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*Putting the Peripheral Centre Stage:
Performing Modernism in Interbellum Bucharest*

To study modernism in East-Central Europe is to permanently seek an escape from what Maria Todorova terms ‘the trap of backwardness’.¹ More often than not, the linear narratives of art history launch a provocation to art historians of the region who must respond by legitimising the existence of their respective modernisms according to existing criteria, or as James Elkins puts it measure them ‘against the appropriate scale, with *Impression: Sunrise* at the 100 percent mark’.² Methodologies which rely on concepts such as hybridity, ambiguity, or locality may succeed in rendering peripheries as positive spaces, but maintain their difference from the centre. Instead, this paper proposes that the permeability and instability of both these categories should be emphasised: the centre is no less heterogenous or ambiguous than the periphery. To provide a much-needed alternative to ‘an aesthetics rooted in the work of art’, the methodology employed is drawn from the field of performance studies, and in particular Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*.³ Fischer-Lichte identifies various means by which performance disrupts the category of ‘the artwork’: by recognising the interrelation between art and life, producer and receiver, subject and object, performance ‘cannot be grasped in binary oppositions’ and disrupts the dichotomies it encounters so that ‘the in-between becomes a preferred category’.⁴

1. Maria Todorova, ‘The Trap of Backwardness: Modernity, Temporality, and the Study of East-European Nationalism’, *Slavic Review* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2005), 140-164.

2. James Elkins, ‘Book Review: Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939 by S. A. Mansbach’, *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 4 (December 2000): 781–85, 785.

3. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 161.

4. *Ibid.*, 174.

This acts as a direct challenge to the antiperformative bias encountered in existing accounts of modernism, the best known being Michael Fried's derogatory assessment of "theatrical" paintings or sculptures [which] are "aware" of the audience and thus lose their self-sufficient unity and integrity'.⁵

One eloquent example of anti-theatrical bias has been the deficient treatment afforded to the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes within scholarly studies of art and design. The conflation of art deco with kitsch is often posited in contrast to the worthier goals of Le Corbusier's minimalist Pavilion de L'Esprit Nouveau.⁶ Le Corbusier's own critique has been widely accepted, preserving his use of theatricality as a derogatory metaphor when referring to shops such as Sonia Delaunay's Boutique Simultanée which offered curated interior design ensemble.⁷ In Bucharest, this type of staged and consumable modernity was present through the Academy of Decorative Arts, a private institution which introduced modern design to the city in the mid-1920s, equipped with a showroom for exhibiting and selling its output. Usually credited to M.H. Maxy, a prominent member of the Romanian avant-garde, the selling exhibition space was in fact the brainchild of Mela Maxy, his wife. As well as funding and managing this commercial venture, she was the architect of the displays themselves, which she arranged to resemble functional living areas. Archival images reveal the existence of at least two carefully designed rooms, where only the discreet labels next to the objects indicate that this seemingly private space is for public consumption. Under Mela's leadership, the Academy's showroom came to embody the modernist aesthetics of Bucharest's vanguard, hosting contemporary dance performances, gracing the cover of an avant-garde periodical, and eventually being immortalised in a 1933 novel that became a literary classic. This space, coupled with Sonia Delaunay's Boutique Simultanée, also provided the inspiration for the theatre sets designed by M.H. Maxy for Ion Minulescu's play *The Sentimental Mannequin*. Presented by the avant-garde Yiddish theatre group the Vilna Troupe in 1926, the production turned the entire stage into a stylish boutique with flowing curtains and modernist home accessories, whose shop window replaced the theatrical fourth wall.

The Academy's claim to modernity is thus considered in the light of recent scholarship that recasts the feminine, the commercial and the performative as essential elements of modernist design histories. Tag Gronberg has revealed the problematic ideas that lay beneath Le Corbusier's criticisms, which conflated the female consumer with an interest in fashionable luxury items and surface decoration, positing his own environments as modern through their rational and masculine attributes.⁸ Thus, Gronberg questions the acceptance of Le Corbusier's modernism as the only 'real' one, and argues instead for legitimising performative modernity. The involvement of Mela Maxy, the re-staging of domestic interiors for consumption and the preoccupation with saleable commodities and with publicity, place

5. Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright. Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 3, referring to Michael Fried's 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood', reprinted in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148-172.

6. See for example Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 220, which refers to the Paris Exhibition as 'the birth of modern kitsch'.

7. Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity. Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 16.

8. Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity*, Ch. 5.

the Academy's exhibition section within the realm of this 'unacceptable' and 'unacknowledged' modernity that Gronberg identifies, whose correlation to the urban 'shop-window' implies theatricality, consumption and female agency, attributes that are frequently considered incompatible with modernism.⁹ Here, Fischer-Lichte's new aesthetics of performance can function as a theoretical framework that expands the boundaries of modernism by acknowledging the communication between the artwork and its audience, challenging Fried's assessment and the perceived autonomy of modernist art.

As this case study demonstrates, by disrupting the categories of 'avant-garde' and 'modernism' and their restrictive usage, casting a wider net to incorporate outputs outside the realm of the fine arts, and recognising the interconnectivity between performativity and modernity, the result may be a more inclusive approach to art history which eschews binaries and normalises liminality and transitional states.

9. Ibid., 18-9.