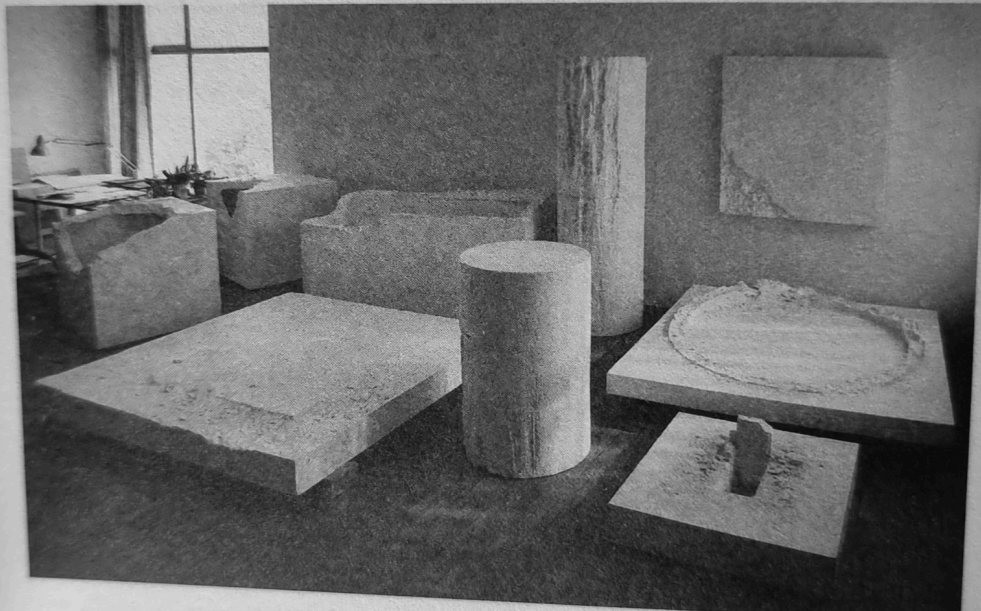


Tomáš  
Pospiszyl  
*An Associative  
Art History*

# Eastern and Western Cubes: Minimalism in Dispute



[ill. 1] Hugo Demartini, artist's studio, 1980s  
Courtesy of the artist's estate

In a photograph of Hugo Demartini's studio from the mid-1980s we observe something like a minimalist ruin—a cluster of white cubes reminiscent of the sculptures of David Smith or Robert Morris that look as though they have suffered violence from an unknown attacker. They have battered edges and punched-through openings. We cannot say when the attack took place, but the scarred white cubes seem almost like articles on exhibit in a historical museum, where a degree of wear and tear would count as a sign of age and authenticity. These modernist ruins are not simply a sort of formal exercise but rather the recollection of an avant-garde that by the 1980s was little more than a nostalgic memory.

We can even look inside Demartini's cubes. They are visibly hollow, and we can gauge the thickness of their walls.



There is only empty space inside; as a result we do not perceive them as mere abstract surfaces. We might wonder whether they had served to conceal a message or contain something that escaped at some point, as if from Pandora's box.

Minimalist sculpture—at least as it evolved in the United States—represented the peak of modernism; after this peak, modernism was ripe for a necessary revision. In essence, there was a reaction to the formalist and developmental theory of Clement Greenberg, who never embraced minimalist artworks because he did not consider them to have aesthetic value. What minimalists created did not bring him aesthetic gratification. Minimalist sculpture tried to refine the essence of sculptural expressive means by drastically reducing sculptural forms, which meant abandoning any literary or metaphorical contents, among other things. Literature and theater are for telling stories; minimalist sculptures exert their influence through nothing but their shapes, volumes, and interrelationships. They have no content; they consist only of forms in space. Most of the time they are produced with an emphasis on precision and meticulousness, and thus it is difficult to tell when they were made. After all, their *raison d'être* is to manifest an abstract idea on the development of sculptural forms, and idea-based concepts cannot exhibit any external traces of aging. Minimalists sought to ensure that their works would always look the same as they did at the moment they received their finishing touches. To their dismay, though, the materials used in their sculptures inevitably began to age, and once-polished surfaces became covered with blemishes.

