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Re-Conception of Russian Avant-Garde Art in the Context of Cultural Cold War (1960s - 1980s)

This research project investigates the intellectual history of re-discovery and re-evaluation of Russian Avant-Garde art in the late Cold War context. Occurring first on the Western artistic stage in the early 1960's, the excitement for the Russian avant-garde externalized by the boom of the Russian Avant-Garde art exhibitions all over the world during the entire 1980's. The grounds for this worldwide interest for the Russian art of the early 20th century were provided by a modest community of enthusiasts – international scholars, museum curators, and private collectors, who were involved in the dense cooperative network during the Khrushchev's Thaw. Towards the end of the 1970s, the heritage of Russian Avant-Garde gained enough symbolical currency to be included into the political sphere of cultural diplomacy. The key role in avant-garde art international recognition was played by such exhibitions like 'Moscow-Paris: 1900-1930' (Paris, 1979; Moscow, 1981) and 'The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910 – 1930: New Perspectives' (Los Angeles, 1980). Examining the European, Soviet and American contexts in comparative perspective through international art exhibitions, this project aims to investigate the tension and cooperation between different cultural actors in the Cold War and their strategies of representation of Russian artistic history of the revolutionary period.

My project follows a new trend in the Cold War historiography, linked to a transnational turn, which pivots the focus from the division and restriction caused by the Iron Curtain to the entangled history of the East-West cross-influences and cooperation (Mikkonen, Koivunen, 2015; Mikkonen, Suutari, 2017; Evangelista, 2002). Following this new wave of cultural Cold War studies, I want to abstain from using the Cold War as a conceptual frame and keep it merely as a chronological context for the cultural interactions.

In my research I want to combine two interweaving approaches - Entangled history¹ (Werner, Zimmermann, 2006) and New Diplomatic History² (Roulin, Scott-Smith, 2014), in order to analyze the interplay of official and unofficial levels in the development of Russian Avant-Garde art field.

In order to examine transnational interactions, the flows of people, ideas and concepts, as well as networks (institutional and interpersonal) in respect to Russian Avant-Garde, I want to apply the methodological concept of "cultural transfer" as per Michel Espagne's definition: "Research on transfers sets out to examine new possibilities for escaping cultural

¹ See more about Entangled History at: https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/cias/wiki/e_Entangled_History.html

² See more about the Network for New Diplomatic History at : <https://newdiplomatchistory.org>

history's national framework by studying in a quasi micro-historical fashion the process through which an object is translated from its context of emergence into a new context of reception"³.

But, at the same time, talking about Soviet-origin Avant-Garde exhibitions, we need to take into account the questions addressing the propaganda and ideological dimensions of the Cold War, which I propose to trace through analysis of cultural diplomatic documentation, official reports, and media discourse. The term "cultural cold war" as recently applied to international history and diplomatic history (Major, Mitter, 2003) in the words of Tony Shaw focuses on "the state's appreciation of the importance of culture as a weapon in the Cold War"⁴.

This project addresses the following research questions:

- Did the re-discovered Russian modernist art become a new and effective weapon in the cultural Cold War? Or was the Cold War itself used as a meaningful context for re-evaluation of this art by engaged groups of international players, such as academic scholars, museum curators or art dealers?
- How was the ideological disposition of Socialist Realism and American Expressionism changed with the advent of Russian Avant-Garde/Russian Revolutionary art in the artistic discourse of the Cold War?
- What do these exhibitions tell us about different international actors' positions and attitudes to the Cultural Cold War? Is it possible to talk about an ideological frame in representation of Russian Avant-Garde in the Soviet, European and American contexts?

³ Espagne, M. (2013). Comparison and transfer: A question of method. *Transnational challenges to national history writing*, Middell, M., & i Aulinas, L. R. (Eds.), p. 47.

⁴ Shaw, T. (2001). The Politics of Cold War Culture, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3/3, p.74.