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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 exhibitions all over the world during the entire 1980's. Was the re-discovered Russian modernist art a new weapon in the cultural Cold War, and if so, how was it instrumentalised by different interest groups? Or the Cold War itself was used as a meaningful context for re-evaluation of this art by engaged groups of international players? 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.

Until the early 1960s such a phenomenon as 'Russian Avant-Garde art' does not exist in the world art history. The ground for the worldwide rediscovery of Russian art of the beginning of the 20th century was laid during the short period of the Khrushchev's Thaw. This time of openness granted international students' access to the Soviet collections, archives, and Russian art historians, which in turn prompted these international students to become the first generation of Russian Avant-Garde scholars. During 1960s – early 1970s the Soviet Union was visited by Troels Andersen, Camilla Grey, John Bowlt, Christina Lodder, Charlotte Douglas, Nicoletta Misler, Jean-Claude Marcadé – all of them were speaking or studying the Russian language and were able to interact with Soviet actors, museum keepers and private collectors who showed them avant-garde art – people like Nikolai Khardzhiev, Mikhail Alpatov, Dmitri Sarabianov, George Costakis and others.

This international community of amateurs at the beginning, later to become respectful scholars of Russian Avant-Garde in terms of transnational relations formed networks across borders, and could be described as "engaged in 'track-two diplomacy' as an alternative to the official negotiations of government diplomats"¹. Due to their activities, the status of Avant-Garde art slowly shifted: inside the USSR it continued to be harshly criticized or ignored, nevertheless, Russian Avant-Garde gained enough symbolical currency to be included into the political sphere of cultural diplomacy. Starting with 'Art and Revo-

¹ Evangelista, Matthew *Transnational organizations and the Cold War* in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 3, Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010). p. 400.

lution' exhibition in 1971 in London, Russian Avant-Garde art came to be one of the most demanded export items in the context of the Cold War rivalry (Clarkson, 2010).

In 1979, the Russian Avant-Garde from Soviet governmental collections was shown at the largest French-Soviet exhibition 'Moscow-Paris: 1900 – 1930' in Paris. In 1981, the same exhibition was displayed at the Pushkin State Museum in Moscow, where the Soviet public for the very first time in half a century had the opportunity to observe Russian Avant-Garde art show-cased officially.

At the same time, US-American museums also displayed several exhibitions dedicated to Russian Avant-Garde art, all of them were organized without Soviet involvement. In 1978, the Museum of Modern Art in New York showed its own collection of Russian art at the exhibition 'Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde, 1912 – 1930'. In 1980, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art displayed 'The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910 – 1930: New Perspectives'. In 1981, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York showed 'Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia: Selection from George Costakis collection', part of the private collection of the Soviet-Greek diplomat, which he was able to bring along from the Soviet Union when emigrating.

In my project, I propose to investigate the history of organization and reception of these international art exhibitions, and to analyze the role of the international network of scholars, collectors, curators and cultural diplomats in the process of large-scale international recognition of Russian Avant-Garde art in the peculiar circumstances of the Cold War.