

Hungarian University of Fine Arts  
Doctoral School

## **Authorial Institution – Mattis Teutsch's Oeuvre in the Light of Its Reception**

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My doctoral research is focused on the interpretation of the oeuvre of Mattis Teutsch (1884-1960), which is complemented by an artistic, curatorial and editorial practice.

The oeuvre of Mattis Teutsch is part of the cultural patrimony of both Romania and Hungary. The canonization of his art is a process in which Cold War antagonisms were also perpetuated. Its reception history documents the contrast between the formal autonomy of art, symbolizing the freedom of the individual, and the one-party state order of socialist realism.

Mattis Teutsch is present in the public consciousness as a pioneer of abstract art. Less well-known, however, is the artist's late period that extended over the years after the Second World War, the first two decades of state socialism established in Romania. In this context he created a body of unique Socialist Realist works that stand out in their originality even on an international scale. From 1944 and continuing through the years of bitter economic hardship following the war, the artist painted over several of his previous works. This was discovered in 2013, leading to the erasure of 15 socialist realist paintings with restorers' intervention to reveal his hidden figurative constructivist works created around 1930. This iconoclastic intervention marks the culmination of the canonization process that had begun when the artist was still alive. Alongside the art institutions of the two countries, market actors also contributed to this process. While his life work was characterized by stylistic contradictions, the social role of the artist – found in the interplay between the transcendental intentions of abstract art and the political commitment of the avant-garde – remained largely unexplored.

To complete the public perception of the artist, I conceived and organized two research-based exhibitions entitled *Mattis Teutsch – Avant-Garde and Constructive Realism*. The first exhibition took place at the Residența BRD Scena9 exhibition space in Bucharest in 2019, followed by the second at Kassák Museum in Budapest in 2020. In connection with the exhibitions, I edited a multi-authored, English-Romanian bilingual catalogue (2022). In the frame of this project, I anchored the interpretation of the oeuvre to the concept of *erasure*. I believe that through the institutional-administrative measure of erasure, the internal contradictions of the reception history have also become inscribed into the body of the works, becoming an inseparable part of the oeuvre. With this insight, I placed the restoration documentation before the works of art within the framework of the project. Through the exhibitions, my aim was to provide a comprehensive representation of the artist's late period, based on which I could advocate for a more nuanced understanding of the cultural heritage

of the regional artistic context, challenging the hermetic separation between Socialist Realism and modern art.

To fully appreciate the intellectual heritage of our Eastern-European recent past, we might need to identify the turning points where individual authorial careers are pulled into an institutional vacuum. These turning points are usually linked to the economic and political regime change marked by either the beginning or end of state socialism and can result in a biographical break such as real or internal emigration (the abandonment of artistic activity). I call such breaks occurring in an artist's life as *historical zero points*. According to my thesis, where such a *zero point* can be identified within a given biography, it will reveal how institutional roles split off from the authorial function as a result of structural uncertainty. For example, in the case of Mattis Teutsch, in the late period after the *zero point*, the dual agency of challenging and defending the canons can be observed. I tried to grasp the dynamics of this dual agency through the concept of *authorial institution*. I based this concept on my empirical observation of the institutional vacuum of the Romanian art scene after the regime change in 1989, which was characterized by the continuous withdrawal of contemporary artists from public institutions to the civil sphere. I am using the concept of *authorial institution* as a working hypothesis by which I aim to find the *zero point* in the oeuvre of Mattis Teutsch, and to theoretically develop my own role in the *erasure*.

Through the analysis of Mattis Teutsch's oeuvre, I made the following observations:

The artist's life work can be segmented into distinct creative cycles. In the early cycles, his style developed in the alternation between the various artistic media of sculpture-painting-linocut, through a continuous formal derivation. His development is consistent with the trends within modern art of the interwar period. After their suppression under the Nazi and then communist regimes, the efforts of art historians from Hungary and Romania rehabilitated these works as significant local examples of Expressionism and Constructivism. This process of "rediscovery" concluded with the *erasure* of the artist's late period.

