

# "Eastern Europe's Invisibilities: Epistemics, Politics, Arts"

## Panel V: Civil Society, Social Movements, and (Invisible) Resistance

The panel examines how communities on the short end of hegemonic power relations develop (in)visibility and agency below a threshold of full-volume activism. The panel dedicates itself to LGBTQIA+ minorities in post-Soviet republics, targeted by the so-called anti-Gender campaigns of the populist right, as well as to the activities of artistic underground communities across Eastern Europe and Central Asia that have been marginalized by state and broader systemic censorship, as well as mainstream narratives of art historiography. It discusses attempts of self-assertion that duck the blows of full-contact political confrontation but still introduce new stitch patterns into the fabric of society. It also explores dominant interpretative patterns within and outside the respective communities that reproduce invisibilities—of artistic, political, gender-specific, geographical, and other positions—and thus generate through entrenched narratives “invisibility squared”.

**Ewa Majewska (SWPS University in Warsaw)**

### **The Invisible Queers under the Caring Eyes of the Leviathan (remote)**

The art histories, like all history books, are, as Walter Benjamin claimed in the 1930s, written by the victors (1967). It is thus that the archives become not merely passive storages of past events, but active tools facilitating the perpetuation of inequalities, both: globally and locally (Zinn, 1976). The role of a critical theorist thus seems to be easy - a struggle for visibility seems the most appropriate course of their research. However, the queer lives and experiences greatly complicate such a position. In the gay classic, *Homos* (1995), Leo Bersani asked the question, which remains pertinent still 30 years later: “Can a gay man be a good citizen?” The peculiar location of queer life, appearing in all social strata and political options, all geographic locations and ethnicities, is furthermore complex when presented in its natural habitat - embodied experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons and groups, in social, cultural, and legal structures, which tend to discriminate, marginalize, and even exterminate us. In my presentation, I will draft a proposal for queer dialectics, proceeding in hopes of combining the weak affect and resistances typical of queer lived experience, while also being inspired by what Kluge and Negt, Fraser, Warner, and Scholette discuss as “counterpublics” - the public spheres of the oppressed. From this perspective, the claims for utopia, recognition, mere equality, and survival intertwine with multifaceted negative vectors, making the queer claims different yet sometimes no less pertinent than those of other excluded groups. In art theory, practice, and history, this is a discussion between canon and utopia, which need to be seen as intrinsically tied, however opposing.

**Ewa Majewska** is a feminist theorist of culture, associate professor at the SWPS University in Warsaw, Poland, working on the queer theory archive project “Public against their will. The production of subjects in the archives of the “Hiacynt” Actions” (2022-

2026). She examines the archives of the surveilling police action targeting gay men in 1980s Poland. Majewska taught at the UDK Berlin, University of Warsaw, Kraków and Szczecin; she was a visiting scholar at the UC Berkeley; ICI Berlin, IWM in Vienna and Orebro University in Sweden. She published eight books, including: *The Caring Leviathan? Hiacynt Pink Files, Biopolitics, and the Queer Critical Theory* (coming up with Brill, 2026); *Weak Avant-Garde?* (MOCAK, 2026); *Feminist Antifascism* (Verso, 2021), multiple chapters and articles in: *Signs*, *Third Text*, *Journal of Utopian Studies*, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *Jacobin*, *e-flux*, *Interalia*, and others. In 2023, she received the Emma Goldman Award from the Flax Foundation for her research on equality. Her research focuses on archive studies, dialectics of the weak, queer-feminist critical theory, and antifascism. She lives and works between Berlin and Warsaw. More: <https://ewamajewska.com>.

**Dorota Sajewska (University of Bochum)**

**Invisibility as a Strategy of Resistance: HIV/AIDS in (Minority) Performance in Poland**

“At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct,” observes José Esteban Muñoz in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, in which he conceptualizes disidentification as a survival strategy for minoritarian subjects within the normative public sphere. This statement points, on the one hand, to the necessity for minorities to render themselves visible to claim political rights; on the other hand, it suggests the latent possibility of distancing oneself from hegemonic modes of identification to constitute a counterpublic sphere in which new, non-systemic forms of social and intimate relations may emerge.

Building on Muñoz's concept of disidentification, this paper proposes (in)visibility as a strategy of resistance in minoritarian performative practices addressing HIV/AIDS in contemporary Poland. (In)Visibility encompasses both visibility and its counter-moment. It refers to representations of marginalized subjects that, when exposed to public view, may possess emancipatory potential. Still, it may also operate repressively by evoking disgust, fear, or horror when the hypervisibility of the Other serves an abjectifying function. Within this framework, (in)visibility can be understood as a deliberate strategy that counters normative regimes of representation that pathologize alterity. In performative practices, it functions to subvert dominant visual codes and generate new, transgressive image politics of subjectivity that could be visible only from a minoritarian perspective.

To further develop this line of inquiry, I propose engaging with Peggy Phelan's concept of 'the unmarked' as a modality of in-betweenness—a dynamic movement between visibility and invisibility, manifestation and disappearance. By applying 'the unmarked' to performances addressing HIV/AIDS in the Polish public sphere, I will demonstrate how this concept can facilitate the emergence of radical otherness beyond the hegemonic discourse, while simultaneously preserving the possibility of withdrawal. This designates a space in which the experience of HIV/AIDS can be articulated, but also held back,

thereby foregrounding the politics of non-representation as a constitutive dimension of expression by minorities.

