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## **COMPARATIVE ART PRACTICES IN DIVIDED EUROPE: EASTERN EUROPE GOING GLOBAL**

### **1 CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECT:**

My current research project is devoted to a cultural history of art practices in divided Cold War Europe. The comparative approach and inter-disciplinary structure is targeted at providing a polycentric perspective on the multilateral, intercultural and trans-ideological relations in the visual arts, in order to challenge traditional bi-polar narratives and perceptions. Cold War studies traditionally tend to emphasize dual narratives, mostly investigated as actions (or counteractions) that are dictated from above by State policies or as cultural relations in an international context. Starting from the bilateral art relations in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a topic that I have investigated during my past research stays in Italy, Russia and Germany, the present research aims to expand the field of investigation to a polycentric and inclusive European focus area.

This area includes the two German republics (intended as “Two States, one Nation”), Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Italy. This selection is due to my knowledge, at different levels, of all the national languages, cultures and art histories at stake. The languages involved also represent the three main linguistic groups in Europe (Romance, Germanic and Slavic). Historical criteria of selection include common experiences of these nations under interwar totalitarian regimes, which provide a further subject for a comparative approach to the visual discourse in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and their irrelevant colonial past (if compared to some West-European powers), which led their foreign cultural policies to focus on continental, European issues. As a result of the polarization that followed the Cold War, those countries underwent different schisms: a geo-political one (such as the occupation and division of Germany and the isolation of Yugoslavia from the two blocks as leader of the non-aligned movement), an inner political one (such as the political party landscape of Italy, marked by the tension between the Christian Democracy in power and the Communist Party), and a socio-cultural one (such as the confrontation between official and non-official Soviet cultures).

## **1.2 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK:**

Art practices are approached as “cultural encounters”, a term adopted to replace “discovery”, considered euro-centric and inappropriate, as stated by Peter Burke in his study *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge 2008). This happened in 1992, on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first voyage of Columbus to America, but also in coincidence with the collapse of Real socialism in Europe. In the art world this generated a boom of Biennials, which, following Venice as universal model, emerged everywhere, including former Cold War hotspots such as Berlin and Moscow. This rapid transition from a divided world to an allegedly reconciled “Global village” occurred with little consideration of the European dimension. How was it possible? Are the reasons to be found back in the previous history of divided Europe?

Future inquiries include the application and adaption in the art practice of key words from Cold War rhetoric, such as fascism/anti-fascism; resistance/collaborationism; communism/anti-communism; euro-communism/Yugo-communism up to dissent/consent; conformism/non conformism; and socialist realism/capitalist realism. I intend to investigate to what extent the different actors involved (artists, art critics, art historians, curators, diplomats, politicians, art dealers, gallerists, collectors) adapted - to their own advantage - their practice to such cultural policies and myths. A second issue regards the question whether the emigration to the West of artists and intellectuals from Socialist Europe enabled a two-way transfer of knowledge across Europe, and as a consequence an empirical knowledge of the “other” in the arts field.

A further field of survey is provided by the Exhibition studies, a discipline derived from the Art history: art shows and acquisitions, State prizes and critics’ awards are investigated as instruments of cultural diplomacy as well as individual and collective art practices. A second aspect regards the rehabilitation of European Modernism, from Degenerate Art in Germany up to historical avant-gardes in Eastern Europe, after decades of condemnation and oblivion, and to what extent it affected the “exhibitionary complex” (Tony Bennett).

The survey is intended to fill the existing gaps in the single area studies and to outline new perspectives through an extensive comparative and trans-cultural survey. This is fundamental in order to challenge out-dated research approaches, conventional narratives and boundaries of the cultural Cold War, which are based on bilateral histories between two juxtaposed art worlds and petrified in dual master-plots and anecdotes.

## **1.3 INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK:**

During my past position as a post-doc fellow at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (2011-2017), I have investigated art histories in divided Europe, focussing on the Western reception of Socialist art from Russia, the Soviet Union and Eastern-Europe, and communicated them to students at bachelor and master

levels as contract lecturer in History of Modern Art in Eastern Europe and History of Russian Art. As appointed Scientific secretary at the Centre of Studies of Russian Art (CSAR), I could gain experience in all the planning, production, communication and educational stages of exhibitions, conferences and workshops, as well as in the editorial redaction of books and catalogues. I could therefore benefit from a conjunction of theoretical underpinnings, knowledge of study cases and exhibitionary practice.

