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A Field of Tension: The Genesis of Leningrad Nonconformist Art

(Part of the project “Between Avant-Garde and Nonconformism: Soviet Artists and Their Alternative Practice Between Thaw and Stagnation,” jointly conducted by the FSO at the University of Bremen and the Russian Art & Culture Reconsidered Group (RACR) at Constructor University, Bremen)

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My thesis is dedicated to the emergence of Leningrad nonconformist art in the late 1940s—early 1970s. I aim to answer the question of what it actually meant to be an independent artist at the time, when there was almost no social space for such activities and the function of unofficial art was unclear. Specifically, I will focus on Leningrad. The situation there is much less researched than the one in Moscow, and that focus will help me to point out aspects of and perspectives on nonconformist art that were not given proper attention in the previous scholarship.

Three major parts of the dissertation will be centered around the three sources of influence that shaped—or, rather, were used in shaping—Leningrad nonconformist art. Those three sources are the historical avant-garde, Western contemporary art, and classical art. Exploring these sources became a constitutional process in the development of the Leningrad unofficial artistic milieu.

The most crucial problem in the relationship between nonconformist art and the historical avant-garde art is inheritance/external influence. I argue that the avant-garde, especially in the case of Leningrad, was not only a source of artistic influence but also served as a social model. Becoming a nonconformist artist meant inventing one's social role from

scratch. In this respect, social and artistic models on which the individual could rely became a necessary foundation for the formation of nonconformism. Avant-garde and post-avant-garde circles in Leningrad served as such models.

The relationship between nonconformist art and contemporary Western art (and earlier modernism) centers on the problem of contemporaneity in art. Many nonconformist artists were convinced that they should make art that would reflect the life of the present and/or be in line with the latest developments in contemporary art. For unofficial artists, this became a matter of artistic identity because connecting themselves with movements and developments in Western contemporary art legitimized their existence outside of Socialist Realism with its ahistorical—hence not in line with contemporaneity—stance.

Classical art and its role in the self-legitimization of nonconformist artists are especially relevant when discussing the Leningrad art scene. The Hermitage Museum, with its great encyclopedic collections, played a crucial role in the emergence and development of nonconformist art in the city. However, the classics were understood and seen through the modernist lens, becoming a conceptual material for unofficial artists. This also allowed them to distance themselves from the official discourse on the history of art and, in a way, to reclaim it for themselves.

The main research questions I aim to answer are as follows: 1. What did it mean to be a nonconformist artist? In other words, on which social and artistic models did they draw to shape their own artistic identities? 2. What were the mechanisms of their (self)legitimation and the invention of their artistic strategies?

The institutional theory of art is the primary methodological framework that will help me to untangle the main conceptual point of my proposed research. By that, I mean not only the philosophical and aesthetic frameworks, established by Arthur Danto and George Dickie, but first and foremost the sociological interpretation of the concept of the art world by Howard S. Becker.

The sources for my research include archival materials from various institutions: the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa (FSO) at Bremen University, the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University (New Jersey) archive, and several private archives.

The most important source for my project is the art itself. Artwork from museums and private collections will play a significant role in my research. The main collections are at the Zimmerli Art Museum, New Jersey; Museum Ludwig, Köln; and Centre Georges-Pompidou,

Paris.