

Art, Politics and Exhibitions: (Re)writing the History of (Re)presentations

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This paper addresses the importance of a relatively new discourse within our discipline – the history of exhibitions – and its role in the post-Soviet context of the regional art history of the Baltic states. Presenting the cases of two exhibitions related to the Venice Biennial – *Printmaking Today* (1972 in *Ca' Pesaro*) and *New Art from the Soviet Union. An Unofficial Perspective* (in the framework of *The Biennial of Dissent*, 1977 in *Palazetto dello Sport*) – as well as the significant presences and absences in these politically charged – either originally or in retrospect – events, the author points out the need for contextualised studies of Soviet-period exhibitionary practices in order to indicate the power relations around representations and history-writing, as well as the rather intertwined nature of what have commonly been referred to as polar official and unofficial canons.

Thinking about the art history of the Soviet period in the Baltic countries, it is indispensable to broaden the context from local artistic realities to the wider scale of Soviet and Eastern European, as well as global, cultural and political developments of the time. While the Baltic art worlds can easily be seen and narrated as separate and individual phenomena, the central Soviet system, both in its official and unofficial forms¹, as well as the Western positions in relation to the art of the Eastern bloc, offer an important framework for the local histories and canons. Yet it is precisely this broader 'Soviet' quality of our past that our art histories have often quite painstakingly tended to block or even undo. In fact, the focus has often been on the 'Westernness' of the art of the Baltics, either in contrast with the official Soviet canon, which has often remained unmapped by the approaches, as if it were something completely alien, or by applying the borrowed phrase 'lost in translation' from the Western tradition. In research on the Soviet era and the Estonian avant-garde, the intertwined influence with the official discourses has often been pointed out, yet the official artistic practices have mostly

¹ I am using the terms 'unofficial' and 'official' here with full critical awareness of the ideological and contextual charge they represent in the context of the local art history. While the actual artistic reality, at least in the Baltic Soviet republics, was much less binary, the cases presented in this article address both of the concepts directly.

remained out of art historical focus as critical research subjects.² In this context, the focus on artistic representations, the issues of politics and power in relation to critical art geography of centres and margins, as Piotr Piotrowski has proposed³, can offer not only new perspectives for local art history writing, but also lead us to previously undetected memory fields of our discipline.

In recent years there have been several research initiatives in Europe with the aim of rewriting the art histories of the region, in terms of the aspect of representations. Some of these have also included Baltic art historians and/or reached the local audiences.⁴ Reflecting on the research for the *Invisible History of Exhibitions*, Dóra Hegyi and Zsuzsa László have pointed out that the competence to deal with the exhibitions and events of the 1950s–1980s period in Hungary had almost exclusively been assigned to the participants and witnesses of the very events, thus making academic and curatorial research or international comparisons hardly realisable.⁵ Due to the ephemeral nature of the subject, this ‘generational’ privilege of access to knowledge may seem almost inevitable, especially in the case of more experimental, secret or unofficial practices that often tend to be quite poorly documented and not covered by contemporary criticism. However, the official exhibition practices are also almost as difficult to retrace, as the art critical and archival focus of the time used to be different: an analytical approach towards exhibition practice was simply not considered. In order to avoid writing the history of our avant-gardes as personal memoirs over and over again, it would be helpful to turn to methodologies offering broader, contextual viewpoints, as well as looking further, both geographically and in terms of discipline, critically considering the art historical blanks created both by the official memory of the Soviet art world and by the romantic avant-garde ‘revolutionaries’.

The history of exhibitions and its possible methods

One of the relatively new approaches that has become quite popular in the art historical discourse recently is the history of exhibitions. The development of curatorial studies and the profession of curatorship in the second half of the twentieth century, with growing academic programmes on curatorial practice, have played a crucial role in the formation of this field of research. The focus on exhibitions as a widespread subject matter for art historical research dates back to the 1990s. One of the crucial volumes

2 Andres Kurg has elaborated on this problem in A. Kurg, *Feedback Environment: Rethinking Art and Design Practices in Tallinn During the Early 1970s*. – *Kunsteiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 2011, vol. 20 (1/2), pp. 26–50.

3 P. Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*. London: Reaktion Books, 2009, p. 25.

4 For example, the *Invisible History of Exhibitions* initiated by tranzit.hu, including the exhibition *Parallel Chronologies* (Budapest, 2009; Karlsruhe, 2010; Riga, 2011) and *Transnational Perspectives on Women’s Art, Feminism and Curating*, with a symposium in Tallinn under the title *Common Differences: Issues for Feminist Curating in Post-Socialist Europe*. The project *Archives in Translation* (2007–2008), by the Art Museum of Estonia in the framework of the EIPCP EU Translate cooperation programme, also tackled the issue with four archival exhibitions on seminal art events of the 1950s–1970s. In summer 2012 the reader *Recuperating the Invisible Past* was published by the Latvian Center for Contemporary Art.

5 D. Hegyi, Z. László, *The Invisible History of Exhibitions – Parallel Chronologies*. – *Novine Galerije Nova / Gallery Nova Newspapers* 2009, vol. 19/20, pp. 6–9.

on the topic was the anthology *Thinking about Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, which proposed exhibitions as the focus of art history, being ‘the medium through which most art becomes visible today’, as the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art.⁶ The aim ‘to put exhibitions back onto art history’s map’, considering them as critical subjects of research, has been greatly inspired and encouraged by the works of Bruce Altshuler, one of the pioneers on the subject in recent art history.⁷ Altshuler sees exhibitions not as fundamental entities in terms of which art history should be presented, but as contextual elements providing a particularly useful framework within which to construct explanatory accounts, and structures of a more general art historical understanding.⁸ The focus on exhibitions should be therefore seen as a method or, in fact, as a complex of methods, not just a subject.