Even though Demartini's cubes are empty, we can find content in their inner spaces: they are expressive and metaphorical—even eloquent. From the perspective of American minimalism, they may be unacceptable. But does that make them unsuccessful works of art? <sup>[ill. 1]</sup>

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, most Eastern European countries were faced with the task of reinterpreting—or, on an official level, interpreting for the first time—their own history, including art history. The traditional art-historical model studies the spread of formal innovations in time and space and follows the ways they



evolve and are modified. In particular, modern art is often presented as a kind of Darwinist evolutionary system in which it is hard to concentrate on isolated species without, at the same time, investigating the entire evolutionary lineage. Given the isolation of Eastern European art from the main "continent" of modernist evolution, unique conditions, like those of a remote archipelago, developed in the former Eastern Bloc, where artists had to fend for themselves, lacking opportunities to regularly exchange ideas or present their work at international exhibitions. Within the archipelago, the situation was not universally seen as tragic; there were voices to be found that saw the isolation in a positive light, as an opportunity to create different, better art. In 1980 Jindřich Chalupecký wrote:

It is surprising that this state of affairs [international isolation] is what became the stimulus for such remarkable development. Whereas elsewhere in the world modern art was providing modern artists with opportunities for success—that is, for fame and fortune—here artists could not count on success, or at least not success of that sort; and whereas elsewhere artists adapted their work to the conditions for such success, artists here did not even have anything to adapt to. And so, whereas in the rest of the world a sort of standard modernity took hold—mostly under the influence of new North American art, which, if judged by its consequences, might quite justifiably be termed a "new academism"—here modern artists remained free within their studios. They answered to no one but themselves or to the inexorability that had led them to art.<sup>1</sup>

Who knows if this stance was just an expression of the desperation of the day or of Chalupecký's leanings toward art as an aesthetic, semireligious activity firmly anchored in daily life—a context in which international exchanges played only a negligible role, if any at all.

However, others—not only Eastern European artists and art historians—saw the isolation as a handicap, and still do to this day. For instance, German art historian Hans Belting writes:

In this part of the world modernism soon became an unofficial culture and, being an underground movement, had no access to the public. The loss of modernism was particularly traumatic for those countries for whom it served as a gateway to European culture (and Western art history) because their domestic art, if there was any worth discussing at all, had been understood as a product of Western colonization [ ... ] Eastern European art viewed in retrospect was, compared with the art of the West, delayed most of the time; on another level of development it served a different social role arising out of its historical lack of contact with Western modernism. It could always vindicate itself by arguing that it opposed official state art and thus avoided the permanent crisis of modernism, remaining in a state of innocence.<sup>2</sup>

Views similar to those of Hans Belting, whose books on the end of art history have been quite well received in the Czech Republic, sound distinctly arrogant to most Eastern Europeans. Why is that?

In 1989 the isolated archipelago was suddenly rejoined to the continent of the world. In the West, a series of exhibitions were held to showcase this heretofore unsurveyed territory. To the surprise of both sides, it turned out that not only had obsolete art forms been preserved in the East with a remarkable degree of authenticity, but new forms reminiscent of the Continental ones had also developed independently. Exhibitions aimed at a Western public and mostly organized by Western curators presented Eastern European art as part of a narrative that paralleled that of Western modernism. In Eastern Europe the history of postwar modernism had not yet been written, and there was little choice but to use terms and categories originating in the West to describe and analyze it. This approach probably caused the greatest confusion in the case of the application of the theory of American minimalism to Eastern European sculptural forms reminiscent of minimalism. We find similar cubes on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Is it nothing but a coincidence brought about by similar circumstances? Would the archipelago cubes withstand new mutations and maintain their specific traits under the new conditions?

Would they survive on the continent, and vice versa?  
 Could the cubes enrich each other? To what extent were  
 the phenomena really similar in the first place?

For artists and art historians from the East, it is not easy to understand American minimalism. In Eastern Bloc countries, independent culture had a political subtext, even if that subtext was merely opposition to the official art, as Belting noted above. Art without content or message was almost unimaginable in the East. For American minimalists, on the other hand, the Eastern European "minimalism with emotions" was objectionable. They thought it antediluvian and regarded it with mistrust.

There have been few attempts to write the history of modern art in Eastern Europe using categories other than those that arose in connection with the development of Western art; in the future such attempts may, in hindsight, seem like quixotic ventures.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, they deserve our attention. Why not risk disapproval and attempt something similar in the Czech Republic? Such a pursuit should not be limited to a simplified, nationalist-tinged search for Czech particularities. Instead, it should be an effort to define the space of a particular identity, which is, especially in Eastern Europe, complex and variable. The aim of the analyses that follow is quite specifically to show how Czech art is different and distinctive, which may, in the end, link it to certain forms of Western art, and American minimalism in particular.

## II.

At first glance it seems that Stanislav Kolíbal's *Labil* [Labile] (1964) and *Jedno podpírá druhé* [One Supports the Other] (1965) invite comparison with Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop* (*House of Cards*) (1969). The principle behind the pieces and their execution are almost identical. Nevertheless, each comes out of a different tradition; they emerged in different contexts and, despite apparent outward similarities, show themselves to be distinct upon closer examination.