The interpretation of the late cycles has been hindered by their stylistic dissonances. The late period shows indifference toward the art historical narrative that favors the artist's departure from mimetic representation, which, as a historical process, culminated in the expressionist and geometric abstraction of his early career. While in the early stages of his oeuvre visual abstraction served the spiritual awakening of the "new man" propagated by the artist, from the beginning of the 1930s the human figure established itself as an independent iconographic problem in his art. He based this iconography on one of the lessons learned from abstraction, namely the equality of figure and background. While this conceptual relationship is stylistically less traceable, its significance in connecting the late cycles is all the more important.

A central paradigm shift occurred within the oeuvre when Mattis Teutsch shifted his focus from the individual viewer towards the masses through the public art form of the fresco. Without ever having painted a mural, from the "fresco plans" of 1930 to the last cycles, his paintings acted as a metonymy of the fresco. With this, Mattis Teutsch found a peculiar balance between artistic autonomy and heteronomy, which can be considered his own creative method. While his late period served the socialist "social commission" through a kind of over-identification, the cyclical nature of his art took on an autopoietic role, in which he found refuge for his own "artisan" disposition. This principle can be applied to his entire oeuvre, wherein each of his works, from beginning to end, occupies the same position within the structure, that is, it is realized as a variation within a cycle. This means that all his works are hypothetical within the logic of the system, and concrete in terms of self-realization.

In the conceptual background of the late period, his commitment to socialist modernization blended with the spiritual language stemming from the inception of abstract art. In his paintings, he raised the tools and conventions of art to the level of subject matter, while also attributed symbolic meaning to some of his technical decisions. By using tempera, he evoked the matte wall surface of the fresco, while simultaneously ascribing an emanating light in the depths of the material as a source of esoteric enlightenment. Building upon the picture plane, his “Constructive Realism” aimed to offer an internal construction for the viewer – the socialist man and woman – preparing them for the historical task ahead by reflecting their role within the political community. The paintings from the late period correspond to the elements of an invisible architecture, in which the “new man” emerges as a social reflection, integrated with the picture plane in terms of representation. One of the means to reach this unity is the so-called “pearly background”, which covers the depicted scenes like a conceptual layer of plaster that also materially unifies the images from the same cycle. The thematic exploration of the picture plane is concurrent and historically aligned with the late modernist art theories (Clement Greenberg and others), which find the final conclusion in the examination of artistic tools and in the flatness of the picture plane.

Mattis Teutsch’s late creative cycles were born and renewed in the context of a constant existential crisis. I interpret the resumption of his late artistic career through the “absolute performative” language game defined by Paolo Virno. In this theory, when a man is faced with a “cultural apocalypse”, his message becomes secondary and the display of his linguistic capacity becomes the sole purpose of his act of utterance. In this sense, the resumption of the artist’s work after the war was an echo of the danger experienced under Nazism, in which his capacity for action is reified in the display of the means of artistic expression. Simultaneously, the ideal of a utopian community emerged as a driving force in his work, growing in intensity despite the looming threats of Stalinism. A strong dissonance emerges in these paintings between the mandatory optimism of Socialist Realism and the artistic language lying in its ruins. In explaining why the artist’s new beginning defies the conventions of any cultured taste, I employ Theodor Adorno’s concept of “late style.” Through the analysis of Beethoven’s late period, Adorno introduced the concept of dissonance, which, in his aesthetic theory, stands as the general response to the alienating experience of modernity in art.