The contextualising framework provided by the history of exhibitions seems to also be a particularly productive one for research on Soviet-period art life. Exhibitions combine different agents, objects, institutions and conditions, such as economic development, political reality and social formations, with the system of artistic practices. The study of exhibition history involves the study of the ‘nodes’ in this network, the interlocking elements of art, power, politics, individual positions and histories, geographies, space, architecture etc. Altshuler has expressed his concern about artists gradually losing control over the display of their work with the increasing institutionalisation of the art world.⁹ One can argue, especially with the Soviet experience in mind,¹⁰ that artists have never actually had that control, at least not total control: there have always been a multitude of different players and canons involved. In the case of exhibition studies, it is crucial to focus on as many different directions of research as possible, including (individual) artists, looking at artworks and their authors in relation to how they function within a particular exhibition system. This approach is quite far from the ‘traditional’ art history’s exclusive focus on artists and their practice, without shifting the focus away from the broader exhibition practice of the time or the social relations around the art world.

The Swiss art historian Professor Beat Wyss has proposed comparative art history as a method for researching exhibitions, in the particular case of the Swiss Institute for Art Research’s project *The Venice Biennale and the Structures of Art Sector*, focusing on

6 Introduction. – *Thinking about Exhibitions*. Eds. R. Greenberg, B. Ferguson, S. Nairne. London, New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 1–3.

7 Bruce Altshuler is the director of the Program in Museum Studies at New York University and has written extensively on exhibition history and contemporary art. He is the author of *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the Twentieth Century* (1994), *Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions That Made Art History*, Vol. 1: 1863–1959 (2008) and the editor of *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art* (2005).

8 B. Altshuler, *Exhibition History and the Biennale*. – *Starting from Venice: Studies on the Biennale*. Ed. C. Ricci. Milan: Et al., 2010, pp. 17–27.

9 B. Altshuler, *Exhibition History and the Biennale*, p. 26.

10 In the Soviet art system, artistic freedom, control over displays and – in some cases – even the possibility of exhibiting in public art exhibitions at all were not aspects artists could decide on themselves. Soviet exhibition practices were quite hierarchical, ideological and severely controlled by the different administrative and ideological powers. Most exhibitions were organised in a pre-reviewed format, where not only inclusion or exclusion was decided, but also artistic and/or ideological advice (e.g. regarding titles) was given; the artist’s formal membership, i.e. official inclusion, played an important role in selections etc. Even if the more experimental and avant-garde practices managed to circumvent the most central rules of the official art world, control and agency in the process of exhibition-making was still strongly defined by the more or less ideological barriers.

national pavilions of the Venice Biennial, and highlighting the specific context of local artistic practices in each individual case. The study group applies the common modular structure provided by the specific constitutional elements of Biennial exhibitions to each case study and thus creates a comparative database within a defined context.¹¹ According to Wyss, comparative art history stands in opposition to the dominance of Western cultural centres by abolishing judgemental hierarchies and highlighting the specific modes of local and regional art reception and production.¹² Wyss is building here on the method of horizontality of art history inspired by Piotr Piotrowski's approach. The contextual and comparative reading of exhibitions, making broader artistic, social, cultural and political aspects its main analytical framework, allows for the analysis of both unity and diversity and can be applied to case studies of very different backgrounds simultaneously – including the seemingly opposite Soviet-era avant-garde exceptions and the official exhibition formats of that era.

Another research project – *Invisible History of Exhibitions* initiated by tranzit.hu – concentrating on Eastern Central European (and in the later phase also Baltic) exhibition practices of the Cold War period, proposed in one of its sections, 'How Art Becomes Public', a method of combining chronology, case studies and the mapping of art historical blind spots and legends by interviews and polls. The Hungarian art historians Hegyi and László have addressed chronology (and parallel chronologies) as an important contextualising method of mediating art events of a past epoch in a balanced and critical way.¹³ Although seemingly too obvious, it is relevant to stress the importance of chronology here, helping to transform individual events into historical narratives (and canons, for that matter), especially in the case of the relatively parallel realities of Soviet 'official' and 'unofficial' art, to create time-lines that help not only to contextualise local histories, but also to put them into a broader regional or global framework. Combining critical chronologies with thorough case studies, interviews and polls of art circles (of today), the blank spots, as well as over emphasised events in specific histories, are more easily mapped.

The question of representation, which is very strongly related to the idea of the exhibition, is of course a question of power and politics. This is obvious, especially if we think about the Soviet period and the context of oppression (quite inevitably for the local reality at least, this specification is ideologically charged). However, by thinking about exhibitions as 'just' artistic entities, the question of power is often blurred. As Beat Wyss has pointed out in the case of the Venice Biennial, the most seminal questions in terms of exhibition histories are not only who and what was shown, but also what was not shown and why it was not shown.¹⁴ Again, in the Soviet Baltic context, the temptation to limit this account to the officially unrecognised avant-gardists and their (relative) persecution by the system, or their singularity within the art world

11 A. Hossain, K. Bódi, D. Ghiu, *Layers of Exhibition. The Venice Biennale and Comparative Art Historical Writing*. – *kunsttexte.de*, Ostblick 2011, no. 2, <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/kunsttexte/2011-2/bodi-kinga-5/PDF/bodi.pdf> (accessed 22 April 2012).

12 B. Wyss, J. Scheller, *Comparative Art History: The Biennale Principle*. – Starting from Venice, pp. 50–61.

13 D. Hegyi, Z. László, *The Invisible History of Exhibitions – Parallel Chronologies*, p. 7.

14 B. Wyss, J. Scheller, *Comparative Art History*, p. 60.

for that matter, can lead to repeating the existing legends¹⁵, whilst questioning our understanding of the artistic system of the time in general, and looking at the exhibition system as a whole, might prove to be much more productive.

The history of artistic representations in the (former) Eastern Europe is in the process of being rewritten. Not much is available on the subject yet; however, the efforts within the past five years (and prior, considering several re-visitations of 1970s shows by the participating artists themselves)¹⁶ to bring the exhibition history, either consciously or intuitively, into the art historical discussion, have already been remarkable. In order to add to the universal histories of the (former) West, a lot still needs to be done to map the parallels of the Baltic countries, the former Soviet empire and Eastern Europe in general. As an example of the multitude of political, social and geographical references springing from a single exhibition account, I would like to rather briefly introduce a case study (and a half) that has departed from a very simplistic attempt to throw light on some Estonian artists' 'legendary' participation in the Venice Biennial in the 1970s.