My current research project focussed on the cultural dimension of the Cold War has been recently awarded by the European Commission with a three-year Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Global Fellowship assigned to the project “GYSIART: a comparative cultural history of art practices and receptions in Cold War Europe (1945-1991)”. In 2018 and 2019 I will be hosted at the University of California Santa Barbara, Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies, with prof. Sven Spieker as tutor; in January-June 2020 at the Universität Hamburg, Department of History, with prof. Monica Ruethers; and finally, in July-December 2020 at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, with prof. Silvia Burini as supervisor.

## **2. SUMMARY OF MY STAY AT EEGA:**

In the period comprised between the end of my post-doc in Venice and the beginning of the Marie Curie Fellowship, I had the opportunity to be guest researcher at Leibniz Science Campus, Eastern Europe – Global Area (EEGA), and more specifically at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) in Leipzig. This fellowship brought several added values to my current research, providing me with the unique opportunity to implement methodology and skills in an international stimulating environment. The two-week project was supported by my principal point of contact at EEGA, Dr. Christine Gölz, (“Cultural Icons” – »the East« and »the Global«), in strong connection with the interests and tasks of the Research Area 4 “Cultural and Intellectual Perspectives and Identifications.

Already two years ago, in December 2015, I had a first chance to be guest lecturer at the Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) within the group project “Utopische Gemeinschaften” [Utopian Communities]. By that occasion I held the lecture *Schauplätze der Utopie: osteuropäische Pavillons auf der Biennale in Venedig* [Showcasing Utopia: East-European Pavilions at the Venice Biennale] and I could profit from helpful feedbacks by the audience, mostly composed by the academic staff of the Institute. I could also gain first knowledge on the main region of interest of the Institute, East-Central Europe, i. e. on the countries and cultures comprised between the two main areas of my previous research, Russian and German speaking countries.

During my recent stay at GWZO, I had the opportunity to enhance proficiency and gain expertise and resources related to this specific area. Through targeted researches in the Institute’s library, I could trace and record texts devoted to the visual culture of East-Central (the Visegrad Group) and South-

Eastern Europe. They represent a significant bibliographical integration to the literature that I have collected during my past research stays in libraries and archives located in Moscow, Berlin, Venice, Milan and Rome.

My stay at GWZO has been very productive also in terms of networking with researchers and fellows affiliated at the Institute. I could profit from a shared workstation with other international guest scholars, with whom I had a productive exchange of experience and opinions.

As foreseen in my application, I disseminated and communicated my research outputs in the three following occasions.

On November 15 I held at GWZO the lecture *Vom Wettkampf der Nationen zum globalen Dorf (und zurück?): Die Biennale von Venedig* [From the Contest of the Nations to the Global Village (and back?): The Venice Biennale]. The lecture was devoted to the history of the oldest and still running art exhibition, the Venice Biennale. Founded in 1895 as an international showcase of the artistic achievements of the "civilized world", the Venice Biennale experienced throughout its history different periods, mostly influenced by diplomatic and geopolitical circumstances. Through visual and archival material, I highlighted the Biennale's role as a privileged platform for international art encounters in 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, from the first exhibitions showcasing "the national character" (1895-1914) to the ideological confrontations in the interwar period (1920-1942) and during the Cold War (1948-1990) up to contemporary shows in a globalized world (1990-2017). The up-to-date global cult-status of the Venice institution is proven by the increasing number of countries asking for a national representation. In the present art landscape, dominated by several art biennales throughout the world, the Venice Biennale has to reinvent its own present and future, often looking back at its original *raison d'être* as a "contest of nations".

Through the lecture I highlighted the persistence of visual bias, clichés and common places rooted in the era of the world art fairs and expos from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and then reinforced through two World Wars and the Cold War. Such national and ideological stereotypes affected to great extent the visual reception of the "other" and, as a result, the transnational art history of the 20<sup>th</sup> up to the present day. A particular attention was given to the participating countries from East-Central Europe, to their cultural policy (such as the boycott of national pavilions as a diplomatic action), as well as to the strategies adopted by the related actors (curators, commissioners, artists, art critics and historians, politicians, diplomats).

