Art beyond Borders

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John Berger was one of the best-known leftist art critics in Great Britain in the 1950s. He traveled several times to the USSR and was one of the few Western authors who wrote on Russian sculpture and art in the Cold War. His book, *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the USSR*, published in 1969, is a remarkable example of the way in which Western intellectuals viewed Russian art and the situation of artists. Apart from this, the book has a fascinating genesis.

The British art critic and the Russian sculptor got to know each other in Moscow in January 1962. Berger was impressed by Neizvestny’s sculptures and drawings. Back home he emphatically wrote two newspaper articles. Berger thought Neizvestny was “the first visual artist of genius to have emerged in the Soviet Union since the twenties.” The year of the first encounter was fateful for the sculptor in other respects, too. He met the party lead-

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er and the head of the government, Khrushchev, at the first exhibition of abstract art in Moscow in November. This meeting catapulted the artist into a hopeless situation, which gave Berger the grounds to write his book about Neizvestny. It was directed at a Western public that knew almost nothing about Russia and this “art dissident.”

Berger was Marxist at that time—and he still is. He sought to take account of the geo-political circumstances. Although not a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), he sympathized with it. Then the crimes of Stalinism became well known and Russia crushed the Hungarian revolt in 1956. Berger still stuck by the Soviet Union as most Western communists did. Berger orientated himself toward the strategies of the CPGB, he participated in its discussions and wrote contributions to its newspaper, the Daily Worker. It was there that one of his articles on Neizvestny was published. Berger also had close contact with communist émigrés who had to leave the continent. The art historian Frederick Antal was one of them. His social historical method was very influential for Berger’s way of thinking. Antal’s book about Florentine painting and its social historical background seemed to him to be a good example of a social history of art. Another important friend and intellectual example was the Austrian communist, author and publicist Ernst Fischer. Fischer had fled from the National Socialists to Moscow. After the war, he represented the Communist Party in parliament. His book, The Necessity of Art, published in London in 1963, exerted a great influence on Berger because it treated similar questions to those Berger was thinking about. One problem was the connection between form and content, another the definition of naturalism and realism.

When Berger and Fischer met for the first time in 1961, Berger had already written the article “Problems of Socialist Art” for the magazine Labour Monthly. Here, one finds many of the themes and considerations the author was dealing with later on in his books and films. These included questions such as how people (in the 1960s) viewed the art produced in or around Par-

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4 “In the global struggle for power and nuclear purity I held the Moscow line, but in relation to Moscow policy towards art and thought I was always opposed”; Berger quoted by Lewis Jones. “Portrait of the Artist as a ‘Wild Old Man,’” The Telegraph, 23 July 2001, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4724662/Portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-wild-old-man.html.
is between 1870 and 1920, and whether anyone had fully worked out how the social function of painting had been changed by the inventions and developments of other media.6

Fischer, who had a large extended network, was helpful to Berger in other respects as well. He arranged the contact with the publisher Erhard Frommhold of the Dresdner Verlag der Kunst. Frommhold became Berger’s first publisher. He printed Berger’s text about the Italian painter Renato Guttuso in 1957.7 Before Berger published a book in his native country, he issued his first publication in the GDR in a language he did not speak. But the Guttuso book was to Berger’s advantage because it made him better known in Russian circles. This fact and the short political thaw, during which the USSR found a more open attitude to aesthetic questions, made it possible for Berger to be invited to write an essay on Fernand Léger by an editor of a Muscovian art magazine. Like the Italian painter, Léger was also a communist, but until then his paintings had been rejected as “decadent art” by the Soviet Union. The collaboration with the Russians henceforth made it easier for Berger to get a visa.