Example: the Venice Biennial

The Venice Biennial is one of the most obvious examples that comes to mind when speaking of power, politics and exhibitions in the context of the global art world: the structure based on national representations provokes these allusions on both ends. For Baltic art histories, there is seemingly little to talk about, as our countries entered the world's oldest art biennial officially only at the end of the 1990s. However, looking at the Biennial with a focus 'outside' our immediate local histories and official national representations, by mapping the indirect connections and exceptions to the rules, the blank spots of our histories start to fill with quite interesting connections, of both significant presences and absences.

There has been no research done so far on (at least) Estonian artists' participations in official Soviet pavilions after World War II¹⁷, not to mention the issue of our artists'

15 I am referring here to the fact that much of the art history of the Soviet period, at least in the Estonian case, has been remembered and written by the direct active agents of the era. Not underestimating the role of the memoirs in the practice of history-writing, nor denying the professional and critical approach of many of the well-informed participants, these accounts have been rather biased and (self-)centered, mainly in regard to the undoubtedly important avant-garde groups. The need to also focus on case studies that might have been left out of current histories, as well as on the more traditional official art system, which for quite understandable reasons (both generational and ideological) has much less eager witnesses, has become more and more urgent over time.

16 The most active artistic group in the Estonian context to knowingly reconstruct their history and important exhibitions of their involvement is ANK '64, the quite informal collective of visual art students from the mid-1960s. The group's retrospective exhibitions and the historical concern date back to the 1970s, when the group's first exhibition's decennial was marked with a new public project. In 1994 the Tallinn Art Hall organised another celebratory show and, more recently, the legendary unofficial exhibition *Saku '73*, which included several members of ANK, was revisited in 2008 in a gallery exhibition in the TAM gallery in Tallinn.

Mari Laanemets has thoroughly and contextually addressed the other legendary exhibition of the time, *Event Harku '75. Objects, Concepts*, and its organising artists' positions in: M. Laanemets, *Kunsti kunsti vastu. Kunstniku rolli ja positsiooni ümbermõtestamise katseid eesti kunstis 1970. aastatel / Art Against Art. Rethinking the Role and Position of the Artist in Estonian Art in the 1970s.* – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 2011, vol. 20 (1/2), pp. 59–91.

17 In the post-World War II period, the Soviet Union participated in the Venice Biennial from 1956 onwards, presenting surveys of the works of Academy of Arts of the USSR members. The pavilion was suspended for a couple of biennials, beginning in 1978. At least on a couple of occasions, the Estonian print-maker and painter Evald Okas was also among the selected official artists, according to the general catalogues.

visits to Venice as part of the Soviet Academy of Arts's tourist groups – experiences that also left their mark on local artistic production¹⁸. Still, the Venice Biennial has played an important role as an almost mythical errand for some artists' self-reflection in search of international recognition beyond the Iron Curtain (and for the recognition of that international success in the home country as well, for that matter).¹⁹ In this context, the 1972 satellite exhibition of the Venice Biennial, with the title *Grafica d'oggi / Printmaking Today*, which focused on international developments in graphic arts, is almost legendary in the Estonian art historical narrative (remembered by the immediate participants mainly). The less recognised artists during the Soviet time (Raul Meel being the best-known for rather personal, yet very detailed memoirs)²⁰ celebrate the account with more devotion, and stress the aspect of the 'unofficiality' of that particular participation, while others, officially recognised (Soviet) Estonian printmakers, barely mention the case unless specifically asked about it.

In the summer of 1972, the exhibition *Printmaking Today* was held in Ca' Pesaro (the International Gallery of Modern Art) as a satellite to the main, 36th Venice Biennial. The artists from Soviet Estonia, Herald Eelma, Concordia Klar, Raul Meel, Marju Mutsu, Evi Tihemets, Vello Vinn and Tõnis Vint, formed – completely unofficially as far as the Soviet Union was concerned – the 'official' display of the USSR, as the exhibition was organised into national representations, like the Biennial itself.²¹ The artists had been selected by a committee of critics and curators, led by Mario Penelope, Commissioner for Fine Arts of the Biennial. The aim of the exhibition was to offer an international survey of an artistic medium that was enjoying relative popularity at the time and that was considered remarkably contemporary and democratic by the organisers. No political or social relevance was attributed to the exhibition, either by the organisers or in its reception. Invitations to participate had been sent, amongst others, to thirteen artists in the USSR: six artists through the central artists' association in Moscow and seven directly to private addresses in Tallinn – authors already known to the experts from other international events, such as the Krakow and Ljubljana print triennials.²² The seven Estonian artists who had received invitations at their home addresses in Tallinn sent some of their recent prints to Venice as requested by the organisers; the invitations sent to Moscow probably never made it past the authorities.²³

The seven artists represented no particular group either artistically or generationally, and included people who had once been part of the severe style, artists with influences of pop art, or rather conceptual abstractionist approaches, as well as more

18 Evald Okas, *At an Art Exhibition* (1962). Paper, etching. Art Museum of Estonia.

Alo Hoidre, *In the Venice Biennial* (1964). Paper, lithography. Art Museum of Estonia.

19 The Estonian artist Raul Meel's presentation in 1997 at the Tartu Art Museum's seminar on 1970s Estonian art should be considered as an example here: R. Meel, *Minule tähtsatest koordinaatidest / Coordinates that Matter to Me. – Rujaline roostevaba maailm / Rocking Rustfree World in the Estonian Art of the 70s*. Tartu: Tartu Kunstmuuseum, 1998.

20 R. Meel, Meel: Minevikukonspekt [Conspectus of the past]. Tallinn: Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2002, pp. 87–94.

21 *Grafica d'oggi*: Museo d'Arte Moderna Ca' Pesaro, 11 giugno – 1 ottobre 1972. Eds. F. Brook, L. Crippa, A. Emiliani, M. Penelope, M. Reggiani. Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1972, p. 317.

22 The Estonian print-makers were at the time quite actively (both officially and non-officially) participating in the international print triennials and biennials, with their works gaining significant professional recognition.