In the first place, there is the age difference between the artists. Serra is 14 years younger than Kolíbal. Moreover, their careers have followed different trajectories: whereas Serra's interest in experimental forms dates back to his



early artistic career, in the late 1960s—among his first works were installations with live pigeons and a hare—by the same time, Kolíbal had already spent a decade doing figural sculpture that harkened back to the interwar avant-garde. Kolíbal gave up figures in connection with his architectural work; in his own words, for a long time he would distinguish between similar projects and free-form art and would hesitate to integrate pure geometry into his sculptural work. He was concerned about excessive decorativeness, however. It was with the help of the motif of lability—defined as a ready tendency toward, or capability for, change—with which he “expressed the being”<sup>4</sup> or feeling of something, that he overcame those worries. His breakthrough work came in 1964. Once he gave up figures, Kolíbal began assembling his works using several parts. This articulation imbued them with the theme of time. We apprehend them as a grouping of individual elements; each piece captures the state of things as selected by the artist and frozen in time (e.g., *Table*, 1965; *Target*, 1965), which might change in the future. Kolíbal’s primary material remained plaster; if he had had the opportunity, he would have cast his works in metal.

In the 1960s American avant-garde sculptors were trying to unencumber their discipline from everything they thought superfluous, including symbolic content. Minimalists became increasingly aware of the space where their work would be exhibited; they cast aside pedestals, and the artwork itself could not even be considered without taking into account the surrounding spatial field in which the interaction between the work and the viewer took place. In other words, even the specific room where the work was being exhibited became part of it. This conception of the sculptural work meant that it could not be fixed and transported—it had to be installed afresh every time, in view of the conditions specific to the location. What was at stake was not simply a formal transformation of the manner in which an artwork was exhibited—using a new picture frame, for example—but one of the definitions of minimalism.

From this perspective, the installation of Kolíbal’s first solo exhibition at Nová síň in Prague in 1967 was not minimalist: a relatively large number of works,

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including two older figurative sculptures, were set in the space on pedestals, and the individual works were independent entities that were not directly related to one another. The mutual relationships among elements in a space, so underscored in American minimalism, was only featured in *Table*, which stood right by the entrance to Nová síň. On its stylized top, two hemispheres are set next to one another—not, however, in the viewer's space but confined to the dimensions of the tabletop. In minimalism, the viewer enters an installation as does an actor on a stage; what is important is his or her interaction with the objects that are present. Works by Kolíbal like *Table* or *One Supports the Other* are like models the viewer must lean over and perceive from above, from the stance of an observer, not of a participant.

In Serra's case, we can oversimplify somewhat by saying that his work from the late 1960s is a reaction to Jackson Pollock and the minimalism of Donald Judd and Robert Morris. *One Ton Prop* is based, as is Pollock's painting, on the assumption that the viewer will be able, after the fact, to reconstruct the artist's actions and relive them. At the time, Serra's artworks were adumbrated in textual form; several verbs would appear one under another, such as "fold," "wind," "prop up," or "cut off." The works that followed could be understood as spatial instantiations of those verbs. Serra worked with materials differently than Kolíbal did. He used raw industrial materials such as lead, rubber, and neon. In this creative phase Serra could not have imagined working with models of his pieces or giving them their final form by casting them in plaster or another material.

Kolíbal's *Labile* was, in contrast to Serra's work, aesthetic; it made an impression based not only on its lability but also on its abstract forms and measured proportions, as well as its decorative character. *One Ton Prop* is intended to engage the viewer, to shock with its lability and the real possibility that the whole structure might fall. This feeling is not elicited by an optical illusion or trick (hence the title of the exhibition, *Anti-Illusion*, in which it was first shown); it really was unsteady, threatening to fall over at any moment. It is an actual unsteadiness, not a metaphorical reference to Kolíbal's existence and how



it depends on balance; it straightforwardly calls attention to the force of gravity and the possibility of collapse. The drastic and literally dangerous impression made by Serra's sculptures contrasts with Kolíbal's artistic thematization of lability; in *Labile* it is no more than metaphorical, abstract. Kolíbal's *Pád* [Fall] (1967) is a sculpture of a fall, not a real possibility, and *Mizející tvar* [Disappearing Shape] (1967) depicts the process of spilling by means of modeling. In contrast, Serra's *Casting* (1969) is the result of a real, and consequently effective, splashing of molten lead onto the juncture between floor and wall. Such a work has no literary or metaphorical meaning; we cannot express its content better than as a description of the process by which it was created. It does not portray the outer world or a human situation; it does not relate to anything but itself.

