



**Instytut  
Historii Sztuki  
Uniwersytetu  
Warszawskiego**

**Enchanted Socialist Modernity? Art of Central and Eastern Europe in the face of esoterism and unconventional spiritualities 1945-1989**

**ONLINE CONFERENCE**

**Institute of Art History, University of Warsaw**

**27<sup>TH</sup>-28<sup>TH</sup> June, 2023**

The already legendary exhibition “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985” (1986) at the Country Museum of Art in Los Angeles challenged formalist readings of modernism and began the process of its radical reconceptualization by identifying the links between 19th-century spirituality and the development of Western abstraction. Over the next decades, the study of the relationship between artistic creation and broadly understood manifestations of spirituality has become an important area of research on contemporary art, which in recent years has taken on some features of a “spiritual turn”. An excellent example of this trend was this year’s Venice Biennale, which was a tribute to artists seeking new relationships with the world based on harmony and empathy. Silvia Federici pointed to the need to re-enchant the world by “reconnecting what capitalism has divided: our relations with nature, with others, and with our bodies, enabling us not only to escape the gravitational pull of capitalism but to regain a sense of wholeness in our lives”. In the view of Federici, as well as many other researchers, the desire to “enchant” again would therefore be a reaction to the alienation of modern capitalism – the reduction of interpersonal and interspecies relations to profit-oriented, objectifying processes of exchange. Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson, introducing the term “occult modernism” into their research in relation to a wide spectrum of artistic practices, defined it as a “variety of interactions between occultism and modernist artistic expression (...). That is to say, occult modernism is the field in which the discourses of occultism and modernism intersect with each other, as well as with other discourses (most prominently science, religion, and modernity).” Considering, however, that modernity cannot be treated in an essentialist way by reducing it to the model of Western civilization, related exclusively to the logic of capitalism, the question arises how the desire to “enchant reality” and the search for alternative forms of spirituality was linked with the imposed project of socialist modernity? Was it an escapist gesture to delve into oneself as a consequence of political disillusionment, or – as Piotr Piotrowski noted in reference to matter painting – a form of conscious resistance to the Marxist materialistic worldview additionally embedded in the “specificity of Central European tradition”?

The conference seeks to consider the relationship between the project of a socialist state and the revival of esoteric/occult traditions in the art of the region after World War II. The goal is to outline a symbolic, alternative artistic geography of Central and Eastern Europe in the years 1945-1989, whose

topography will be determined not so much by geopolitical borders, but rather imagined spiritual communities.

The conference welcomes papers that address one or more of the following research topics and questions:

- How to talk about art inspired by esotericism/occultism in Central and Eastern Europe? Definitions, theoretical frameworks and new methodologies;
- Transnationalism of esoteric/occult practices and the (post)colonial condition; non-obvious directions of the reception of ideas;
- Esotericism/occultism in art in the face of modernization trends in the countries of the Eastern Bloc;
- Searching for alternative forms of spirituality and knowledge as a reaction to disillusionment with political systems and national states;
- Artistic esoteric/occult practices as a form of resistance; spiritual turn in art as a struggle for artistic subjectivity, individuality and self-realization;
- Esotericism/occultism as a reaction to the politicization of identity and sexuality, enabling the reconfiguration of traditional gender roles; the emancipatory nature of esoteric/occult inspirations;
- Art as a spiritual activity? Avant-garde tradition, neo-avant-garde strategies and occultism/esotericism;
- Contexts and conditions of discovering local esoteric traditions by artists after World War II; Individual art practices in relation to local cultural memories and non-professional art;
- Esoteric codes - revisions of (local) iconographic traditions;
- What role did art and artists play in popularizing alternative forms of spirituality and religious discourses?

The conference will be held in English via Zoom. In keeping with our desire to increase the opportunity for discussion and debate, the format will be short papers/presentations (20 minutes) followed by 15 minutes discussion. We welcome contribution by scholars from across a range of disciplines and national and international perspectives. A post-conference publication is planned (peer-reviewed book; details will be announced at a later date).

#### Timeline and procedure:

Please submit your abstract of 300-400 words (max) with brief academic biography (no longer than 250 words) by **12<sup>th</sup> March, 2023** to one of the following:

Dr Justyna Balisz-Schmelz: [j.balisz-schmelz@uw.edu.pl](mailto:j.balisz-schmelz@uw.edu.pl)

Dr Kamila Dworniczak: [kamila.dworniczak@uw.edu.pl](mailto:kamila.dworniczak@uw.edu.pl)

Notification of acceptance will be sent by **16<sup>th</sup> April, 2023**.