The lecture was scheduled within the public oriented series *Mittwochsvorträge in Specks Hof* [Wednesday lectures in Specks Hof] in order to reach a wider audience. Consequently, most of the comments and questions by the GWZO staff and by public at large dealt with the state-of-the-art of the Venice Biennale today. I could respond also from my personal experience as assistant co-curator of the

Russian Pavilion at the recent Venice Biennale (which closed few days later, on November 26), thus providing concrete examples from the practice of so called “exhibition making”.

East-European art and culture at the Venice Biennale was the main topic of a second guest lecture, held a week later, on November 22, at the Otto-Friedrich-Universität in Bamberg. The lecture *“Eine inoffizielle Ausstellung neuer sowjetischer Kunst”*: *Die Biennale des Kulturdissens aus Osteuropa (Venedig, 1977)* [“An Unofficial Exhibition of New Soviet Art”: The Biennial of the Cultural Dissent from Eastern-Europe (Venice 1977)] was scheduled within the seminar *Regional – national – global. Die nationalen Pavillons und andere Beiträge der osteuropäischen Länder auf der 57. Biennale in Venedig 2017* [Regional – National – Global. National Pavilions and Other Contributions from East-European Countries at the 57. Venice Biennale], held by Prof. Dr. Ada Raev, Chair of Slavonic Art and Cultural History at the same university.

The lecture shed light on a crucial episode in the cultural relations between the Soviet Union and Italy, which can be regarded as a seminal study case in the East-West European art confrontations during the Cold War. The Venice Biennale, at that time headed by Socialist Carlo Ripa di Meana, announced in early 1977 the *Biennale del dissenso culturale*, devoted to different expressions of underground culture from numerous socialist countries. As a first reaction, the Soviet Embassy in Rome made pressure on both the Italian Government and the Communist Party, in order to prevent that event, perceived as an evident manifestation of anti-Soviet feelings. The actions and counter-actions undertaken from both sides (Biennale and Moscow) raised an unprecedented national debate and an international *affaire*, resulting in a huge publicity to the Biennale’s enterprise. The *Biennial of Cultural Dissent* was originally motivated by bare domestic political reasons. It fitted into the strategy adopted by the Socialist Party - to which Ripa di Meana belonged - to subvert the traditional balance of power within the Italian left, thus undermining the cultural and political supremacy of the Communist Party.

The lecture was focussed on the art program of the controversial Biennial, the group show *La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale* [The New Soviet Art. An Unofficial Perspective]. The exhibition opened the gates in the West to more selective shows of Soviet non-aligned art, and contributed to a richer critical approach within a trans-European dimension. It represented a platform for Soviet refugee artists, who now had the chance to submit their own artworks and to present them on place: a direct acquaintance with them contributed to debunk the Western myth of a united front of unofficial artists, and to discern the different positions and even revelries within.

The lecture was mostly attended by university students. Given the specific topic, a preliminary introduction was necessary, as well as a contextualization at the end of the talk. It was important to outline the historical significance of this event on the background of the growing interest in Europe towards Russian modern avant-garde and so called “Second” Russian avant-garde by Soviet underground

artists, as well as in the framework of counter-culture and dissidence discourse in Western Europe, most notably in Italy and West-Germany.

The lecture in Bamberg took place exactly forty years after the opening of the *Biennial of Cultural Dissent*: with this was (accidental) circumstance, we intended to stress the significance of anniversaries in defining the national narratives and cultural practices dictated from State authorities as national strategies of self-celebration and historical legitimation. This was particularly evident in October and November 2017, when many celebrations have been organized, at State-level as well as in the academic milieu, on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution.