It appears that Kolíbal's manner of working with space changed in 1969, when he started to set some of his pieces directly on the floor. Nonetheless, they still have a dimension that is private, turned in upon itself. The 1969 installation *Na tomto místě* [At This Spot], consisting of two irregular plaster objects lying on the floor, brings to mind a model of two islands. The withdrawn, intimate dimension is set off by the hand-drawn chalk circles enclosing them and demarcating their territories. Using a length of rope, Kolíbal highlighted and made visible the relationships between the elements of his installations. He also started working with untreated, simple materials; nevertheless, his works did not lose their strong literary subjects, which were often expressed in their titles (*Kam, není kam* [Whither, There Is No Whither], *Pouto* [Shackles], *Nedostatečně vymezený prostor* [Insufficiently Demarcated Space]). Kolíbal himself wrote, "then all my pieces became more and more metaphorical."<sup>5</sup> The works of Serra and his fellow travelers, in contrast, are connected to the body. The processes by which they are created border on performance. They attempt to enter into a direct dialogue with the physicality of the viewer—even through such tactics as eliciting the fear that a heavy, unstable construction might fall.

Richard Serra's works from the late 1960s led to the contemporary works in which—once again, put very simply—he tries to form and bend space and bring the viewer into unusual, stirring relationships with space.

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Kolíbal's work over the last 30 years has gone through several stages. Among other things, he has devoted himself to reliefs and illusory spatial perspectives. His *Staroby* [Structures], dating from the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, imply a third dimension with a series of geometric drawings. They are characterized by spatial-textual contradiction: despite the title, we cannot enter into the structures themselves, or enter the drawings either; we can only observe them from different external vantage points.

Aside from the different ways they conceive space with respect to the viewer, I think the main difference between the work of the two artists is Serra's intentional emptiness with regard to content. This is in sharp contrast to the literary quality of Kolíbal's work—the ability of his artworks to convey not only forms but also dramatic content and a spiritual message. A void of content would have been unacceptable for Kolíbal.

### III.

In the catalogue for a solo exhibition held in Litoměřice, Czech art historian Marie Klimešová compares Eva Kmentová's work to that of Alina Szapocznikow, Kmentová's Polish classmate who lived the last years of her life in Paris (until her death in 1973), as well as to that of American sculptor Eva Hesse.<sup>6</sup> Since the works of these three artists share certain traits, many people even ask, quite justifiably, why Eva Kmentová's work does not have a similarly decisive or even cult status as that of Eva Hesse in the United States or Szapocznikow's standing as a central figure of postwar art in Poland. However, upon closer examination, we find that the bodies of work of Kmentová, Szapocznikow, and Hesse, though they sometimes use identical or related formal approaches, are surprisingly different and constitute the three vertices of an imaginary triangle. In the center is a common territory we might characterize as the use of non-traditional, primarily soft-sculptural materials that radically transformed the expressive capacity of their works and that related them in a new way to reflections on the body in postwar art. However, the Central Europeans Kmentová and Szapocznikow, both ten years older than Hesse, were reacting to a different artistic tradition than the American one.

When Jindřich Chalupecký tried to describe the arc of Eva Kmentová's oeuvre, he wrote that, like others in her generation, "she went from academic realism to free abstraction."<sup>7</sup> This assessment is not only overly broad but, from the perspective of abstract American sculpture, also untrue. Of course, the accuracy of this conclusion depends on how we define Chalupecký's term "free abstraction." The corporeality that distinguishes Eva Kmentová's work, which is often, moreover, explored in the form of cast body parts, can really only be labeled free abstraction in the Czech context. Kmentová never deserted the figure; on the contrary, she continually found new methods to portray the human body with ever greater urgency. Her methods cover a broad temporal and dimensional range, from the monumental *Pupek* [Belly Button] (1972) to the minute, delicate, two-dimensional *Hrudník* [Chest] (1979). Even the different versions of *Sloup* [Column] (1979) and *Výhonek* [Offshoot], from the same period, take the human body as a theme.<sup>8</sup>

Primarily, Chalupecký's summary description was meant to express the idea that Czech art in the late 1950s had first to shake off the ideological heritage of socialist realism—and the concomitant imposition of a program of realist figurative sculpture—of an entire decade in order to reconnect with the Czech tradition of modern art and attempt to react to what was going on in sculpture abroad.

Eva Hesse did not have to come to terms with any such experience, even though the element of rejecting the past played a significant role in her work. She rebelled against orthodox minimalism—against what we might describe as the highest stage of modernism—as the most abstract of abstractions. I believe a strictly evolutionary and genealogical conception of art history founders when it comes up against the work of these two sculptors; both of them made postmodern art, in the sense that they were not interested in finding a general formal perfection in the discipline of sculpture; rather, they focused on the emotive contents of their sculptures. In the United States, Eva Hesse feminized and humanized minimalist sculpture; Eva Kmentová brought the immediacy of corporeal contact back to Czech sculpture.

