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The national imagination of post-Soviet countries at the Venice Biennale. The (re) construction of national identity

I am applying to The Berlin „International Forum for Doctoral Candidates in East European Art History". In particular, I am interested in aspects of post-soviet art exhibit abroad in relation to the emergence of consumerism and capitalist art markets.

Why start with Venice Biennale? Nowadays exhibitions are the medium through which art becomes known and its cultural meanings are established and administered. As editors of the *Thinking About Exhibitions* anthology, support, "[e]xhibitions are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed."[1] The Venice Biennale is one of the most important exhibition of contemporary art, where nations represents their image in particular economic circumstances. The former soviet artists create new national imaginaries. A very special context of Venice Biennale where art of former Ussr claims an inspection of the West, an inspection that used its own language and its own value system as the criteria of significance and excellence, as Piotr Piotrowski argue in his monography *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, give us an interesting point of view.

My claim will be that it is a curious case that former soviet republics exhibits in Venice Biennale the former non-official artists. For example Russia shows Moscow conceptualist school until 2015 (Andrei Monastirskii for 2011, Vadim Zaharov for 2013, Irina Nahova for 2013), Armenia at least until 2009, when made by ACCEA NPAK, center of contemporary art of Sonia Balassanian, or the first Venice's edition of Ukraine (Valentin Raevskii for 2001) or Central Asia (Sergey Maslov for 2005). It is true that there were many edition of biennale since the USSR dissolution, and there were a younger population of artists presented, but the soviet history and the sharply shrill remnants are still visible in post-Soviet neo-liberal states on view in Venice. So why the post-soviet countries are represented by non-official artists?

[1] Thinking about Exhibitions. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne. Psychology Press, 1996, p.2

To answer this question one has to revert to the broader issues related to the history and contemporary situation of this territory, which is specific , with this being true not only as concerns the non-official promotion.

The first reason is the de-modernization global process, what meant the rise of traditional and folk culture. Postcolonial studies have taught us that the rural discourses of the West is imposed on the Imaginaries of post-soviet countries. Yet, in the 1990s, the West was not only one of the actors who oriented the subjects of the political, cultural and artistic scene of former USSR towards the quest for roots, patriarchal traditions, times and beliefs of all kinds. Among other protagonists who have contributed to torment minds, it should first mention the local elites who, in the search for the solid foundation on which they could build their young independent states, have reoriented artists to a "mythified" past[2]. Thus, the reorientation of artistic practices towards passeism was officially committed and prescribed, and the energetic exploitation of shamanic, nomadic, religious sources has responded to the expectation addressed to artists by power. What is important, the concepts and ideas that power has engaged in the late 1990s and during the 2000s, were deliberately contemplated by artists during the previous era. In seeking an alternative to stagnating socialist realism, creators were faced with the dilemma of preferring accelerated knowledge and bringing Western trends closer to one another, or drawing on historical sources that date back to ancient cultures. Both possibilities were explored, and for many of them the second way seemed to make more sense given its more singular and less imitative character. This is how dervish and Sufi figures are established in Uzbek and Tajik art (these two peoples had for centuries a developed urban culture, and the role of religion in their life has always been predominant), while Kyrgyz and Kazakh art gave priority to archetypes of the nomad and shaman (nomads to Stalinist "collectivization", Kyrgyz and Kazakhs were Islamized to a lesser extent, and fragments of pagan rituals remained more firmly anchored in the collective memory of the peoples themselves).

Let me continue with a quote from Norton Dodge for NY Times:

"Many of these artists were poor and living in obscurity. Some were arrested and murdered. Their art was part of the struggle for artistic freedom in the Soviet Union. And I believe that it played a crucial role in bringing the whole communist system crumbling down."[3]

Therefore, the second reason to call non-official artist to nation imaginary building is the participation in the victim's competition. Heroic narratives thus often go hand in hand with

[2] For example the slogans spread by the leaders of the new states of Central Asia are almost identical, such as: "The people indifferent to its history has no future", "Whoever has no past does not There is no future "," Determining the future of future generations is possible only through knowledge of the past and the quest for identity ", etc.)

[3] Forbidden Art of the Soviet Era By Dana Micucci Published: October 28, 1995 NY Times http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/28/news/28iht-somart.t.html (04.01.2018)

strategies of victimization and martyrization, bestowing an aura of sainthood upon the former non-official artists and presenting them as martyrs in the struggle for freedom of self-expression, unquestionably a major factor in the development of modern art. Not surprisingly then, it is the term “non-conformist art” that plays a central role.

In addition, the third reason, which are certainly not the last, is as Ales Erjavec argue in his book *Postmodenism, Postsocialism and beyond*, an important actor, a Hungarian-American millionaire George Soros, who founded a number of centers for contemporary art, called ‘open society’ centers. His idea was that by sowing the seeds of an open society in culture, he would promote freedom and democracy as well as different creative artists and their promoters. As he admitted some years ago in this, he partly failed: instead of helping artists develop their own networks and financial resources, his money replaced that formerly supplied by the communist state. In addition, he helped erect a network of art centers with an almost identical artistic philosophy and preferences throughout the former Soviet bloc. So the non-official artists today are still the most contemporary artistic former “east” production, who participate in a process of the (re)constructing of identities of new nations on view.

In order to conclude I can say that there is many reason to exhibit non-official art from Soviet Union. The three reason I mentioned are not the only and nor certain. However, they explain the constant interest towards former soviet artists and underpin their aura in today’s postmodernist society.