doi:10.32020/ArtandDoc/32/2025/8

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‘SECOND-CLASS’ CITIZEN POSITIONS AND THE WORKS OF GRŽINIĆ/ŠMID A SEA OF TRAUMATIZED SOULS STUCK IN THE POST-SOCIALIST ERA

In the fall of 2023, we exhibited *Nothing New in the East* at A.K.T; in Pforzheim, Germany. The exhibition included 28 contemporary pieces (together with a collection of posters) that originated from or had a direct connection to the Eastern European region.

The exhibition was split between two institutions: at A.K.T; we showed contemporary artworks, while our sister institution, the EMMA Creative Center, exhibited Polish posters from the collection the Dydo Gallery in Kraków has built over the last 60 years. These posters illustrate the complex history of Poland since the Second World War.

The title of the exhibition *Nothing New in the East* was of course deliberately chosen. It was clear that many visitors would make a direct connection to Remarque’s novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929), literally “Nothing New in the West.” The novel was published in English translation in the same year as *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Surprisingly, hardly anyone was bothered by the title or the play on words (with the exception of a class of Ukrainian refugee children who visited the exhibition). In my opinion, this indicates the conscious or unconscious attitude of the viewers. “Nothing New in the East” was not formulated as a statement, but as an ambivalent question. However, most people did not understand it that way. For the West, there is nothing new in the East – except war. But there is a lot that is new in the East! But the new is contaminated with the old. Recognizing this is a challenge.

Main Anchor for the Thematic Orientation

In this context, the “WE” (which stands for Western Europeans) is an essential focal point in terms of emancipation and participation. “WE” could also be seen as the imaginary extras and the mirror of obsessions in the thematic depths of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid’s works. Or like foreign bodies in a sea of traumatized souls stuck in the post-socialist era, fearing to be swallowed up by capitalism and new identity movements without questioning their own guilt.

In the exhibition *Nothing New in the East* we showed five major works from the last

40 years of Gržinić/Šmid's oeuvre: *Moments of Decision* (1985), *Bilocation* (1990), *The Butterfly Story* (1995), *Obsession* (2008) and *Seizure – Rewriting Counter-Histories* (2015).

Together, these works formed the main anchor for the exhibition's thematic focus. In a wooden room created specifically for these five works, located in the middle of one of the exhibition floors, the works were isolated from and simultaneously enveloped by many different pieces. They served as a kind of fixed point, the centre of a coordinate system around which the other works revolved. Their presence, urgency and impact are essential for subsequent generations. Nearby were works by Ieva Epnere, Rufina Bazlova and Sofia Tocar, Julia Beliaeva, Márta Czene and Krišs Salmanis.

All of these artists deal with past and present issues related to confronting reality: examining the structures of recent history, exploring childhood and the search for identity, the legacy of failed socialism and its relationship to capitalism, the role of women and the questioning of female attitudes, war and war-related contexts and the consequences of war, overcoming trauma, questions about the relationship between religion and the state, questions about the nature of democracy and its future perspectives. The work of Gržinić/Šmid is exemplary for reflecting upon and contextualising these themes and serves as a model for subsequent generations of artists, which made it decisive in terms of the exhibition's structure.

Their works not only highlight historical and contemporary references, they also dissect and analyse the realities, fictions and corruption driving male-dominated society, which has manifested itself in various ways over the centuries and where violence is the norm, be it physical or psychological. The legacy of colonization, patriarchy and exploitation continues in the structures it has established and, with the aid of new technologies, it seeks to spread to new terrain, to maintain inequality, and to avoid confronting its legacy and the trauma it has yielded.

Their works affirm the need to rethink philosophical insights and narratives. In the exhibition *Nothing New in the East*, they have provided this impetus.

The Eastern European View of Europe

In view of the current crisis and war-related situation in Europe, the exhibition was intended to shed light on the Eastern European view of Europe, present Eastern European perspectives, and promote an open discourse. I had been considering the idea of such a thematic exhibition for some time. The discussions and conversations that took place in Germany after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine made it clear that a substantive debate on the topic of so-called Eastern Europe was necessary. These often-hysterical discussions revealed a lack of background knowledge and a lack of interest in a serious and well-founded debate, which would have required a shared sense of responsibility and awareness.

It became all too clear that the so-called Western European realm shows little interest in history and in social and historical contexts – neither that of the post-war period nor of the period after EU enlargement. A climate of stigmatization prevails, which seems to have been confirmed time and again by conflicts since the 1990s. Having roots in the East meant hiding mentally behind the Wall. No discourse. No perspective. Only defiance and violence. A cliché that seems to be confirmed by the current war in Ukraine. Just like in Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (published in 2010). Only self-inflicted. These were the comments I heard from visitors to the exhibition at A.K.T;.

Sztuka i Dokumentacja nr 32 (2025) | *Art and Documentation* no. 32 (2025) • ISSN 2080-413X • e-ISSN 2545-0050 • doi:10.32020/ARTandDOC

Exhibition *Im Osten Nichts Neues* (*Nothing New in the East*), A.K.T; Pforzheim, 2023

History as a Question of Perspective

Of course, this was nothing new to me. I was born in Poland, but have spent most of my life in Germany. And of course I have always been judged and categorized on the basis of my origins and the same clichéd images of history. To this day, even though I have lived in Germany for almost 40 years.