Moreover, we also see a remarkable variety of personal approaches among them. Kmentová considered

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Szapocznikow's works too literary and dramatic; Hesse might have had similar grievances with the work of Kmentová. Hesse used sculptural materials in a thoroughly nonmetaphoric manner: she did not use metal, latex, or laminated plastic to create the semblance of something else, as Kmentová or Szapocznikow did. Using different materials, Kmentová cast real sheets or curtains and thereby gave them solid sculptural form, an approach that would have been alien to Hesse, who would never have "imitated" or made impressions of sheets; she would have put the sheets themselves on display. However, that does not imply that one approach was better or more legitimate than the other.

In 1970 Kmentová made *Agresivní krychle* [Aggressive Cube], which, like several previous works, juxtaposes casts of the human body with a geometric shape. In this case, fingers protrude from the sides of a cube. The piece gives the impression that hands imprisoned within a geometric shape are groping out toward the surrounding world and trying to escape from the limiting form of their cage or prison. Fingers, the main bearers of the sense of touch, appear quite often in Kmentová's work, as do lips, another part of the human body that is highly touch-sensitive due to dense concentrations of nerve endings. In view of the political situation in Czechoslovakia in 1970, *Aggressive Cube* calls for a political reading. As soon as the sense of touch breaks through the boundaries of its confined space, the cube—which the title informs us is aggressive—stiffens and prohibits the fingers any further free movement. What then happens within the cube is hidden from view. But since the fingers are protruding, we can guess that it will not be pretty. <sup>[ill. 2]</sup>

Let us now compare Kmentová's *Aggressive Cube* with Hesse's *Accession*, several versions of which were created between 1967 and 1969. Each version consists of a metal cube with sides consisting of lattices of holes through which rubber tubes have been passed. The cube is topless, which enables us to contrast the interior of the sculpture with its exterior. On the outside, it looks like a carefully organized system—like a precisely woven basket. Inside, however, the tube ends generate an indistinct chaos; the tube shoots invite parallels with some sort of unknown biological system



or even the human body. In an interesting parallel with Kmentová's *Aggressive Cube*, it is worth noting that some American critics saw the tube ends inside *Accession* as representing fingers.<sup>9</sup> Hesse chiefly wanted to express a tension between exterior and interior, outside and inside. She showed that outwardly precise minimalist geometric structures have inner lives and followed a path from geometry to organic form. Both sculptors gave geometric cubes an inner life, both by means of fingers or body parts; nonetheless, they differ in the way they used their sculptural materials. Kmentová cast real fingers in plaster; Hesse achieved a similar effect without resorting to an explicit corporeal image.

Eva Hesse, an emotional, psychologically fragile being, was the daughter of Jews who emigrated from Germany following a pogrom in 1939, when she was not quite four. In 1964 and 1965 she was deeply influenced by a trip to what was then West Germany, where she broke away from painting and began experimenting with reliefs and sculptures. She found a deep connection with "European culture" in general. The psychedelic optimism typical of 1960s American culture was alien to her; behind the period's enchantment with breaking old taboos and the ostensible advent of a new age and a new civilization, she felt a vague darkness. In an interview not long before her death, she said, "If I am related to certain artists it is not so much from having studied their works or writings, but from feeling the total absurdity in their work."<sup>10</sup> In the same interview, she revealed that her favorite artists were Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, and the writers Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett. We would be more likely to expect a selection of such names uttered somewhere in Central Europe than in the United States.

The works of Kmentová quite often express absurdity and dark humor, and not just in sculptures like *Terč-muž* [Target-Man] or the empty gesture in *Opuštěný prostor* [Deserted Space]. Particularly with works from the mid-1960s, we might see some as cruel visual jokes, especially in view of their titles, *Proč* [Why] or *Co se nepovedlo* [What Didn't Work Out]). In addition to a straightforward sexual symbolism, a group of works, including *Velká škvíra* [Large Slit], *Díra* [Hole], and *Štěrba* [Aperture], invite a deeply existential reading. Kmentová herself later ironized them

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in *Velká hostina* [Large Feast]: the originally dramatic gesture of slits cut out of paper was repeated in paper trays for hot dogs, thus transforming them into the ironic sigh of a person who has no choice but to see her fate as a tragic farce.

