

## **Ekaterina Vinogradova**

University Grenoble Alps and St Petersburg Academy of Art

### **Narrating victimhood. Post-soviet identities on Venice Biennale**

The participation of the republics included in the Soviet Union at the Venice Biennales and of the independent states after the dissolution of the communist bloc presents features that are both stylistic and thematically different. Artists promoted by nations break with the practices of socialist realism to embrace the modes of representation of the international avant-garde. They renounce themes celebrating the Bolshevik hero and the success of social struggles to highlight the face of the victims of oppression, whether political, ethnic, religious or sexual. This break has often been presented as a liberation from the ideological constraints imposed by the Soviet regime on artistic creation and the possibility offered to artists to finally express their sensitivity freely. The question arises, however, whether this liberation, demanded by artists and celebrated by critics, does not hide a new submission to the values promoted by Western ideology. Do the artists, in declining the theme of the victim in forms borrowed from the Western stylistic currents, do they not really submit to the commercial expectations of the international market? How to build the image of a national identity by borrowing the values that define it to a foreign lexicon?

The Venice Biennale propose a very special context for artistic production. This exhibition under the cloak of transnationalism, nomadic culture and globalization show at least from 1977 the parade of modern nationalisms, new victims. It precedes the season of art sales at international fairs. The "victim" banner and the aesthetic denunciation of social misery are often considered as decisive selling points in the competitive international art market. Michel Nuridsany, in the French daily *Le Figaro* wrote in 1990 that the Russian pavilion "plays the opening but worried by its speed to adapt to the market."<sup>1</sup> John Russell Taylor advances in the *Times*, the same year, after the Polish Pavilion description that "we must pay a really special attention to this pavilion, because its creator is a survivor of Auschwitz,"<sup>2</sup> thus making the artistic value dependent suffering endured by the artist. William Parker heard, in 1993 and still in the *Times*, "the martial music of old communism". And names the Russian installation "a strangely touching piece". He says the Biennale for "meeting, greeting and eating," or

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<sup>1</sup> Nuridsany M. Vitrine promotionnelle, *Le Figaro*, 29/05/1990

<sup>2</sup> John Russell Taylor What news on the Rialto, darling? *The Times* 1/6/1990

"various cultural foundations and large corporations (Swatch, Armani, etc.) have secured a total funding of \$ 4.8 million for this program. year. " In a little while later the world of art goes to Basel "the grandfather of art fairs" to see "the salability, rather than the sensitivity"<sup>3</sup> of art. In 2015, Ukrainian activists took over Russia's exhibition space at the Venice Biennale to denounce the occupation of Crimea. The "Arti-Vistes" took possession of the "Green Pavilion" at the opening of Irina Nakhova. Memorial competition and rivalry in the claim of suffering: the Russian artist had organized an exhibition that paid tribute to the victims of the Stalinist regime ...

So being heroes is nowadays not interesting in the case of the Venice Biennale. The post soviet nations, as many others, participate in so-called victim's competition. Heroic narratives thus often go hand in hand with strategies of victimization and martyrization, bestowing an aura of sainthood upon the artists and presenting them as martyrs in the struggle for freedom of self-expression. Such a transformation has been accompanied by a change in certain social ideals characteristic of communist mythology: "At the center of modern historical culture is no longer the ideal of the hero, but the ideal of the victim". The privileged status of the victim in the 1990s then created new forms of self-representation and identity politics: Armenia, a country with a long tradition of suffering since the genocide of the turn of the century, or the Baltic countries, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, built their identity on the role of victim, transforming the traumatic history of Stalinist repression and the Soviet occupation into a collective glorification of the miserable past of their people. Exhibitions for the Biennale illustrate visually, and with almost religious fervor, this sacrificial history, representing the resistance to violence and the war memories of the people as the heroic origin of the birth of nations<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Parker Wiliam, Conceptual posterings in Venise, The Times, 20/06/1993

<sup>4</sup> For exemple Sonya Balasanyan, through video art, David Kareyan, through his performances, illustrated the traumas endured by the Armenians. The pavilions of Ukraine have almost always exposed the revolutionary events of their recent history (the fight for the freedom of the orange revolution in 2005, the war of Donbass in 2015 and in 2017).