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Soviet Nonconformist Art: Functional and Social Stipulation

Introduction

The present paper covers the topic of Soviet cultural split and the following formation and underground existence of artistic movement against ideological pressure, censorship, political voluntarism and cultural isolation, namely Soviet Nonconformist Art (also known as Soviet Underground Art and Soviet Unofficial Art). In the period of 1930ties – 1980ties Soviet culture was rigorously dominated by Soviet realism style aimed at ideological manipulation and the Party will transference. The nature of Soviet Nonconformist Art contains grass roots and reactionary components: it tried to feel the track of natural art development unintentionally implying the counteraction to the official cultural policy, being a dissident response to the message of soviet realism.

For a long period of time Soviet Nonconformist Art didn't have a generally accepted name: artists and collectors used to call it Experimental, Pioneering, Forbidden, Other, Alternative, Independent, the art of Second Avant-Garde, the art of Protest. It had many names while the official Soviet critics preferred to call it barbaric disgrace against Soviet moral principles and the honour of a Soviet citizen. During the entire period of Soviet Union existence the cultural space of this state formation was dominated by socialist realism – the most prominent cultural product of Marxist-Leninist philosophy setting the standards of thought, outlook and artistic action. Inspired by the Party a socialist realist analyses the past, depicts the present and forecasts the future observing the signs of close communism in every single social event including even the French Revolution [6]. The best definition of this phenomenon is probably given by Soviet Writers Union charter: "Socialist realism, being the main method of Soviet fiction literature and literary criticism, demands the veracious, historically specific depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. Meanwhile the veracity and historical accuracy of artistic depiction of reality must function in combination with the task of ideological reconstruction and the socialist spirit breeding" [4]. Loyal to the visual standards of the 19th century realism (the Itinerants school) socialist realism served as a means of the Party will transference while artists were supposed to assist the building of communism. Construction works, industrialisation, kolkhozes and factories workers achievements, the speeches of majestic Party leaders and the heroism of Soviet soldiers during WW II were approved and welcomed socialist realism topics with only one motive underneath: the new state, the new man and the new conscience moulding. The examples of socialist realism are diverse in style, content and genre but united by this underlying though which, however, gradually brought Soviet official art in the state of inexpressiveness, inconclusiveness and functional degradation.

Functional shift and the beginning of the split

There are two approaches towards the understanding of art essence:

1. The general one. Socially oriented art aimed at the world change and revision, including also the inner human world.
2. The narrow one. Functional interdependence of formal artistic modes and form and content correlation in the limits of work of art. [1]

The lack of realization of the second approach at the governing level of Soviet Union led to the situation when the sense and aim of art was equalized in public conscience with formal and aesthetic properties. The reduction of visual art functional opportunities was caused by two measures: (a) governmental support given exclusively to the artists following the formal tradition of the Itinerants school, depicting the theme of class struggle and underlying the leading role of workers and peasants; (b) exclusion of all the modern art tendencies from the public space and the strengthening of selection principle based on the socialist realism canon.

The general artistic tendency inclined to heroic and optimistic mood and served the state idea of agriculture optimization and industrialization necessary for the socialist victory. Ruined hopes, broken dreams, lost delusions were incompatible with socialist realism as this method inevitably implied a sort of happy ending. Even if a character is bound to die, the idea of communism is immortal and unbetrayable. As a result Soviet artists had extremely limited range of formal modes at their disposal – since 1930ies ideological tendency allowed no or almost no experiments. The official standard was dominating at a so all-embracing extent that the mass art perception could not be different but automatized [1]. At the same time ideological redundancy deprived official art of informational value and functional purpose.

The socialist realism canon didn't allow modern art appear at the museums and exhibitions until Stalin's death (1953). The right to be publicly exhibited had only those works of art that corresponded the official standard or could be interpreted as its direct continuation. All the rest was hidden in museums storerooms or sold abroad. Particularly, a concrete illustration of this social situation is the fate of Pushkin Art Museum (Moscow) that was transformed into the gallery of Stalin's birthday presents in 1949 and managed to regain its former status only three years later. The cultural space of this period is characterized by intellectual vacuum and information starvation. Official art became totally rhetorical in content and formally uninteresting both to the public and artistic stratum, what in its turn stirred up a number of new art tendencies during the Thaw (1953 - 1964) period.

Grass roots formation of unofficial art

The functional degradation of art caused by the Soviet Union long-term cultural isolation could be overcome only by means of public ideological values and socialist realism standards reconsideration but even during the relatively liberal Thaw period it was absolutely impossible. However after the death of Stalin a number of refreshing tendencies began growing into the cultural soil. The XX Party Congress launched the process of Stalin cult erasure, rehabilitated victims of political repression and returned many works of literature, music and visual art into public access. The humanities field began to feel the influence of linguistics, structuralism and semiotics [1]. First time after a long vacuum period cultural field saw the exhibitions of Russian avant-garde and the exhibitions of Western European and American art.