Despite the similarities noted so far, we would certainly not confuse the works of the two artists at a group exhibition. The very materials they use would help us distinguish them: Eva Hesse works with raw laminated plastic, metal, and latex, whereas Eva Kmentová works with more traditional plaster or paper. Kmentová expresses herself through the human body, which she models either in whole or in part or directly imprints into the materials she has chosen. Hesse creates objects that are related indirectly to the human body or to realistic representations of it. In the end, what most connects Eva Kmentová and Eva Hesse is the significance each one has for her own artistic community. They each offer what to some might seem like a poorer alternative to the "robust" expression of male sculptors. Their approach, however, was more convincing and personal than if they had expressed themselves through bronze or marble.

#### IV.

Many works of Eastern European sculpture that show evidence of a sort of delayed minimalism in reality represent post-minimalism or conceptual art. Their creators often did not want to build on minimalism but instead to critique it, or even to parody it. In this approach, they did not differ from their Western counterparts.

We may assign Jiří Kovanda's *Věž z cukru* [Sugar Tower] (1981) to this category. One day, when Kovanda had set off to the park at Vyšehrad in Prague (the site of a historical fort overlooking the Vltava River), he had nine sugar cubes with him, which he arranged into a small stack by a low wall. He then documented the installation and left the park. In a close-up photograph, *Sugar Tower* looks like a typical minimalist sculpture: in its simplicity it suggests the brick artworks Carl Andre made in the 1960s. Their additive principle is identical; Kovanda just applied it vertically rather than horizontally. Although both works were made using existing, ready-made materials, the impression they make is strikingly different, and



not merely because of the difference in scale. Andre's bricks are neutral, commonly used construction materials. Though sugar cubes may in some respects be similar to bricks, their chief characteristic is that they are sweet; the material itself, regardless of whether it is exhibited in a public space, thus conveys a powerful metaphor. Sugar is nourishment, an energy reservoir. Andre's brick installations, according to eminent critic Arthur Danto, blur the distinction between what is art and what is not. Whether we consider arranged bricks to be works of art depends only on our knowledge of art history and the circumstances under which we encounter them, much as with Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964). If we are in a gallery and are familiar with minimalism, we know that what we have in front of us is art. Perceptually, however, it is nothing but carefully arranged construction materials.

Kovanda's sugar cubes are different. The way they have been set down and arranged means they cannot be confused with something else, like a forgotten stash of sugar or an ant trap. If we found them in the park, we would wonder how they had gotten there. We would probably approach them as if they constituted a secret message, as if they conveyed information in an unknown sign system. *Sugar Tower* takes the hermeticism of contemporary art as its theme; we imagine the tower has some significance, but it is difficult or impossible to say what it is. What is at work here is not simply an additive principle, as used by Carl Andre, but, rather, the secret significance of the addition. If we can characterize Andre's works, in keeping with minimalist theory, as particular objects, we might say that Kovanda, rather than creating objects, creates a particular situation in *Sugar Tower*, which chance passers-by stumble upon and must then come to terms with. The work cannot be called a sculpture; it is related more closely to Kovanda's previous work, which involved expression in the form of performance art. Whereas Andre's pieces are always exhibited in galleries and could, in theory, be recreated with everyday bricks, Kovanda did not exhibit in galleries in the 1980s. His works would be performed on the street, or he would set up his installations in public spaces or in his own home. His work is not a pointed response to art theory; Kovanda is responding to a social state of affairs, which he comments on not from afar but by introducing himself into his works.<sup>11</sup> [ill. 3]

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The history of art in Eastern Europe before 1989 was influenced by the political situations in each individual country. There was either official history, which had to conform ideologically to government policy, or unofficial history, which was a reaction against the oppression of the state. In either case, the story of modern art by necessity became a struggle for freedom of expression. When writing new histories of art, authors are tempted to emulate existing histories of Western art, with their definitions, categories, and periodizations. Many Eastern European art historians have not been able to resist adopting those categories and grafting them onto the art of their countries. In such cases, traditions of Eastern European art are mostly engulfed by the Western context, in which they cannot hold their own. Adopting foreign terminology leads to searches for domestic minimalists, abstract expressionists, or pop artists.

The works of some Eastern European artists were derivative of what—in a different place and under completely different circumstances—the likes of Robert Rauschenberg or Yves Klein might have done. But many key artists in each country fall to the wayside in the critical narrative, because none of the categories of Western art applies to their work.