23 Documentation of the exhibition in the ASAC, archive of the Venice Biennial, Venice. Fondo Storico, busta AV 192, AV 194.

poetic and romantic positions. Apart from Raul Meel, all the other participating artists were members of the Soviet Estonian Artists' Association. The presented artworks, but more importantly the fact that the artists lacked hierarchical positions within the Soviet system, contrasted with the pavilion of the USSR in the Giardini; therefore, the 'adventure' could not be ignored by the state. The officially recognised artists among the group were punished with three-year travel and international exhibition bans, a surprisingly severe consequence for at least some of them, who had enjoyed rather frequent international trips through the Artists' Union system.²⁴ Some of the artists (Mutsu, Tihemets and Vint) also (could have) had some commercial success at the exhibition: urgent requests for more prints were sent out to Marju Mutsu in order to fulfil all the demands, but these probably never reached her. In these cases, exhibition copies were sold, but the artists never received their share, quite understandably. The Venice Biennial sales office closed for good right after the 1972 biennial (after having been severely criticised since the 1968 student protests) and the Biennial itself underwent radical institutional changes during the following years. The almost heroic legend of Estonians participating in the Venice Biennial via mail was long secretly celebrated by local art world insiders, both as an element of praise for the Estonian printmaking traditions and (in some cases) as evidence of the individual artists' relative 'non-conformism'.²⁵

The Biennial of Dissent – a cultural festival of contradictions

While trying to establish the facts around the 1972 exhibition in Venice, I came across another case, an exhibition that has mostly been forgotten (especially in the Estonian tradition – as something with no direct relevance to our local reality), and that deserves an important place in the contextual history of Soviet art and its international reception. If *Printmaking Today* can be interpreted as an example of an unexpected significant presence of Estonian artists on the global scene, an 'error' in the universal

24 Interview with Evi Tihemets (22 February 2011). Interviewers: Kādi Talvoja and Liisa Kaljula. Video recording in the archives of the Art Museum of Estonia.

25 Raul Meel's accounts form the main source in this case. Based on his statements, several critics and historians have celebrated the fact, especially since the late 1990s, when the national participation in the Venice Biennial became an art political / art historical issue.

Tõnis Vint, the central figure in Tallinn's 'unofficial' art life and an important reference besides Meel, is claimed to have been the only one of the participating artists to have obtained the catalogue of the 1972 Venice exhibition (as remembered in Meel's autobiography: R. Meel, Meel: minevikukonspekt, pp. 87–94). In the recent catalogue of Tõnis Vint's work, in the section of the artist's biographical data, the photographs of the Venice exhibition (photographed by the Finnish art historian Juhani Rautio and sent to participating Estonian friends) from the artist's archives are published. It is quite telling that here the exhibition is presented as 'the exhibition of unofficial Soviet art' (Tõnis Vint ja tema esteetiline universum / Tõnis Vint and his Aesthetic Universe. Ed. E. Taidre. Tallinn: Art Museum of Estonia, 2012, p. 337). Also, Raul Meel has used this specific expression in some of his official CVs, while the more 'official' artists in the group refer to it as the 'printmaking exhibition of the 36th Venice Biennial'. See for example Evi Tihemets's biography <http://www.haus.ee/?s=maaler&kid=221> (accessed 19 November 2012) and that of Raul Meel http://www.vaal.ee/est/galerii/naitus/cv/one/article_id-80 (accessed 19 November 2012). I would like to thank Elnara Taidre for pointing this detail out to me.

system (if considered from the traditional 'provincial' position at least), the Venetian exhibition five years later instead serves as an example of a declarative absence.²⁶

The Biennial of Dissent was organised by the Venice Biennial in 1977 as a special event in the institution's then vast and activist continuing programme, scheduled to be held every odd-numbered year. The cross-disciplinary festival concentrated on the Eastern European cultural 'underground', the dissident movement and unofficial culture(s), from cinema and literature to music, theatre, religion and science, the visual arts being represented by two major exhibitions: *Czechoslovak Printmaking* and *La nuova arte Sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale / New Art from the Soviet Union. An Unofficial Perspective*. The latter may have been the largest of the exhibitions of unofficial Soviet art organised in the West at the time.²⁷

Analysing the *Biennial of Dissent* and its central art exhibition *La nuova arte Sovietica*, several parallel thematic threads emerge. First of all, there is the notion of 'dissent', its political charge and function, as well as its historical role at the time. There is also the local political context of the event and its organisers, their ideological aims and personal ambitions. And there is the context of the Western reception of Soviet unofficial art, the art historical 'branding' of the nonconformists, with several different interest groups and agents. In the 1970s the unofficial culture of the Soviet Union was quite well known in the West: the histories of dissident thinkers, the work of unofficial writers and artists, and non-conformism as a social phenomenon were quite common cultural facts of the Cold War era, which the Western media covered rather regularly.²⁸ After the 1975 Helsinki Treaty declared that the basic human rights of Soviet citizens should be respected, both a wave of artists emigrating from the Soviet Union and a new wave of their Western exhibitions emerged.²⁹ 'Non-conformism' and 'dissent' also became well known brands for the international art world of the time.

Besides the role of the question of dissent in the East-West political axis, it is important to consider the role of this topic for the internal affairs of different (European) countries. Although information about the Soviet regime's oppression of basic human rights spread, the reactions in the West were varied. For some left-wing politicians

26 The exclusion addressed in this context is symbolic; technically an Estonian artist – Ülo Sooster, a legendary member of the Moscow underground – was part of the exhibition *La nuova arte Sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale. Sooster (1924–1970)*, born and educated in Estonia, lived and worked mainly in Moscow after being released from a Soviet prison camp in 1956. He became one of the central figures of Moscow's artistic underground and is considered to be one of the most influential Estonian artists of the period.

27 I am personally revisiting this topic in my research here, since I previously curated the exhibition *Arhiivid tõlkes. Dissidentluse biennial '77 / Archives in Translation. Biennial of Dissent '77* in the Kumu Art Museum in 2007, in the framework of EIPCP Translate, proposing more general discussions on the issues of dissident culture and representations of unofficial practices in Venice through archival and more associative materials, contextual time-lines and artworks of the time.

28 Mostly, individual cases of dissidents were presented, starting with Ernst Neizvestny, Andrei Amalrik and Alexander Galich, as well as the civil rights movement, with Andrei Sakharov as its leading figure. The Western media covered the Soviet artistic underground's life, at least the most dramatic incidents, such as the *Bulldozer Exhibition* in 1974 and similar events. Accounts of dissidents allowed to leave the USSR, and their arrivals in the West, were regular beginning in the mid-1970s. I am referring here to a personal research project through the online archives of the *New York Times*, Italian newspapers of different backgrounds and a variety of magazines of the period. Of course, the statement here is a strong generalisation, as no thorough media overview of the unofficial Soviet culture's representations in the West are currently available.

