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The Reversed Power of the Image: Graphic Art Biennials in Eastern Europe during the Cold War

The purpose of my current research is to investigate the role periodic exhibitions of artistic prints played in building cultural networks within and across Eastern European societies during the Cold War. This research project assesses the methods that post-war printmakers and curators of periodic print exhibitions devised to initiate an international cultural dialogue in countries suffering from political censorship and cultural exclusion.

I take as a point of departure the fact that artistic printmaking in the countries such as the former Yugoslavia, the Polish People's Republic or the Soviet Union was less affected by censorship than other artistic media. The significant freedom of artistic printmakers was common in Eastern Europe and was directly related to the underappreciated position of artistic prints in the hierarchy of artistic production.

Artistic print culture had significant input in the process of re-building cultural networks broken by repressions, which were often introduced in the aftermath of events such as the student and intellectual protest action in Polish People's Republic in March 1968. Censorship forced artists to work in closed circles of reciprocal artistic influence, while access to the international art world was rationed only to those in the good graces of the state. The biggest tragedy of censorship was not the atmosphere of schizophrenia created by constant surveillance, or even the breach of the freedom of expression, but the destruction of the internal cultural tissue caused by disseminating distrust and alienation among artists (Strzyżewsk, *The Black Book of Polish Censorship*, 1977; Schöpflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe 1945-1992*, 1993).

Cultural isolation resulted in a common artistic aspiration to westernise and modernise art produced behind the curtain of censorship. In this respect, international exhibitions of graphic art became windows onto the world that significantly helped re-connect disjointed societies. Out of almost 80 such initiatives, three had a particular impact on freedom of the international network of printmakers. In 1955, the Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana

was initiated; in 1966, the Biennale of Graphic Art in Cracow; and in 1968, the Tallinn Print Triennial came to life. These are the oldest graphic art exhibitions in Eastern Europe which still periodically gather and display works of printmakers from across the world.

My research assesses the role prints exhibited during these events played in the process of social change. While new media such as photography or film became technical apparatuses used to control societies, as famously outlined by Walter Benjamin in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) and subsequently reproached by Vilém Flusser in his essay, *The Power of the Image* (1990), I want to argue that traditional expressive media, such as artistic prints, paradoxically took a reversed stance towards the subordinating potential of new media and became tools used by artists, but most of all curators, to oppose the imposed power. Apart from the media theory, I support my thesis with political theory and also confront my findings with the most recent scholarship on the history of periodic exhibitions (e. g. Green; Gardner, *Mega-Exhibitions: Biennials, Triennials, Documentas*, 2016).

The research method I am using traces and compares examples of artistic printmaking, which were used to address the political situation in authoritarian countries, but most of all, I am concentrating my efforts on exploring the curatorial strategies devised for negotiating the power relations between the art world and the world of politics. I am trying to complete this task through investigating material presented at the international print exhibitions and via direct engagement with primary sources; archives, living artists and curators, and academics.

The early stage of my project focuses on the three father-curators of the oldest exhibitions: Zoran Kržišnik from Ljubljana, Witold Skulicz from Krakow and Jüri Hain from Tallinn.