The October Revolution had a ground-breaking impact on the arts and culture also outside Russian and Soviet borders: it laid the foundation for an international socialist art history, not only within the communist bloc, but also across the Iron Curtain, reaching a transnational, pre-global, dimension. Generated as an ideological cause, it expanded to a virtual community of art professionals and artists all around the globe. On this specific topic, GWZO organized in Leipzig the three-day international conference *Socialist Internationalism & the Global Contemporary* (23-25 November 2017), conceived and coordinated by Marina Dmitrieva, Beata Hock (GWZO), and Antje Kempe (University of Greifswald). On this occasion, I read the paper *Showcasing International Socialism: the Exhibition of Socialist Countries*, on the group show held in the Manezh Central Exhibition Hall in Moscow in 1958. It was the first large show ever organized in the socialist hemisphere, with artworks from twelve East-European and Asian countries. Conceived as a socialist response to the Venice Biennale - branded as the main international showcase for bourgeois art from capitalist countries - the exhibition was scheduled in the late fifties in the framework of art shows held in Moscow and devoted to western countries. The exhibition's main purpose was to celebrate the achievements in the fine arts within the communist hemisphere, thus providing ground for a polycentric international art historiography under the shared "humanistic" principles of socialist art. In doing this, the exhibition organizers also addressed to "progressive" artist and art professionals worldwide, residing also outside real socialism; therefore they referred to both a "real" and "ideal" socialist transnational art community.

The conference offered a unique opportunity to interact with scholars from specific disciplines such as Biennial studies, Socialist and Communist Studies and Comparative Art History in a global perspective, with a focus on East-Central Europe. In the final discussion, participants agreed on the need to investigate Socialist Internationalism through criteria which differ from the categories generally applied to (West-)Eurocentric matters such as Colonial Studies. A publication of the conference proceedings is foreseen in the next year.

### **3. CONNECTIONS OF MY TOPIC TO THE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES OF THE EEGA:**

My research is particularly relevant in the present geo-political context, which is often labelled as a second Cold War: Europe is divided by a new Iron Curtain, even if much deeper into the East after the inclusion of several post-socialist countries in the European Union. The wide resonance in the Western media of recent Russian actions [*aktsii*] (e.g. Pussy Riot or Voina) confirm the impact of art practices on the international debate at three different levels: in the professional art world, where such events monopolize the art debate; in the public opinion, where they contribute to a re-emergence of latent East-Western European stereotypes; and finally in EU foreign policy towards its Eastern neighbours on issues such as freedom of thought, speech and expression. Such purpose corresponds to the primary mission of EEGA.

Future fields of cooperation with EEGA may include joint applications for collaborative projects such as the INTERREG Projects – Central Europe, funded by the European Commission, on topics such as Cultural Heritage, Shared Memories and Lieux de mémoire, examined from a global perspective, with GWZO and Ca' Foscari as leading academic institutions, and museums as non-academic partners (for example, the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana and the Memento Park in Budapest).

#### **4.1 OUTLOOK IN WHICH DIRECTION THE PROJECT IS GOING TO PROCEED:**

As already mentioned, in the next three years I will work on my research project in the framework of a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowship. During the outgoing period in California, my plan involves targeted short visits to academic and non-academic institutions mostly based in the Los Angeles area, whose art archives specifically devoted to Cold War Europe represent a unique cluster of collections that has no equal in the European Union. At the moment three main institutions have been identified and contacted: the Getty Research Institute, with its collections focussed on GDR and Soviet art, FGR art galleries, Mail-art across the Iron Curtain, Russian and Italian Avant-garde and Harald Szeemann; the Wende Museum of the Cold War, with its collections of artworks, artefacts, archives, and personal histories from Cold War–era Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (1945–1991); finally, the Institute of Modern Russian Culture (IMRC) at the University of Southern California, with its library and collections on Soviet periodicals and museum guides; the Dissident Collection and the Ferris Collection of *Sovietica* (original artworks, ephemera, library).

A first occasion to discuss methodologies related to archive based research and field studies will be provided by the session panel *Cold War Art Archives, Collections and Exhibitions: Starting from Los Angeles*, that I will chair at the 2018 Annual Conference of the College Art Association (CAA), in Los Angeles (February 21-24). The invited speakers include art historians and curators from the three institutions

mentioned. The panel session will deal with a critical approach to the art archives as a resource and tool to investigate, narrate and display selected cultural histories from Cold War Europe, that I intend to apply in my current and future projects.