29 The best source book for mapping the 'unofficial' artists' exhibition activities, both in the USSR and in the West, as well as their emigration data, is the archival publication *Another Art. Moscow 1956–1988* (Другое искусство. Москва 1956–1988. Moscow: Галарт, 2005).

(mostly communists with tight connections to the USSR), at first the dissidents represented ideological error, political opportunism and a lack of professionalism, rather than a serious social phenomenon.³⁰ The unofficial culture of the Soviet bloc inevitably also became a political argument in the inner political discussions of several European countries, especially Italy, where by the second half of the 1970s the Communist Party (PCI – *Partito Comunista Italiano*), with its strong Euro-communist strategy, had reached the second largest electoral presence in the country, and the more marginal Socialist Party (PSI – *Partito Socialista Italiano*) was attempting to offer a more centrist alternative to the dominant Christian Democrats and communists.

In terms of visual art, the second part of the 1970s can be considered a culmination of the ‘unofficial Soviet art’ discourse in the West. In 1977 alone there were major shows of alternative Soviet art in Paris, London, Washington and Venice, plus innumerable smaller and solo exhibitions in different countries. In the USA exhibition, as part of the Dodge collection, younger (pop and hyperrealist generation) Baltic artists were featured³¹, whereas the London ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts) and Paris Orangerie shows were intentionally based more on the ‘usual suspects’ from Alexander Glezer’s collection *Musée Russe en Exile*, mostly consisting of Moscow school classics.³² Exhibitions mediating art from behind the Iron Curtain had become part of the usual art life, just another novelty that was only partly politically engaged by some contextual accounts of their reception. The diplomatic balance of the Cold War era was fragile: any tiny event considered hostile could create tensions in the East-West international relations. Therefore, aesthetic aspects prevailed over political concern in most presentations. However, the ‘branding’ of the ‘unofficial art’ phenomenon in the West, which did tackle the thin line between political propagandism and cultural marketing, should be recognised as a Western strategy, in which some of the émigré artists and collectors also knowingly participated. The three major survey exhibitions definitely played a role in this process.

One of the few cases of the cultural representations of dissent in which political considerations were strongly emphasised was indeed the festival in Venice. The *Biennial of Dissent* was part of the new, politically engaged format of cross-disciplinary ambition, introduced by the Biennial director Carlo Ripa di Meana in response to traditional objectifying and market-oriented exhibitions much criticised by the new generations during the student riots in 1968. Ripa di Meana, an Italian Socialist Party member in charge of the Biennial beginning in 1972, proposed an active social-cultural institution that not only organised art exhibitions and film festivals, but also responded intellectually to what was going on in the world at large. Ripa di Meana’s presidency was quite crucial in the history of the Venice Biennial, changing the institution permanently,

30 The discussions were extremely heated, for example, on the pages of the Italian communist newspaper *l’Unità*, where such political activists and/or cultural figures as Giulio Carlo Argan (mayor of Rome 1976–1979), Antonello Trombadori, Renato Guttuso and several others discussed the problematic concept of ‘dissident’ (art) as a political mistake. See also A. Cossutta, *Dissenso e unità: il dibattito politico nel PCI dal XVI al XVII congresso*. Milan: Teti Editore, 1986.

31 N. T. Dodge, A. Hilton, *New Art from the Soviet Union: The Known and the Unknown*. Washington: Acropolis Books, 1977.

32 Другое искусство, pp. 235–242; *Unofficial Art from the Soviet Union* by Igor Golomshtok and Alexander Glezer. Ed. M. Scammell. London: Secker & Warburg, 1977, p. [x].

by introducing thematically focused curatorial exhibitions as its central format. His socially engaged approach should not be viewed apart from the general context of Italian culture and history, where the mid-1970s, also known as the years of lead (*anni di piombo*), are considered to be the peak of social and cultural activism (along with terrorism and instability). Carlo Ripa di Meana himself has explained his reforms of the Biennial quite pragmatically: the previous spectacular and elitist institution was no longer conceivable, and a new format, targeting narrower yet more engaged audiences, was needed. His aim was to create discussion and participation, get audiences involved and gain public attention through this new activist approach.³³

The first new kind of event in the series was the biennial dedicated to Chile in 1974, criticising the role of the USA in the coup: a festival celebrating Chilean culture in the streets of Venice through public recitals and murals. The topic of the Eastern European dissident culture in 1977 was, in a way, a balancing act, after the inevitable diplomatic reaction from the US. However, Ripa di Meana was also personally engaged with the issue as a socialist politician.³⁴ The festival was organised under intense political and administrative pressure. In March 1977, after the press conference declaring the Venice Biennial's intention of organising a cultural festival on the topic of dissidence in the Eastern bloc, the ambassador of the USSR in Rome protested:

You intend that the principal Italian cultural festival, the 1977 Biennale in Venice, will be dedicated to dissent in Soviet and Eastern countries. Don't. Our relations are good, but if you pursue this idea of giving undue importance to 'dissent', we will lodge a strong protest. Eastern countries will join us. We consider this emphasis on dissent a provocation. It will not be good for you. We have so many reasons, do we not, including trade, to remain on friendly terms? Why injure them?³⁵

The Italian government responded by blocking the annual budget of the Biennial, a state cultural institution at the time. Severe criticism of the Biennial from the communist politicians in the opposition and leftist intellectuals from different cultural circles filled the newspapers for months. Finally, in June the budget and the programme were confirmed and preparations for the festival started immediately, postponing the events from the traditional summer period to the end of the year: the festival took place