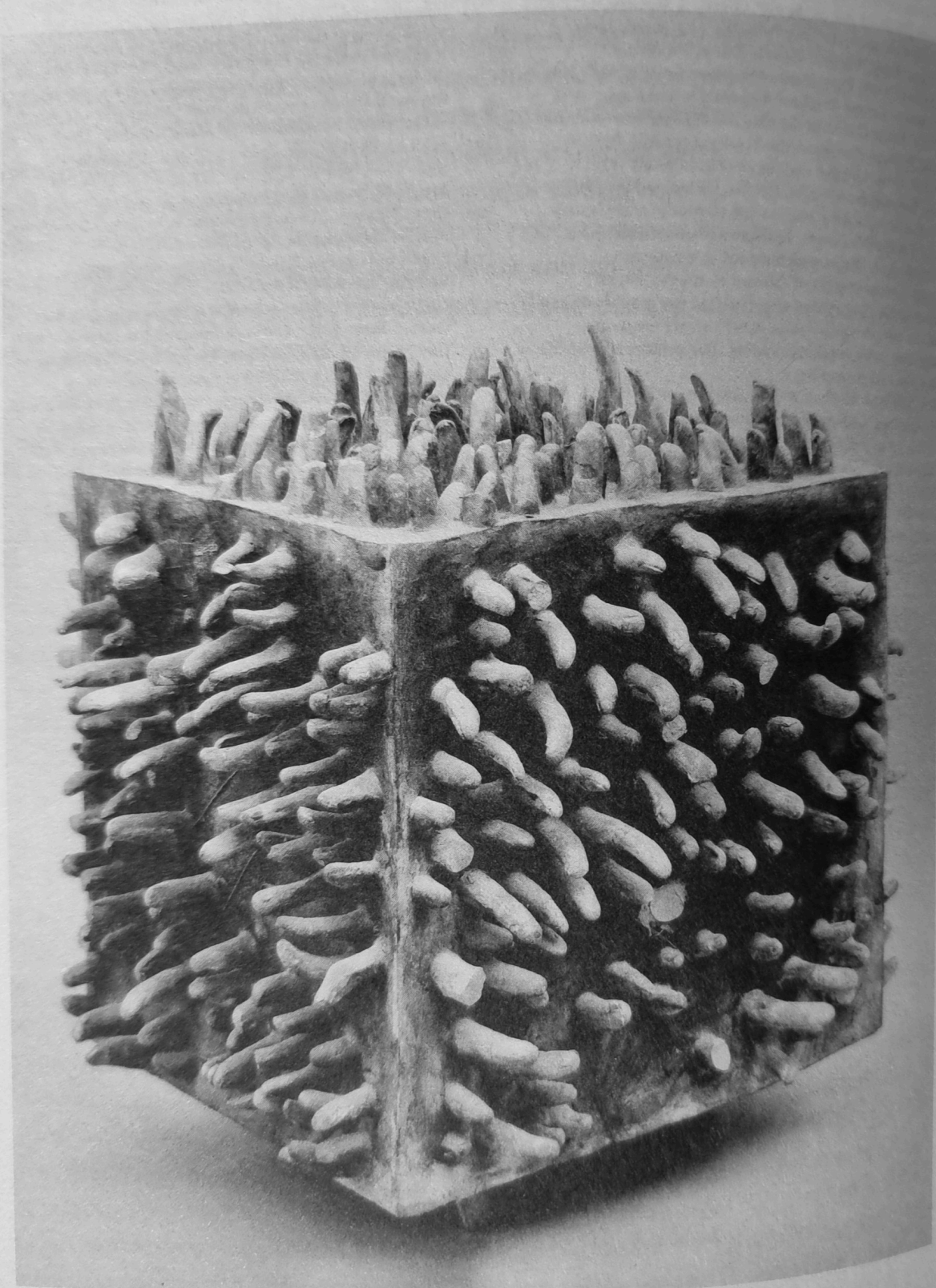
Eastern European “minimalism” shows that there is no way to take in global culture as a single, all-embracing whole. A systematic transplantation of artistic terms that originated at a particular time in a particular cultural context must necessarily end up confining the significance of the “other” and thereby converting it to “colonized art.” Nonetheless, the worldwide system of exhibitions and art markets dominated by the economic and political might of the United States and Western Europe *is* a single, all-embracing whole. If art from other regions is to succeed quickly and unproblematically within such a system, it must submit to the imposition of the system’s categories. Much more than simply market forces and the economic disparities between East and West are at play here. Compared with the West, the level of institutionalization of modern and contemporary art in Eastern Europe is low, and we may not expect this state of affairs to change significantly in the near future. Still, large state institutions with extensive

collections can play a key role in the collection and dissemination of local histories of art and in the promotion of contemporary works abroad.