Berger was originally a painter who had studied art in London. He started his career in the late 1940s and exhibited quite successfully at the time. Besides painting he taught drawing and worked as an art critic. He promoted a socially engaged realism like that of the painters of the Kitchen Sink School in Great Britain.8 Since his work as a critic took up too much time, Berger gave up painting and concentrated on writing. In 1956, he decided to start a career as a novelist. Two years later his first novel, A Painter of Our Time, was released.9

Berger was of the opinion that art and culture were weapons in the fight

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for a different society. To him, realist art alone seemed to be the appropriate method to achieve the new conditions. He favored an art that took the side of socialist ideas and made a contribution to changing the social conscience. In his eyes, Guttuso was the embodiment of a successful artist and political activist. His art was like a Marxist art theory put into practice. Berger’s definition of realism was:

Realism is the declared enemy of all academism. Realism in art comes into being when the artist discovers and interprets the changing reality of the world. Realism is the art of the probable and it can only be created by those whose world view enables them to work in such a way that the probable becomes the real. However, the academic in art comes into being if the artist tries to pick a single perception out of the reality and make it static, be it a historical or a purely subjective phenomenon. It is the art not of the probable but of the accidental and it is created by those who fear the probable world.¹⁰

Berger was obliged to the USSR in solidarity until the beginning of the 1960s. Then his attitude became more critical. He had had reservations about Russian art even earlier. In his third and last article, “Soviet Aesthetics”—which was already written after his first journey to the Soviet Union in 1952—he praised the creation of a real tradition while Western society was only destroying its traditions: “A true tradition can only be built on the general awareness that art should be an inspiration to life—not a consolation.”¹¹ But in spite of all the admiration, his verdict was negative: “The majority of Russian painting is bad [and] the new developments are embryonic.”¹² Berger supported the development of a European social and socialist realism in a clear dissociation. The ideological splits—a result of the ambivalent relationship to the Soviet Union—were also to remain characteristic of his later relationship to this country.

Berger focused his interests not only on contemporary art but also on classical modern and old art. He made films for British television about Belli-

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¹⁰ Berger, Art and Revolution, 27.
¹¹ Berger quoted in Hyman, The Battle for Realism, 67.
¹² Ibid.
3. The British Art Critic and the Russian Sculptor

ni, as well as about Léger and the French outsider artist and postman Ferdi-
nand Cheval. The film on Cheval in particular illustrates Berger’s endeavor
to exceed the canon of the great artists. This attitude was most evident in the
film An Artist from Moscow, broadcast in 1969 by the BBC. In the year in
which Art and Revolution was published, Berger even produced a film about
his Russian friend. On reflection, it was a small media campaign with the aim
of pushing Neizvestny’s fame in the West.

Ernst Neizvestny was born in Sverdlovsk in the Ural Mountains in 1925.
His family had Jewish roots. As a highly talented child, he was sent to the Re-
pin Academy of Arts. He fought for the Red Army from 1943 to 1945 and
just before the end of the war he was so heavily wounded that he was declared
dead and awarded the Red Star medal posthumously. But miraculously, he
managed to survive and continued his artist’s career, studying sculpture and
philosophy in Moscow from 1947 to 1954.

His early work met with official approval. He received a nomination for
the Stalin Prize in 1954. But despite these successes, Neizvestny was very un-
satisfied. He disliked the repressive atmosphere of the university and the poor
teaching conditions. In philosophy, there were no primary literature or pri-
mary sources of the classical writers.

We would learn about Lenin from Stalin, about Marx from Lenin and
Stalin. . . . Little old men would insist that we take an active part in politi-
cal disputes between factions and sub-factions at various party congresses
dating back forty years. And we had to memorize them like the Talmud.
It was monstrously uninteresting work.

This was why Neizvestny joined a secret study group that was reading pro-
hibited books. He familiarized himself with the art created before the Rus-
sian revolution in 1917 and with the disgraced avant-garde of the 1920s. Mod-
eling sculptures in the way of constructivism and exhibiting them caused
him trouble. His examples were the work of Malevich and Tatlin. Neizvest-

\textsuperscript{13} An Artist from Moscow. Program number: LMA 5172E. Date: 22 April 1969. Length: 0:47:15.
\textsuperscript{14} Neizvestny quoted in Albert Leong, Centaur: The Life and Art of Ernst Neizvestny (London: Rowman &
Littlefield, 2002), 74.
Figure 3.1.
© Jean Mohr, Musée de l’Elysée, Lausanne.
ny chose a dangerous path that was to lead him into permanent conflict with the official guards of the Soviet arts.

