

Vera Otdelnova

Department of Modern and Contemporary art Studies at the State Institute for Art Studies in Moscow

Moscow Union of Artists. Art and Politics in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 70s.

The dissertation is dedicated to the history of the Moscow Union of Artists (MOSKh). MOSKh was established in 1932 and shortly became an only legal professional art organization in Moscow. Its functions were multiple from organizing art exhibitions and debates to distributing material goods among artists and intermediating between artists and state customers, in the absence of the art market. As for the state, it regarded the Union of Artists as an instrument of propaganda and control over the art society. The main mechanisms of ruling art were set by the mid-1950s.

The period I am focusing on in my project is marked by two significant features. First, by the growth of the economic welfare of the art industry, that brought stability in artists' everyday life. Second, by the raising crisis of ideology within the artistic society.

The starting point of my research is an exhibition "30 years to MOSKh" (1963), which provoked a new conservative turn in the state politics regarding fine arts and, particularly, the Union of Artists. The timeline of the study ends at the end of the 1970s with the partly legalization of the underground art the of MOSKh monopoly on the Moscow art scene.

The archive documents show that in the 1960s and 70s a silent critique toward party decrees was common among many members of MOSKh independently on their artistic manner or official status. This change led to a conflict situation. On the one hand, MOSKh, as a legal institution, had to show its loyalty and to follow party instructions. On the other hand, its members sought to distance themselves from the ideological influence of the Communist party and to come out for the autonomy of art. Thus, the central question of my project is about the limits of artistic freedom and the strategies of liberation that were used by the members of the Union.

Methodologically I follow the institutional approach of such historians as A.Baudin and G.Yankovskaya who concentrate their attention not on the pieces of art, but on an institutional and economic frame that brought this art to life. I also share the idea of 'performative shift' formulated by A.Yurchak, according to which, most of the citizens accepted official ideology but reinterpreted and adapted it to their proper needs. Since the history of the Union of Artists

in the 1960s and 70s hasn't been described yet, I pay attention to historical reconstruction and verification of facts.

My work consists of four chapters. The first chapter shows the place of MOSKh in the hierarchy of the state and party organizations, that curated the sphere of culture.

The second chapter focuses on the inner life of the Union, its structure and the spheres of its competency. According to the documents, in the 1960s and 70s, the MOSKh displayed activity mostly in two directions: receiving of material goods and guarantees, and popularization of art among workers, peasants, and children. In the same time, professional discussions, dedicated to art problems and perspectives, moved from public sites into the clubs and studios.

The goal of the third chapter is to reconstruct the most significant MOSKh exhibitions of the 1960s and 70s, the way of their organization and censoring, and the debates they provoked.

Even though the main idea of such debates was to separate art from ideology, the anti-modernist pathos, terminology and logic constructions recall the rhetoric of the Stalin era.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the economic conditions of Soviet artists. Who were the customers? How did they chose and order art pieces? What kind of works did they prefer? How did the Union of artists control the quality of such works?

The dissertation bases on a large corpus of sources. Among them are art periodicals of the 1960s and 70s, MOSKh statistic reports, archival documents of MOSKh and the Art Foundation. Documents of oral history, such as interviews with the participants of the artistic life of the 1960s and 70s is another important source.