33 E. Roddolo, *La Biennale: arte, polemiche, scandali e storie in Laguna*. Venice: Marsilio, 2003, pp. 106–108.

34 Having spent some time in Czechoslovakia as a student, Ripa di Meana (b. 1929) had good contacts with several colleagues in Eastern Europe, and through his political idol Bettino Craxi, a quite controversial figure in recent Italian history, at the time the new secretary-general of the PSI and a close friend of Ripa di Meana. In fact, the political in Ripa di Meana's case should not be separated from the private: in his memoirs of thirty years later, the events of 1977 are as detailed and bright as if they happened yesterday. The political struggle on the local level is combined with the appropriated role of a dissident, a liberal confronting both the totalitarian regime of the Soviet bloc and his own political opponents in Italy. The romanticised self-image of an emerging political activist (who soon became a member of the EU parliament), in an adventurous undertaking comparable to spy stories 007-style, can also be explained by the fact that at these very events of the 1977 Biennial he also first met his future wife Marina. Ripa di Meana has remained the most active voice remembering the Biennial of Dissent as an event of (his personal) cultural political activism, one of the first steps in the dissolution of the Soviet bloc in his view. He has recently published memoirs on the matter: C. Ripa di Meana, G. Mecucci, *L'ordine di Mosca: fermate la Biennale del Dissenso. Una storia mai raccontata*. Rome: Liberal, 2007.

35 Quoted from: F. Colombo, *Italy: The Politics of Culture*. – *The New York Review of Books* 1977, vol. 24 (12) – <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1977/jul/14/italy-the-politics-of-culture/> (accessed 21 November 2012).

from 15 November to 15 December. The USSR maintained its menacing stance: correspondence with intellectuals living in the Eastern bloc was blocked, and letters and invitations were returned. Publishers and distributors were prevented from sharing the rights, scores and films requested by the festival. However, numerous émigré artists, writers, musicians and intellectuals, as well as several Western European thinkers and theoreticians, slavophiles and Sovietologists, were present at the events. Within thirty-one chilly autumn days there were seven different conferences, three exhibitions, and an endless list of concerts, recitals, film screenings, debates and seminars in Venice. The events attracted 220 000 visitors and included 350 participants from 24 different countries.³⁶ In the opening symposium of the Biennial, an address by Andrei Sakharov, recorded especially for the occasion in Moscow in extreme secrecy, was presented. The Nobel laureate expressed not only the importance of freedom of speech and thought, but also the need to fight the anti-intellectualism and the cultural isolation of the Eastern European countries, praising the enterprise in Venice for its efforts.

The controversial nature of the 1977 Biennial is best understood by considering two personalities: the charismatic and dynamic president of the Biennial, Ripa di Meana, and the experienced curator, art historian and professor Enrico Crispolti. Both contributed their best efforts to realising the festival, yet ideologically they can be seen as almost opposites: an ambitious socialist politician, and a devoted academician close to communist circles, although with a very individual and determined attitude. Enrico Crispolti – already a veteran curator of Eastern European art³⁷ – was invited, together with the scholar Gabriella Moncada, to curate an art exhibition for the festival. He was appointed by Ripa di Meana due to his prior active involvement in the Biennial, having curated the socially engaged and experimental Italian section *Ambiente come sociale* of the 1976 exhibition. The clear opposition between the two men can also be noted by analysing their own recollections: Crispolti later expressed his skepticism about Ripa di Meana's motives and ways of doing things³⁸, and Ripa di Meana completely left the role of Crispolti and his team, as well as their exhibitions, out of his memoirs, concentrating exclusively on the political context, with art (and other cultural activities of the Biennial, for that matter) being given only an auxiliary role³⁹. The curators, both slightly critical of the political nature of the proposed subject (the art of dissent), and facing enormous practical difficulties in realising their comprehensive concept due to the politically engaged topic, finally managed to put together an exhibition that, without doubt, was the largest and most complex of the kind at that time.

36 Il dissenso culturale. – La Biennale di Venezia. Annuario 1978: eventi del 1976–1977. A cura dell'archivio storico delle arti contemporanee. Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1979, p. 529.

37 Crispolti had collaborated with artists from the USSR, Poland, Hungary and the Czechoslovakian Republic on several occasions, first in 1965 for the exhibition *Alternative Attuali 2* in LAquila.

38 Conversation with Enrico Crispolti (23 June 2007). Video recording in the possession of the interviewer, Maria-Kristiina Soomre. See also a short excerpt here: <http://www.kumu.ee/images/dokumendid/naitused/2007/enrico-crispolti.pdf> (accessed 21 November 2012).

39 On the occasion of thirty years passing from the events of the *Biennial of Dissent*, in 2007, Ripa di Meana gave several interviews and public presentations. Also, his memoirs were published on the occasion.

New art from the Soviet Union: representing the (seemingly) absent

The initial intent of the curators had been to include in the exhibition the vast reality of Eastern European art, both 'official' and 'unofficial'. By the time preparations for the exhibition had begun (a quite short period in today's institutional terms, as the more intensive correspondence with artists, collectors and connoisseurs started only in August, just three months before the opening), it was clear that no cultural exchange with the USSR or Czechoslovakia was possible and the only realistic alternative was to approach Western collections. The issue was not clear in the case of Hungary and Poland; in fact, Crispolti made a desperate last minute trip to these countries, which turned out to be futile due to the official circles' passivity.⁴⁰ Even if there had been any interest in cooperating, the official opposition in the two countries was well orchestrated and strict: the festival was actively combated in the Soviet bloc propaganda press and through diplomatic circles. In his catalogue introduction, Crispolti described his search for a dialogue with the Soviet art bureaucracy, and his sincere belief in the positive cultural dialectics which the open selection of artists would have permitted.⁴¹ In the context of Cold War *Realpolitik*, these claims were more than unrealistic and were probably meant to function on the local level, as discussion points with communist comrades and critics.