One of the results was that the artists’ union refused him a proper studio; instead, he had to work in a very small former shop. Photographs in *Art and Revolution* show a workshop full to bursting point, where the sculptor suffered in the cramped conditions and creative work was almost impossible. But Neizvestny did not give up and he fought for his views in public. This was why he was appreciated by certain circles. Poets, for example, praised him in their lyrics. But the traditionalists made sure that he very rarely got the chance to succeed—for instance, in 1960, when he won a national competition for a victory monument of the Second World War. This time it was not the guards but a jury of high-ranking soldiers who delivered the judgment. In comparison, the Soviet cultural establishment missed no opportunity to put the nonconformist sculptor in his place. The opportunity to destroy him came in 1962. Neizvestny took part in the first Muscovian exhibition of abstract art. It was demanded that Khrushchev close it immediately, but the head of government wanted first to form his own opinion of the disputed show. On his visit he was confronted by Neizvestny. The sculptor made him listen to his unorthodox views. It became a legendary meeting. Khrushchev was impressed by the courage of the artist. But the consequences of Neizvestny’s appearance were so severe that, for the next ten years, it was nearly impossible for him to hold down his job.

I managed to publish my illustrations to Dostoyevsky and erect sculptures in Riga and the Crimea, but these sculptures were commissioned before 1962, and it was simple to cast them in stone and metal. I was unable to sell a thing under my own name during those ten years. But as a stonemason, bricklayer or sculptor’s assistant, I was able to earn quite a bit, since my colleagues turned to me for help and paid me good money. When there was no work I would load salt at the Trifonow railway station... As a sculptor, I have blossomed only in the last three years, from 1972 to 1975, after winning an international competition for a monument at the Aswan Dam in Egypt.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 163.
The aim of the state repressions was clear. The sculptor was to be isolated and eliminated. Given this hopeless situation, the only option that remained for Neizvestny was to emigrate to the West. But since it was not easy to obtain an exit visa, Neizvestny wanted to put pressure on the public authorities by making his fate well known in the West. Berger was to help him. Thus, the idea of Art and Revolution arose.16

The subject of sculpture was untypical for Berger; he had spoken about it only sporadically. He devoted some critical articles to his fellow countryman Henry Moore in the New Statesman, in which he reproached the British sculptor for the “retrogression” of his sculptures. In contrast, Berger found in Neizvestny’s realistic sculptures the “antithesis” to Moore. The unusual book title, Art and Revolution— which places Neizvestny’s plastic art under a main theme— can be read to mean that, in comparison to the world-famous Moore, the unknown Russian sculptor was the true revolutionary who had the ability to develop art further.

Berger wanted to reach as many people as possible with his articles, books and films. Art and Revolution was also dedicated to a wider audience. Consequently, the book differed from traditional artist biographies of its time as it included a historical and ideological analysis of Russian art and an analysis of global political affairs. Berger dissected the reasons for Neizvestny being branded a “dissident,” despite the fact that he was not a political opponent of the Soviet system and did not want to be one: “But essentially Neizvestny is not a rebel. And that is why he is such a threat and his example so original.”17 In the second part of his book, Berger provides an insight into the sculptures and drawings by the artist and tries to give a description of the artistic development from the mid-1950s until the late 1960s. Beyond this, his study attempts to give an outline of Russian art history. Berger reflects on the relation-

16 I interviewed John Berger and Anna Neizvestny and I got two different versions. The version I present here is Berger’s, narrated in a long telephone call on 8 April 2009. Anna Neizvestny, Ernst Neizvestny’s second wife whom he got to know in New York, told me that Ernst is of the opinion that the story told here could be one possible explanation for writing the book, that is to say, it is Berger’s view of things. Neizvestny himself could not give me a written depiction of his own version because he was too ill. It was only possible to talk to his wife Anna, who tried to answer my questions as thoroughly as possible. With some reservations, I recount Berger’s version here because it enables me to lean on details. In the case of Neizvestny’s view, I have no details at my disposal.