Mattis Teutsch’s post-war new beginning takes place in a culture of *tabula rasa*. The artist witnessed a historical turning point, in which the proletariat as a social class emerged as the heir of universal human culture and tried to bring bourgeois institutions under its control. At this point, an institutional vacuum was created, in the context of which, without realizing it, Mattis Teutsch found himself in a transcendent position in relation to his own art historical role, and continued his work by appropriating his own artistic path. In his creative program, the concept of the *historical zero point* is amplified when, in the unmistakable gesture of the *absolute performative*, it returns objectified in an institutional role through the ritual repetition of artistic creation. In the resumption of his late period, the cyclical nature of his authorial program shields the craftsmanship with which he puts artistic language into production in the form of a public good, free from the constraints of academic representation and the elitism often associated with the avant-garde.

With the fall of state socialism, Mattis Teutsch’s utopian intellectual architecture lost its reference in reality. His works gained prominence and resonance as spiritually charged market commodities. The picture plane has become a stage for institutional intervention, where selections and erasures are carried out with virtuosity, unaware of the artist’s partiture. However, there are ‘prefabricated’ roles in the *erasure* that can be traced back to the artist’s original gesture of overpainting. The conclusion here, based on the hypothesis of the *authorial institution*, is that the *erasure* lacks a specific author, yet structural genius arises from its background – the *genius loci*. There are inherent institutional and technical functions in the *erasure*, which, as part of the canonization processes, are fulfilled by the restorer, or the art historian who interprets, exhibits, etc. I was able to place a document of *erasure* on

the cover of the monographic album in the name of an authority that was prepared for me. It is an act of proxy placed within the institution, which can be traced back to the dual agency of the artist. And although he was the one who repainted the picture, so he was the first to erase, he did so in a role in which he multiplied the *historical zero point* as an institutional vacuum on the picture plane and in the structure of his life work.

The act of *erasure* embodies a trope of the artistic avant-garde characterized by the assault on traditional artistic language and the notion of authorial genius, akin to the Dadaist spirit of denial. A classic example of this tendency is given by Marcel Duchamp, who, after publicly renouncing his artistic practice, in his later career embraced a form of pseudo-institutionalism that we identify today with the technique of appropriation. He appropriated institutional functions within his authorship when he canonically closed his oeuvre and began distributing it in the form of miniatures arranged in suitcases. Duchamp's last work, *Étant donnés* (1966) diverges from his criticism of "retinal" art by placing the viewer in the position of a voyeur. Through peepholes drilled into a door, the viewer is compelled to gaze upon a scene meticulously staged within a secluded museum chamber. After his death, Duchamp's final work, created in complete secrecy, was installed in a pre-selected room at the Philadelphia Museum of Art according to detailed instructions transmitted through his widow and his stepson. This permanent museum installation is the final stage of the self-proclaimed cultural diplomacy by which Duchamp helped the establishment of modern art in America, for example, through his involvement in the Société Anonyme museum initiative. As part of this same effort, Duchamp engaged in extensive correspondence in order to repurchase (or make his American collector acquaintances repurchase) those pieces from his oeuvre that had been sold over the years, with the aim of assembling a comprehensive museum collection representing his entire output. What he previously distributed in suitcases, now resides in a formal institution, marking a transition from his authorial to institutional roles. While Duchamp's Dadaist denial established a tradition of institutional critique, his conservative tendencies remained concealed. Thus, the significance of the point at which the indifferent *dandy* had become a polite diplomat is lost. Similarly, in the case of Mattis Teutsch, the overlap between his institutional role and artistic career obscures the moment when the visual medium of *élan vital* transforms into the communist "engineer of the soul". Starting from the European fine art tradition, the two artists arrived at opposing poles within modern art. While one anchored his institutional role to the socialized picture plane and found his artisan self-realization in serial production, the other found the institutional resolution and conceptual endgame in the European competition for breaking with traditions on the American continent.

Consequently, the use of *institutional vacuum* as a tool for deconstructing a biography is not only relevant in conjunction with a regime change associated with the beginning or end of state socialism. Where the *historical zero point* can be identified within an authorial career, the working hypothesis of the *authorial institution* will likely prove useful in establishing a praxis.