

EEGA in Dialogue: Interview with Matteo Bertelé

by Lena Dallywater

Dieser Beitrag ist hervorgegangen aus der Kooperation zwischen dem Leibniz-WissenschaftsCampus „Eastern Europe – Global Area“ (EEGA) und dem eJournal Connections. Die folgenden Interviews und Artikel geben Einblicke in die Forschungen am EEGA-WissenschaftsCampus, die den Entwicklungen im östlichen Europa in ihren globalen Bezügen gewidmet sind.

This item has emerged from the cooperation between Leibniz ScienceCampus „Eastern Europe – Global Area“ (EEGA) and the eJournal Connections. The following interviews and articles offer insights of the research projects at EEGA ScienceCampus, which are devoted to the developments in Eastern Europe in their global dimensions.

*Interview with Matteo Bertelé

Matteo Bertelé is Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellow at the University of California Santa Barbara, Universität Hamburg and Ca' Foscari University of Venice (2018-2020). He has been adjunct lecturer in Modern Art in Eastern Europe and History of Russian Art, and a post-doc research fellow at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. In 2011 he obtained a PhD at Ca' Foscari University, with a thesis on the history of Russian participation at the Venice Biennale (1895-1914). The results of his research have been published in the book „Russian Artists at the Venice Biennale 1895-2013“, awarded in 2013 as „Book of the Year“ by the Art Newspaper Russia and nominated in the category „Theory, Art Critics and History“ at the Innovation Prize, Moscow. He obtained research grants and fellowships from Kupferstich-Kabinett, Dresden; Ivane Javakishvili State University, Tbilisi; National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Moscow; Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe, Leipzig. His main research projects and publications deal with Russian émigré artists, Soviet and socialist

visual culture, exhibition studies and the cultural dimension of the Cold War.

Can tell us what you are currently working on?

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 counter-actions) 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 20th 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.

What do you mean by 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 20th 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).

On which methodological and theoretical framework is your research based on?

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 500th 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?

What do you want to investigate concretely?

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.

What is about the field of Exhibition studies? Is this approach

important for your research?

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 outdated 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.

How did you come to this topic?

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.

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 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 Gözl, („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 GWZO within the group project „Utopische Gemeinschaften“ [Utopian Communities].

Could you share some of the results of your project has yielded so far?

In 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] held at the GWZO I talked about 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 19th, 20th and 21st 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 19th 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 20th 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).

East-European art and culture at the Venice Biennale was the main topic of a second guest lecture, held at the Otto-Friedrich-Universität in Bamberg, with the title „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)]. It 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.

Here I 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.

My Bamberg-lecture 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 100th 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.

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.

What are your future research plans?

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.