17 Berger, Art and Revolution, 79.
ship between realism and naturalism using the development and meaning of the art academies in Europe and Russia. He tries to prove that in Russia there was no realism opposed to academism. France and the art of Gustave Courbet had not been present. The standards inaugurated by the Russian academy had not been challenged and this had later been momentous for the visual arts during Stalin’s rule. Due to the doctrine of socialism in one country and the development of Stalinist society, the new artistic freedoms won if the successful revolution had been abandoned. Instead of a realism that could have reflected social reality in all its antagonisms and in its totality, the leadership had promoted a naturalism that remained superficial. The consequence had been the failure of the development of a Marxist aesthetic in the Soviet Union. Berger came to the opinion that there never had been any true realist tendencies in Russia. He went as far as to maintain that even Russian painting in the nineteenth century, which seemed to be socially critical, had not actually been realism because it had only chosen different themes but had maintained the means of naturalist painting. Hence, it had not differed fundamentally from academic painting. The socialist realism of the twentieth century was not an exception because it represented nothing more than the victory of a naturalism extraction over the revolutionary avant-garde tendencies. Berger’s conclusion was that the “new” art of Soviet society was nothing more than the old academism. The latter was merely sailing under a new flag.

It was clear to Berger that even after Stalin’s death, the visual arts were still under the centralized control of the academy of fine arts and the union of artists. Therefore, Neizvestny had to be the opponent of both institutions. They pushed him into illegality by refusing him access to a foundry, to iron and bronze, and by forcing him to obtain the materials on the black market as well as scrapyards. It was inevitable that Neizvestny would appear to be a “dissident” and a “progressive” artist from a Western perspective. But the evaluation of his art’s historical meaning was not as easy as that in view of his young age and his modest output.

Parallels with contemporary Western art were missing. Compared with Western art, Neizvestny’s work seemed to be antiquated and like the testimonials of a finished episode that had been influenced by the Russian avant-garde. But in terms of content, Berger perceived in Neizvestny’s sculptures an unbroken and strong humanism, which was forward-looking for him and
Figure 3.2.
© Jean Mohr, Musée de l’Élysée, Lausanne.
expressed an artistic struggle with existential human conditions. Berger believed he would recognize in Neizvestny’s work the realist, too, because it was possible to draw parallels from their intensive thinking about the theme of human stamina and resistance to the worldwide liberation movements of the 1960s. In an article for the *Daily Worker*, Berger put Neizvestny in order of a worldwide tradition of socialist art, which invents realist forms for socialist contents. This argumentation was developed further in *Art and Revolution*, in which Berger writes that Neizvestny was a “Marxist” artist who made human perseverance and standing power—which is sometimes tragic and sometimes affirmative and heroic—the subject of his art. Here the monograph has features of a political paper. Berger connected the artist and his work to the anti-imperialistic struggle. The sculptor, who is fighting for the freedom of the individual, is with his resistance in the middle.

Before Neizvestny was allowed to leave his country in 1976, the authorities demanded that he distance himself from Berger’s book. Only then would they grant him the exit visa. To commit this “betrayal” would be less difficult for him with the knowledge that it would have been the last humiliation by the state. Neizvestny settled in the United States after stopovers in Vienna and Geneva in 1977. The book was to be useful for him there as its author had become famous in the 1970s. So when the Russian émigré Neizvestny arrived in New York, he had the rare luck to have a monograph about his art written in English by an important English author. Moreover, this monograph gives him in certain respects the aura of a “dissident.” This was helpful during the Cold War years. In Great Britain, France and the United States, the book was given a warm-hearted reception. Therefore, it definitely supported the artist by giving him a second career on the new continent and making a name for him there.

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20 John Berger, interview by Kai Artinger, April 2009.