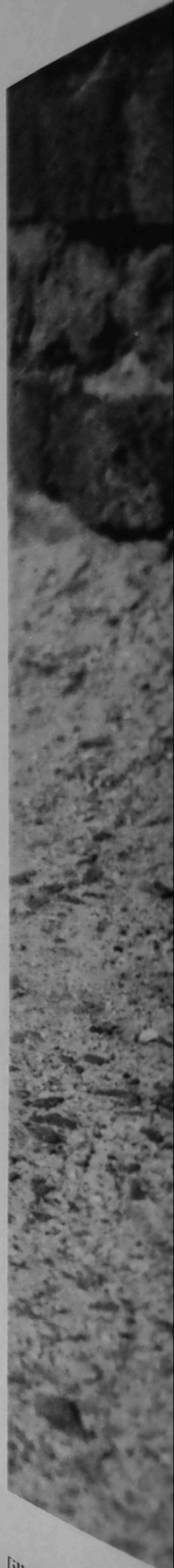
Judgment of a domestic art scene's significance based on foreign categories can only be forestalled by the thorough study of the fragmentary history of that domestic art scene. It is not only that numerous important figures of Czech art have not had monographs devoted to them and their work has not been presented in retrospectives; in addition, there have been almost no exhibitions in recent years with historical themes that juxtapose Czech art and art from other countries and thereby make it possible to discern any divergences and incongruities.

- [1] Jindřich Chalupecký, *Na hranicích umění* [On the Frontiers of Art], Prague, Prostor–Arkýt 1990, p. 123.
- [2] Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, Chicago–London, University of Chicago Press 2003, pp. 54, 57–58.
- [3] For example, Ekaterina Degot, *Russkoe iskusstvo XX-go veka* [Russian Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century], Moscow, Trilistnik 2000; *Art from Poland 1945–1996*, ed. Anda Rottenberg, Warsaw, Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Zachęta 1997; Piotr Piotrowski, *Avantgarda w cieniu Jalty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945–1989* [The Avant-Garde in the Shadow of Jalta: Art in Central and Eastern Europe in the Years 1945–1989], Poznań, Rebis 2005; and the underappreciated projects of the Slovenian collective IRWIN, including *New Moment Magazine—East Art Map: A (Re)Construction of the History of Art in Eastern Europe*, Ljubljana, New Moment 2002. *New Moment Magazine* attempted to create an independent system of Eastern European art, an alternative history that appropriated the graphic design of the cover of prestigious American art magazine *Artforum* as its graphic branding. The project is available at [www.eastartmap.org](http://www.eastartmap.org).
- [4] See Stanislav Kolíbal, *Kresby, sochy, komentáře* [Drawings, Sculptures, Commentaries], Prague–Český Krumlov, Arbor vitae—Egon Schiele Art Centrum 2004, p. 68.
- [5] Stanislav Kolíbal, p. 111.
- [6] Marie Klimešová, “Forma—koncept, hmota—dotek, positive—negativ. Dílo Evy Kmentové” [Form—concept, substance—touch, positive—negative: The Work of Eva Kmentová], in *Eva Kmentová*, Litoměřice, Severočeská galerie výtvarného umění [North-Bohemian Fine Arts Gallery] 2003, p. 9.
- [7] Jindřich Chalupecký, *Nové umění v Čechách* [New Art in the Czech Republic], Jinočany, H+H 1994, p. 112.
- [8] Despite the lyrical impression these works might make, they all contain in various forms the additive principle, which is one of the basic characteristics of minimalism. It appears that what Kmentová found most interesting in the form of *Sloup* [Column] was the precise and yet gentle fraying of the surface, arising from the roughly cut pieces of round paper stacked on top of one another.
- [9] See Lisa Phillips, *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1950–2000*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art–W.W. Norton 1999, p. 190.
- [10] Cindy Nemser, “An Interview with Eva Hesse,” in *Artforum*, 1970, vol. 7, no. 9, May, p. 60.
- [11] Note from 2017: As Karel Císař has pointed out, Jiří Kovanda was familiar with the works and theoretical concepts of the American minimalists. At the time he created *Sugar Tower*, Kovanda translated an interview with Carl Andre for *Minimal, Earth, Concept Art*, an anthology of theoretical texts published in Czechoslovakia by the semiofficial organization Jazzová sekce [Jazz Section]. See Karel Císař, “Dějiny současného umění v zúženém poli” [History of Contemporary Art in a Narrowed Field], in Karel Císař, *Abeceda věcí; Poznámky k modernímu a současnému umění* [An Alphabet of Things: Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art], Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design in Prague, Prague 2014, pp. 125–127.





[ill. 2] Eva Kmentová, *Agresivní krychle* [Aggressive Cube], 1970  
Colored plaster, 52 × 52 × 52 cm  
Courtesy of the Olomouc Museum of Art



[ill. 3] Jiří Kovand  
Ephemeral  
Document  
Courtesy of



[ill. 3] Jiří Kovanda, *Věž z cukru* [Sugar Tower], spring 1981  
Ephemeral installation in a public space, Vyšhrad, Prague  
Documentary photograph  
Courtesy of the artist