In the end, the exhibition, including artworks and photographic documentation exclusively drawn from Western private and institutional collections, as well as from émigré artists directly, mapped two generations of 'officially' unofficial art and its diverse artistic languages throughout two decades in a systematically conceived presentation. In this generational division, Crispolti was probably drawing on Golomshtok's, Glezer's and Scammell's ICA catalogue, as a quite similar approach also emerged there. Works (and reproductions) by around hundred artists were exhibited in seven sections of the exhibition, which offered an art historical division based on stylistic, formal and substantive artwork elements, an interesting approach. The sections of the exhibition were: 'Expressionist and Lyric Figuration', 'Gesture, Matter and Image', 'Post-constructive and Organic Abstraction', 'Kineticism. The *Dvizhenie* Group', 'Surreal Figuration', 'Irony and the Everyday', and 'Conceptual Mediation, Actions and Happenings'. In addition, documentations on slides were added to the exposition, covering, besides the extensions of artistic divisions, the Soviet official pavilions in Venice, clippings of Western reception of Soviet unofficial art, examples of the art of the Russian avant-garde and photographic documentation on the conditions of practice of the artists in the USSR.⁴² The thematic division proposed by the curators was deliberately subjective, put together with a 'Western view', mapping parallel realities and directions in Soviet art, and consciously concentrating on the artistic centres of Moscow and Leningrad (mainly due to the availability of the artworks). The aim of the exhibition was to present as many different artistic positions as possible, and to stress their differences from the Western avant-gardes, while not denying their possible

40 La nuova arte sovietica: una prospettiva non ufficiale. Eds. E. Crispolti, G. Moncada. Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, Marsilio, 1977, pp. 13–14.

41 E. Crispolti, Una mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica. – La nuova arte sovietica, pp. 11–20.

42 La nuova arte sovietica, pp. 216–238.

influences. Crispolti stated the importance of presenting artists whom – in some cases – the Western professional circles had recognised since the mid-1960s but the Soviet authorities still denied official recognition.⁴³ The Venice exhibition thus opposed itself both to the official cultural politics of the USSR, which belittled innovative and alternative art, and to local Italian artistic circles, which defined the phenomenon as provincial.

The task of addressing both the few ‘insiders’ – collectors and scholars – and the much less informed general public was not easy for the curators. Their approach in the quite well-branded *Biennial of Dissent* seemed quite clear and well balanced. However, some of the local critics of the exhibition, could not get past the ‘Soviet’ label of the artworks; the relative cluelessness somehow contrasted with the promise of the ‘new’ in the exhibition title for some of the more critical audiences. The question of the unofficial art’s detachment from its social context, and the pure aesthetic positions of most of the exhibited artists caused misunderstanding and harsh criticism among the more politically minded Italian audience and professionals. The curator’s aim of keeping the representation apolitical was seen as cowardly, and the art represented as unprofessional.⁴⁴ Crispolti and Moncada stressed the necessity of acknowledging the distanced position of both the curators and critics, as well as recognising the desperate search for a dialogue with the Western tradition by the Soviet artists.⁴⁵ Acting as a middleman, Crispolti tried to reconcile Western leftist criticism of the ‘dissent’ positions with the apolitical nature of the art presented, reminding Western viewers of the specific conditions this art was created in, thus ensuring a slightly different and separate communicative system. Both in his writings (the catalogue, the exhibition booklet and in some writings connected with public discussions he participated in) and in the exhibition structure, Crispolti and his team expressed the singularity and complexity of the exhibited material. He also stressed the inevitable ‘escapist’ nature of Soviet underground art, although not in a judgemental manner.⁴⁶ As a leftist intellectual himself, in the Italian context Crispolti definitely had to take a more decisive position on the question of ‘dissent’ than his British or American colleagues. While all the exhibitions at the time preferred the politically neutral term ‘unofficial’ or ‘new’ Soviet art, arguing the very diverse background of the artists as their main motivation, the actual ideological argumentation of the issue was best captured in Crispolti’s catalogue essay. Defending the politicised context of the exhibition and the *Biennial* as a whole, Crispolti argued that, as long as the political positions were balanced and equally alert to the dangers in Western society, including the fragile harmony between culture and politics, celebrating artistic freedom as an ultimate virtue against any mercantile attempts, the political context for the art could be seen as a fruitful addition.⁴⁷

The exhibition *New Art from the Soviet Union: An Unofficial Perspective* took place in the historical Arsenale area of Venice in a newly built concrete sports hall that had not yet been put to its intended use. The layout of the show was modern, sober and airy,

43 E. Crispolti, *Una mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica*, p. 17.

44 D. Micacchi, *Novità e limiti dell’arte ‘non ufficiale’*. – *l’Unità* 16 November 1977.

45 *La nuova arte sovietica*, pp. 45–46.

46 E. Crispolti, *Una mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica*, p. 19.

47 E. Crispolti, *Una mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica*, p. 20.

and the divisions for different topics were created by light modular systems, providing a labyrinth-like structure appropriate for presenting parallel realities, rather than a hierarchical or linear narrative. Even though the 'alternative' venue was a practical choice resulting from several official art institutions' refusal to cooperate with the Biennial due to its controversial subject matter, the unusual location, a kind of non-place in the Venetian historical urban texture, a closed-in underground space, clearly helped to create a somewhat revealing environment for the art exhibited. In a way, the location also helped to 'undo' the otherwise too official or institutional (and thus even more political) nature of the exhibition (as opposed to if it had been held in the Palazzo Grassi)⁴⁸ and to help it to be accepted as an exception to rules in every sense.

Several émigré artists attended the opening events of the Biennial in person, among them Lev Nussberg, the founder of the *Dvizhenie* group, one of the central focuses of the Venice exhibition. Nussberg's own active involvement in the preparatory phase and his vast archive were clearly part of the reason for the group's important position in the exhibition. However, the kinetic artists' international career across the Iron Curtain, spanning over fifteen years by that time, could in any case not be ignored in such an explicit programme. Judging from the harsh reactions of some exile art experts (the collector Glezer in particular)⁴⁹, not everyone accepted the group's inclusion within the 'unofficial' narrative – mainly due to the fact that they had also received official commissions in the USSR, in the scientific and design context. The 'true' nature of 'new' Soviet art was beginning to be designed by the interested parties themselves, and relatively neutral foreign middlemen served little purpose in this process of branding and history-writing, which in some ways is still occurring.