**Dorota Sajewska** is professor of theatre and performance studies at the Ruhr University Bochum. Her research focuses on performative arts, theories of performance and performativity, body anthropology. She is the author of i.e. the monograph “Necroperformance. Cultural Reconstruction of the Body” (2019) and the anthology “Crisis and Communitas. Performative Concepts of Commonality in Art and Politics” (2023).

**Éva Forgács (University of Pasadena)  
The Role of the West in Eastern Europe’s Invisibility**

Besides the obvious reasons for the invisibility of Eastern European art, I would focus on the role the West played in it.

Alfred J. Barr Jr.’s 1936 mapping of modernism on the cover of his „Cubism and Abstract Art” catalogue in MoMA overlooked Eastern Europe, while including two Russian trends, so Western scholarship ignored Eastern Europe until 1989. The scarce attention paid to it also manifested in the lack of market interest.

Conflicting narratives in Eastern European countries, modernists versus national conservatives, did not help international renown, and the absence of adequate terminology relevant to the often-idiosyncratic trends kept Eastern European art detached. Leading Western scholars of modernism systematically overlooked Eastern European art.

Despite many international appearances of this region’s artists, there is still no unified narrative that includes both Western and Eastern European art.

**Éva Forgács** is an Adjunct Professor of Art History at the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, and at László Moholy-Nagy University, Budapest. Her field of expertise is Central and Eastern European modernism and avant-gardes. Recent publications include *Malevich and Interwar Modernism* (Bloomsbury, 2022) and the anthology *Between Point Zero and the Iron Curtain* (Brill, 2025).

**Emese Kürti (Central European Research Institute for Art History, Budapest)  
Dilemmas of the Semi-Periphery: The Institutionalization of Conceptual Art from Hungary and Yugoslavia under Emerging Illiberalism**

Drawing on world-systems theory, this paper approaches Hungary as a semi-peripheral position within the global art system—a space structurally situated between the cultural dominance of the Western core and the marginalization of the periphery. In this framework, the semi-periphery is characterized by delayed, uneven, and externally conditioned processes of canon formation, institutionalization, and market integration, particularly visible in the post-socialist period.

In Hungary, conceptual and neo-avant-garde practices—originally developed under conditions of absent art markets—remained largely ignored by both the commercial sector and canonizing public institutions throughout the first decade after 1989. A significant shift occurred in the early 2000s, when a small number of Budapest-based

commercial galleries began to institutionalize and market this generation of artists. This turn was closely linked to the East European acquisition strategies of major Western museums, revealing how core institutions often mediate semi-peripheral recognition.

The paper argues that this process coincided with the gradual erosion of institutional autonomy under neoliberal and, later, illiberal political conditions, resulting in an asymmetric redistribution of symbolic power in favor of the art market. The production of missing historical narratives of neo-avant-garde art increasingly moved into the private sphere, even as it remained subject to critical scrutiny by a professional community aware of the stakes of canonization. While the market-driven institutionalization of conceptual art has enabled unprecedented international visibility and inclusion of Hungarian artists in major public collections, it has also reinforced semi-peripheral dependency on external validation.

By situating Hungary—and by extension Yugoslavia—within a semi-peripheral perspective, the lecture examines how former conceptual artists' strategies of self-organization and self-marketing after 1989 became integral to their later institutional and market success. Ultimately, the paper highlights the structural dilemmas faced by semi-peripheral art scenes, in which global recognition is achieved at the cost of greater market dominance and reduced institutional sovereignty.

**Emese Kürti** is an art historian and researcher, working as a deputy director for research at the Museum of Fine Arts - Central European Research Institute for Art History (KEMKI) in Budapest. Previously, she was a researcher at Artpool Art Research Center, a lecturer at the Central European University (CEU), and an art historian at the Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art. Her research focuses include transregional discourses of the neo-avant-garde in Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia, the concepts of minorities, and women's positions in experimental art (*Screaming Hole. Poetry, Sound and Action as Intermedia Practice in the Work of Katalin Ladik* (2017)). She has co-edited with Zsuzsa László *What Will Be Already Exists: Temporalities of Cold War Archives in East-Central Europe and Beyond* (Transcript Verlag, 2021).

**Chairs:**

**Tomáš Glanc** is Professor of Slavic literatures at University of Zurich. His research focuses on Eastern European culture, modern Slavic art and literature, samizdat and unofficial media and cultural practices, performance in Eastern Europe, Slavic ideology, and contemporary Russian art and literature. He has written and edited numerous books, articles, and diverse other contributions on these subjects. He is a co-curator of the ongoing exhibition series *Poetry & Performance: The Eastern European Perspective*.

**Matthias Meindl** is a research and teaching assistant at the Slavic Department of the University of Zurich. One of his areas of expertise is the intersection of art and activism in post-Soviet Russia. He has translated the poet-activist Kirill Medvedev (*Antifaschismus für alle, Berlin 2020*). He is writing a book about the sexual revolution(s) in Yugoslav film (and video) since the 1960s. Other current and recurring interests are Post/Punk in Eastern Europe and nationalities in Soviet Film.