and its shape bears witness to this. Any sign of fragility has been banished. However, the formal austerity is counterbalanced by certain elements: the trapezoidal shape of the three legs, the rounded edges of the opening, the thin black line that separates the pot from the heating cartridge, the general bowed line leading from the leg to the handle. All these elements create something like a proletarian elegance – it is a thing that is both robust and delicate. Similar features can be found in other objects on the table, such as the aluminium thermos by Margarethe Jahny (1958) or the carafes made by Wanda Zawidzka-Manteuffel at the beginning of the 1950s.

In the exhibition, objects from the 1950s are not compared with objects from previous periods. However, if this were to be the case, we would have insisted on the specificities of the decade’s creations. Such objects are different from the design created under fascist regimes (craving for the eternal form, with right angles, hard edges) or in keeping with the modernist simplicity of the 1920s (for instance that of the

Bauhaus), when the geometrization of the form was more visible. In comparison, objects from the 1950s do not display such a modernist formalisation. They propose another version of simplicity than the stylisation of modernism. Nevertheless, it is incorrect to say that they are in opposition to modernism; rather, they take their place at its side.

5. During our guided tours of the exhibition, we witnessed some of the visitors' spontaneous reactions to this table. The objects can evoke a feeling of familiarity – this can be a pleasant familiarity (for example because objects are remembered from a grandparent's home) or a rejected familiarity (because the visitors had seen the objects many times and did not wish to encounter them any more).

However, our curatorial proposition was to show how puzzling the objects are today. They appear as unsettling creations, referring to rural handicraft, participating in industrial production, jeopardizing the narration of modernism, being neither modern nor antimodern. Our ambition was to suggest that the objects (and actually most of the images that we put on display in the exhibition) can be interesting to look at, even if they do not follow the modernist narrative. In a way, we propose an escape from the matrix of Modernity/Antimodernity.

We built the exhibition around socio-political issues, in the belief that the comprehension of these matters would help to make the creations visible. In the context of *Cold Revolution*, we see the main socio-political feature as being the specific proletarian atmosphere of the time, the recurrent attention paid to the working classes in the framework of the communist dictatorship. Let us mention one last object on the table: the transportable sewing machine made by Ernst Fischer (1950–1955). Here again, the adjectives modern or antimodern are ineffective. The object becomes more visible if it is related to the concerns of the working class of this time. This especially applies to the situation of one section of the working class: women who worked at home rather than in a factory, faced with the task of combining family care and housework with earning an income. This transportable machine (which takes the form of a briefcase that unfolds into a long sewing machine table) offers a beautiful object/image of the unstable proletariat of this period.

In *Gestalten für die Serie*, the unmatched book on East German design from 1988, Heinz Hirdina uses the expression *Besitzerstolz*, ›pride of the possessor‹, in the chapter on the 1950s¹⁴, and this inspired us to name the room ›pride of possession‹. The expression is indeed insightful. It places the question of ownership at the centre, in a socialist context where, even though the possession of the means of production was banned, workers still owned private objects (and sometimes tools such as a transportable sewing machine). The *possessor* was more than a *user* or a *consumer*. They were someone who was not supposed to own because of their modest situation, but who was elevated

thanks to their proprietorship. The workers felt *pride* – confidence in the context of the communist dictatorship is certainly one of the most intriguing historical problems of this period.

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Joanna Kordjak is a curator at Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw. Her main research area is 20th-century Polish art, with a focus on the post-war period. She is curator and co-curator of numerous exhibitions, e.g. *Andrzej Wróblewski 1927–1959* (2007); *The Map. Artistic Migrations and the Cold War* (2013); *Cosmos Calling! Art and Science in the Long 1960s; Just After the War* (2015); *Poland – a Country of Folklore?* (2016); *The Future Will Be Different. Visions and Practices of Social Modernisation* (2018); *Puppets: Theatre, Film, Politics* (2019) and editor of their accompanying publications. With Jérôme Bazin Kordjak collectively curated the exhibition *Cold Revolution Central and Eastern European Societies in Times of Socialist Realism, 1948–1959* at Zachęta.

Notes

- 1 For instance, Martin Kohlrausch, *Brokers of Modernity, East Central Europe and the Rise of Modernist Architects 1910–1950*, Leuven 2019; Andrzej Szczerski, *Modernizacje: sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 1918–1939*, Łódź 2010.
- 2 See the activities and publications of the group *Socialist Modernism*, aimed at the preservation of the buildings from this time: online: <https://socialistmodernism.com>, 8.1.2022.
- 3 Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca 1979.
- 4 Gabriela Nicolescu, »Decorativa: the Monopoly of Visual Production in Socialist Romania. The Centralized Organization of Museum Displays in the 1960s and 1970s«, in: *Journal of Design History* 29/1 (2016), 71–87.
- 5 Svetlana Boym, *The Off-Modern*, London 2017.
- 6 Aleksandra Sumorok, Tomasz Załuski, *Socrealizmy i modernizacje*, Łódź 2017.
- 7 Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects. A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design*, Berkeley 2007.
- 8 »Es ist unser Bemühen, die Dinge schön, bequem und zweckmässig zu gestalten: sie sollen weder den Stempel der Ärmlichkeit noch den des falschen Prunkes tragen: sie sollen aber auch nicht gestrige Kleinbürgerlichkeit, asketischer Purismus und formalistische Extravaganz sein.« (Horst Michel, »Industrieformgestaltung. Beispiele aus der Arbeit des Instituts für Innengestaltung an der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar«, unpublished, Bauhaus Universität Weimar, Horst Michel Archiv, 1950–1962.)
- 9 Horst Michel, »Warum ist das angemessene modern? Von Professor Horst Michel, Direktor des Instituts für Innengestaltung an der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar«, unpublished, Bauhaus Universität Weimar, Horst Michel Archiv, undated.
- 10 See for instance the Hungarian exhibitions analyzed in: Eszter Szónyeg-Szegvári, »The Advance Towards Modern Forms in Everyday Life. Vision and Propaganda at the Home Design Exhibitions of the Hungarian Council of Applied Arts in the 1950s and 1960s«, in: *Within Frames. Art of the Sixties in Hungary (1958–1968)*, Budapest 2017, 158–191.
- 11 Piotr Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż: Towarzystwo Popierania Przemysłu Ludowego, Cepelia, Instytut Wzornictwa Przemysłowego*, Warsaw 2013.
- 12 Emma Widdis, *Socialist Senses. Film, Feeling and the Soviet Subject, 1917–1940*, Bloomington 2017.

- 13 Emma Widdis, »See Yourself Soviet: The Pleasures of Textile in the Machine Age«, in: Marina Balina, Evgeny Dobrenko (ed.), *Petrified Utopia, Happiness Soviet Style*, London 2009, 115–132 (here 117).
- 14 Heinz Hirdina, *Gestalten für die Serie: Design in der DDR 1949–1985*, Dresden 1988, 47.

Photo credit

[1] Daniel Chrobak.