

## **Vinogradova Ekaterina**

University Grenoble Alps

St Petersburg Academy of Art

### **Narrating Victimhood. Post-Soviet Identities on Venice Biennale**

The Fine Arts Biennale is currently contributing to the formation of a critical view of contemporary art. The Venice Biennale, as a multinational exhibition, represents a simplified model of international relations from both a political and artistic point of view.

Post-Soviet states have been participating in the Biennale since the late 1990s. The new generation of commissioners often uses this exhibition to talk about national identity, asking the same question as Alice Tiefertale, curator of Latvian participation at the 2013 Biennale - "Why is our art so different, why is it so 'Latvian' ...? The curators of the pavilions used various tools for this purpose. In particular, they constantly show images of physical and social suffering and individual trauma on their national venues and throughout their participation.

Thus, the aim of this work is to analyze and reflect on sacrificial narratives and the victimized representation of post-Soviet nations in the framework of the Venice Biennale, as forms of actualization of the newest forms of contemporary art in the conditions of contemporary artistic culture.

The Venice exhibition of contemporary art was created on the basis of classical ideas of the nineteenth century: the primacy of national identity and support for new initiatives in contemporary art. The USSR, during its journey, denied the idea of a national state and any other than socialist art. The state that inherited the Russian pavilion of Shchusev represented itself as a state of workers and peasants, without national identity, with realistic art. The artistic hierarchy was dominated by decorative and applied arts, architecture, design, theatre, cinema and collective creativity. With such installations the USSR had a very special position at the Venice Biennale. Nevertheless, in international contemporary art and, in particular, at the Venice Biennale after 1977 some alternative "imaginary USSR" was formed, which still exists today: progressive anti-capitalist art, a victim of the official regime, created by artists dissidents "heroic freedom fighters". Despite the Cold War, Western culture needed a Soviet component.

With the loss of the USSR and the opening of its borders, the former Soviet republics experienced the trauma of contextualization. A new generation of young artists, those who came to the art scene in the early 90s, shared this drama with their countries. Performances, installations and other gestures of this circle became the only artistic fact of contemporary post-Soviet culture, in which the relationship between man and power, economic disaster and the ambition of a new national ideology were reflexive.

In the post-Soviet pavilions of the Venice Biennale, new images of national unity are images of trauma and suffering. This aesthetic instrumentalization was mainly for commercial or political purposes, reflecting the transition from a people - hero and victor, to a people - victim. The curators representing states, following the policies of representing of the international avant-garde, no longer turn to topics that represent the success of social struggle. On the contrary, post-Soviet projects are designed to emphasize the identity of the victims of oppression, whether political, ethnic, religious or sexual. This change is often seen as an exemption from the ideological restrictions imposed by the Soviet regime on artistic creativity, and as an opportunity for artists to finally express their feelings freely. This is often true, especially in the context of projects "full of self-destructive mythology". that gives access to individual, very sensitive memories. However, freedom of expression using a foreign lexicon can lead to opportunistic, impoverished art projects. In the race for adherence to Western values, it is easy to fall into nationalist pathos and ethnicization, which leads to a dangerous rejection of victim pluralism by creating factional unity that justifies an even distribution of suffering. The same race explains the favour of projects and artists who meet the requirements of the victimized discourse of the art market.

Coming to the end and returning to the justification of scientific novelty, it should be noted that the dissertation for the first time described in detail and analyzed the new object of research for art history - the pavilions of the post-Soviet countries at the Venice Biennale. Its specific system of showing on the basis of national representations allowed to reveal the main problems of representation of the post-Soviet art on the international arena, connected with the appeal to aestheticization of suffering. At the institutional level, it is a problem of training and selection of participants by new private agents, among others, and mainly by the Soros contemporary art foundations on the one hand, and the commercial interest of the Biennale itself in sacrificial narratives on the other. At the iconographic level, it is a problem of competition between memories, orientalism and exoticism, and the controversial use of gender-related rhetoric. Finally, on the technical level, it is the problem of the medium, the artistic medium used for building a dialogue with the outside world, as well as the problem of the lack of permanent exhibition spaces and the resulting systemic problem of organizing the exhibition.