All too often things get mixed up, for example, due to a lack of basic knowledge, such as the assignment of capital cities to their respective countries. A serious discussion about the past of Eastern Europe from the post-war period to the present was and is only possible with a few select people.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Germany experienced reunification and Western Europe saw the end of the division of the continent. From the perspective of the Eastern European states, this event marked the final end of the Second World War. Many of these states had not exactly been willing members of the Warsaw Pact.

This rarely played a role in history lessons at German schools. There, historical analysis was limited to Hitler's putsch, the Nazis' rise to power, the Blitzkrieg, Stalingrad (although Napoleon's failed campaign was also briefly mentioned) and Stauffenberg's uprising (the 'good German'). Then the 'good Americans' and the 'bad Russians.' Other countries on the eastern border of West Germany were not mentioned. They simply disappeared behind the Wall after the Second World War. (Incidentally, this view is also prevalent in today's analyses of the war in Ukraine. It is all about Western Europe, Russia and America. The other states in between seem to be just a buffer zone.) The Hungarian uprising, the Prague Spring or Polish Solidarity are only known to connoisseurs. And when the Wall came down, which the average West German interprets as the result of a peaceful revolution by the East Germans, Eastern Europe was simply integrated into Western Europe. Economically speaking.

The countries of Eastern Europe had to adapt quickly to a new, market-oriented, democratic system without having the opportunity to reflect on their own identity and come to terms with the events of the 20th century. Today, some 30 years later, we are facing the challenges of a difficult European unification process. Eastern European states are fighting for their place, their identity and their voice in Europe, while Western European countries often find it difficult to understand the motives and actions of their Eastern European neighbours.

Two Sides of the Imaginary Wall

During my research for the exhibition *Nothing New in the East*, I noticed that young female artists in particular are struggling to find their identity and their voice. This underscores the importance of the works by Gržinić/Šmid. They question the past and the present by connecting a seemingly imaginary space with the harsh reality of a society that has been searching for its identity for decades. This is reminiscent of Kosovo 30 years ago and can easily be transposed onto the current situation in Ukraine and elsewhere. It is the struggle of an emancipating social class against the trauma of patriarchy and male heroism that has developed over decades.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about the two sides of the imaginary wall of Eastern Europe in today's EU. On the Eastern side, the challenge is to cope with the present without having the time to face the past. They are discriminated against by Western clichés while others have already passed judgment.

This image is reinforced when you look at the history of Eastern European countries, which all seem to have voluntarily joined the Russian-dominated Warsaw Pact and resigned themselves to their fate behind the Great Wall. And now they are expected to submit to the EU, its values and its dominant culture (which is always talked about in Germany). Like an underage child dreaming of

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playing in the biggest stadium. Except that the foundations have not yet been laid.

Academic Sense of Superiority

In Germany, most people from Eastern Europe are associated with cheap labour, cheap care workers or good career opportunities in the sex industry. In my opinion, this has solidified into a kind of academic feeling of superiority among the population. "Made in Germany" stands for quality. "Made in Eastern Europe" stands for quantity. And this idea has become ingrained in people's minds. "WE" see "THEM" as uneducated second-class citizens, as masters of improvisation and sloppy work.

I can cite many examples from my own experience. I grew up in a neighbourhood where almost exclusively people of Eastern European descent (mainly Russian-Germans) lived. Due to a poorly implemented migration policy, all people of a certain origin were settled in a neighbourhood just outside the city. This place developed into a kind of ghetto that offered the inhabitants the opportunity to live their old lives, habits and principles, just in a different place. The result was a parallel city with its own specific system of repression, a place that was rich and creative in terms of possibilities for criminal enterprise. Anyone who tried or tries to escape from this place carries a stigma. When the 2016 World Cup took place in Russia, the press asked me (by then I had become a reasonably respectable member of the cultural sector) what the mood was like and how Russians were behaving. I said: "I have no idea. I was born in Poland." When Russia's blitzkrieg in Ukraine failed, the press called me again. This time it was about arranging an interview with a Russian deserter and whether there were discussions within families...

Of course, they are not interested in my work as an artist and curator who deals with socio-political processes, or in me as an artist living and working in Germany who has gone through all levels of education via the so-called second educational path, from vocational training to university (the academy).

Nevertheless, stories from people with a similar background to mine, who are referred to as 'people with a migration background,' would be very interesting to hear, because their family stories show the complexity and opacity of people's perceptions and understandings of both Eastern European and German history. Everyone has heard different and contradictory stories about the war and the guilt and innocence of their families. And the case is certainly the same from one family to another. Whether in Poland, the Czech Republic, the Balkans or the Baltic states. One of the artists in the exhibition, the writer Susanne Fritz, has portrayed this impressively in her 2018 book *Wie kommt der Krieg ins Kind* (in English: They Left us War and Silence), in which she traces her mother's search through German-Polish historiography and narrative.