At this specific background the formation of logical opposition to official art started, driven mostly by young artists and artists who were repressed after the war and returned due to Khrushchev's liberalisation. The reconsideration of art's functional values did meet the official political line of the Thaw period but step by step this process began to free itself from upper control. At this particular moment art was not a means of political protest. The artists were interested mainly in the opportunity to express their subjective world-view, Weltanschauung, without outside influence. The matters of politics and ideology were outside the area of their priorities. The central place in artists' work took intimate genre painting with non-typical characters full of expressive individuality (V. Sidur, E. Neizvestny). The "historic truth" was replaced by "subjective truth", the artists answered to and interpreted any phenomena of reality touching the existential problems of the individual and the humanity. Thematic shift in its turn demanded new visual modes, what, consequently, inspired artists for experiments with colour, line, composition and other visual properties (E. Bielutin, O. Rabine, U. Sooster, etc.). This new art tended to contain more significant emotional component than socialist realism art and to replace natural forms with abstract ones. The individual itself, regardless its profession and level of social heroism, was sublimated down to the universal qualities of the individual [1].

The artists were looking for the ways interesting from aesthetic point of view and messaging something different from socialist realist rhetoric. They tried to build a new type of art *ab ovo*, refusing to have any thematic taboos and without applying to the official canon even with the aim to reject it. They created their own artistic means or borrowed them from other historical periods. The opposition, the spontaneous artistic split, was getting more and more obvious even though at this stage artists didn't incline to protest against political system.

The final split

The final split happened on December 1, 1962 when Ely Bielutin's artistic group (Novaya Realnost Avant-Garde Studio) was invited to participate in the exhibition dedicated to the 30th birthday of Moscow Artists Union. At this stage unofficial art was independent enough to introduce the viewer as the third element in the system of artist-painting relationship. Soviet Nonconformist Art was essentially dialogic and the dialogue inevitably touched existential problems the Party had been strenuously glossing over. The officials could not ignore the fact that certain cultural aspects were going away from their control and made a decision to visit Moscow Manege where Artists Union exhibition was taking place and to inspect Novaya Realnost exposition.

This event became historically known due to N. Khrushchev's public blow up at Nonconformist Art. Considering modern art tendencies to be disgraceful and inclining to give appraisal from the position of pure academism, he criticized the artists using strong obscene expressions and ordered to "root out" the abstract forms of creativity from the public life space. Especial attention was given to Ülo Ilmar Sooster, Vladimir Yankilevsky and Boris Zhutovski whose works allow an obvious interpretation on no condition. *"Too general and unclear. Listen, Bielutin, I'll tell you as the Council of Ministers chairman: soviet people do not need it"* (N. Khrushchev) [2]. That was the official position of the state and soon after it was promoted at all the levels. The day after Khrushchev's visit The Pravda published a crushing critical review that

marked the beginning of the anti-abstractism campaign. The exhibition was closed and all the artists who inclined to go beyond socialist realism limits found themselves in a position of forbidden underground figures while the Nonconformist Art took the clear shape of a dissent communication means.

Starting from Manege Exhibition Soviet Nonconformist Art did begin to imply protest, as the expulsion of all the abstract forms of art raised an underlying question: what kind of art can and may be official. It brought Soviet cultural field to the obvious split with the consequence of pressure on the underground art.

As nonconformist artists were expelled from the public cultural space their activity concentrated mostly within small unofficial groups (Bielutin group, Lianosovo, Sretensky Boulevard, The Group of Seven, Dvizhenie, etc.) gathering every week to work together and to discuss art, literature, philosophy and Western European humanities tendencies that could not be discussed openly. The only way to exhibit their works was to organize private home-based expositions (kvartirniki) and small public exhibitions outside gallery space (for instance, at research institutes). However even these limited opportunities didn't exist for long. After the Prague Spring KGB intensified its control and all the unauthorized public events regardless their scale were repressed.

The confrontation and hopeless underground position compelled some artists to emigrate, other began to seek an open conflict. Latent tension had its logical explosion on September 15, 1974 – the day of the so-called Bulldozer Exhibition. A large-scale open-air exhibition, curated by Oscar Rabine and Alexander Glezer, was organized in Moscow Bitsevski Park and existed for no more than half an hour. *“The exhibition was more of a political challenge to the repressive regime than of an artistic event. I knew that we would have problems, that there would be detentions, beating. We were all in fear during the two days before the opening. I was scared by the thought that absolutely anything could happen with me”* (Oscar Rabine). [3] The event did cause beatings and mass-detentions. Soon after the beginning of the opening a hundred of policemen in civilian clothes accompanied by bulldozers, water carts and dump trucks made their way towards the exhibition place and began to press the artists and to destroy the works of art. However the event provoked big speculations in Western media and Soviet authorities finally made a concession: abstract forms of art returned the right to be exhibited.

Conclusion

The functional shift in Soviet art brought the cultural space in the unnatural state of vacuum and information starvation. The message of socialist realism (the official artistic method) became rhetorical and senseless what, in its turn, conditioned a number of art refreshment tendencies in the Thaw period and stirred up the formation of Nonconformist Art as the opposing artistic method setting individual expression and existential themes above ideology.

Though initially Soviet Nonconformist Art did not pursue the aims of political protest the historical, social and political context compelled it to become a dissent communication means.

The existence of two opposing artistic method divided Soviet art into official and unofficial ones and deprived the cultural space of homogeneity.

References

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