An exhibition's afterlife

As a direct result of the cultural conflict created by the *Biennial of Dissent*, the Soviet Union boycotted the Venice Biennial in the following years: the most prestigious international artistic showcase was thus for a while denied not only to officially unrecognised artists, but also to the artistic 'nomenclature'. As a virtual bridge across the Iron Curtain, in November 1977 an apartment exhibition was held in Leningrad, curated by Marina Nedobrova, and supported by the photographer Valentin Samarin and the collector Georg Mihhailov at the private apartment of Vadim Nechaev, ambitiously titled *Museum of Contemporary Art*, as an immediate response to the Venice Biennial.⁵⁰ The organisers managed to inform their Western colleagues in Venice about this fact, becoming the only known positive resonance of the Biennial in the USSR. The Soviet press, especially the cultural weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, systematically slandered the Venetian initiative, publishing letters from Italian correspondents that stated the propagandistic nature of the whole festival and the poor content and form

48 In fact, Palazzo Grassi, a dominant palace on the Grand Canal and the property of the textile industry owner Vittorio Cini, which housed the international art and costume center and had become one of the central venues of changing exhibitions in town, was one of several institutions to refuse collaboration with the Biennial.

49 A. Glezer's letter to the President of the Venice Biennial (5 December 1977). ASAC, AV 268.

50 The note that arrived at the Biennial headquarters (16 November 1977). ASAC, AV 270, Varie.

of the exhibitions, trying to reduce public interest and negate any cultural impact of the event. In Soviet Estonia, the whole Biennial passed by rather unnoticed, despite the collection of quotes of propaganda articles from *Literaturnaya Gazeta* that were published in the local cultural weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* (*Hammer and Sickle*).⁵¹

The only indirect allusion to the Venetian events in the Estonian art historical recollections so far have been the somewhat muddled references by the artist Raul Meel of an encounter with the collector George Costakis in Moscow, when Costakis told him about the 'Biennial of 1974, concentrating on the conditions of artists working under communist regimes'.⁵² Meel claimed that, according to Costakis, the Biennial also might have represented photos and documents connected with Tõnis Vint's, Leonhard Lapin's and Raul Meel's problematic situation in the USSR, although Meel admitted never having seen any documents to prove this. Whether Costakis, who emigrated from the USSR in November 1977,⁵³ really shared his more or less direct knowledge of the Biennial with Meel, or whether this conversation took place in the context of the preparatory processes of the event as a theoretical possibility, has yet to be confirmed. Based on the exhibition catalogue and the remaining documents in the Biennial archives, the inclusion of Estonian artists' representations in the exhibition's sections is still rather unlikely.⁵⁴

The Venice Biennial exhibition *New Art from the Soviet Union: An Unofficial Perspective* has not entered the canon of 'unofficial' or 'new' Soviet art so far, although its broad concept and critical approach would make it a cornerstone in such a discourse. The linguistic and cultural isolation of the Italian artistic and historical context are only one part of this well-documented exhibition's exclusion from the histories of both global and, especially, local ex-Soviet art worlds. Although the art and artists exhibited in Venice (not to mention the festival's programme of such other fields as music, literature, theatre and cinema) were, in many cases, connected more with the realities of the 'West' than the 'East' by that time, in the highly representative and undoubtedly 'official' (regardless of the Soviet demonstrative boycott) context of the Venice Biennial, this exhibition can also be seen as the most comprehensive, yet neutral, artistically selfless attempt to 'officialise' the discourse of unofficial Soviet art. Compared to the other similar exhibitions of the same year⁵⁵, along with several strong similarities and parallels (especially in the artists' list, to a certain extent), the Venetian project clearly stands out for its comprehensive nature and original art historical ambition, still offering numerous threads for researching our common artistic past, the patrimony that is both nobody's and everyone's. The critical division and analysis of this artistic, as well as political and social historical, phenomenon by Crispolti and Moncada could

51 'Teisitimõtlemisseiklus' kanalite vahel [The dissent adventure between the canals]. – *Sirp ja Vasar* 23 December 1977.

52 R. Meel, *Minule tähtsatest koordinaatidest*, p. 26.

53 Другое искусство, p. 243.

54 In this context, the misinformation in both Tõnis Vint's and Raul Meel's official biographies, referring to the 1972 exhibition *Grafica d'oggi* as an overview of unofficial Soviet art, can be explained as an after-the-fact shifted interpretation of secondary reports, mixing facts and rumors.

55 *Unofficial Art from the Soviet Union* (ICA, London, 19 January – 27 February, 1977). *New Art from the Soviet Union: The Known and Unknown* (The Arts Club, Washington, 2 October – 20 October, 1977). *Art et matiere. Avec la participation des artistes russe contemporains* (Orangerie du Luxembourg, Paris) – Другое искусство, pp. 242–243.

also serve as a possible canon for future research to deal with, or at least add an important chapter to the history of Soviet era exhibition accounts. This is also true of the Estonian young printmakers' virtual adventure 'representing' the USSR clandestinely in the completely apolitical exhibition *Grafica d'oggi* in Venice 1972, another chapter in the history of Soviet-era artistic representations, one that should not be read outside of the often over-politicised context of post-Soviet art history.

As Beat Wyss has pointed out, the art biennials can be regarded as venues for continuous constitutions and reconstitutions of modernities: the (national) participation in the Venice Biennial structure can be regarded as a serious upgrade of (the country's) cultural identity, as a right to use and be part of the European canon.⁵⁶ This search for a 'civilising ritual' can also be traced in the case of national (as well as personal) art histories focusing on the fact of 'participation' in this global artistic arena. Also, in the case of the *Biennial of Dissent*, a critical postcolonial comment is essential on the Western hegemonic position appropriating forms of 'Otherness', the ever new differences and exceptions, however well-motivated and ethical. Exhibitions, the larger and more visible the better, are tools for not only making art visible, but for rooting an artistic phenomenon in history. Visibility is power and, as we know in the case of the Soviet regime, the control over this power has been rather strict. Thus representation inevitably has become an ideological issue. The aspect of power related to exhibitions is one we, art historians, acknowledge without doubt. It is still not our habit to look at exhibitions in order to see what else becomes visible in these complex and comprehensive contact zones, whether exceptions to the rules or errors in the system, or the contextual histories that an exhibition can reveal, besides its immediate artistic reality. The two cases briefly introduced in this paper witness the complexity of seemingly clear and polar constructions from our art historical framework, introducing new geographical, historical and political dimensions, as well as new agents to be better acquainted with in order to fill in the blanks in our histories of artistic representation.

56 B. Wyss, J. Scheller, *Comparative Art History*, pp. 55–57.