Biennial of Dissent ‘77
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Archives in Translation
Exhibition in Kumu Art Museum
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The exhibition “Biennial of Dissent ‘77” opened the series of “Archives in Translation” with an overview of one very specific cultural event – the festival “Biennale del dissenso” that was held in 1977 under the auspices of the Venice Biennial. Through the story of its background a very extensive circle of problems about unofficial culture and nonconformists during the Cold War was opened. From chronological point of view it is the “newest” material of the exhibition series, but at the same time maybe – at least in the Estonian cultural space – the most forgotten chapter of unwritten (art)history.

Historical events have a tendency to get lost in the depths of archives from time to time. This can happen due to different reasons – either the event has lost its actuality in the course of time, the people or ideologies connected to it have become ostracised, or language and cultural barriers are the reasons why information does not get through without translation. However, boundaries between languages and cultural contexts, and recently still even between whole worlds, are never insurmountable. Culture, information, and ideologies spread in any case, even though mostly not without losses. These losses – on the one hand through translation mistakes, on the other hand through selections made during translation – should be kept in mind both while writing down history, as well as when trying to analyse historical events. Often translations and fragmentary retellings begin to influence the fate of the original, to narrate their own stories. Fortunately, the events of the Venice Biennial of the 1970s have been meticulously documented and published in thorough annuals by ASAC, the archive of the biennial that began its work at that time. With the
help of those annuals everybody has the chance to get acquainted with the facts. The exhibition held in Kumu was not an attempt to reconstruct the events from thirty years ago, and to give detailed overview about happenings and talks, but more an attempt to look at the connections between culture and politics through one forgotten event, and to view the historical processes in a broader extent, to translate one circle of topics so close to us “back” into our cultural sphere.

The direct link between the “Biennale del dissenso” of 1977 and Estonia is limited to only four paintings by Ülo Sooster that were exhibited in the art exhibition of the biennial „New art from the Soviet Union. Unofficial viewpoint,” but topics covered at the biennial are certainly also relevant in our context. The “Biennale del dissenso” was an expressive example of politically charged cross-culture translation process. It was an attempt to perceive and give meaning to the dissident culture of the Eastern Europe in the West. Sounds simple enough, yet on closer look an endless series of topic developments diverge from that, and background systems become visible. Starting with the Italian local and in greater extent with the European political history, with institutionalising the unofficial culture of the Eastern Bloc in and through the West, until our current historical image that we also translate back for ourselves through the memories of a third party. Such was the web of connections that spread as one possible scheme, an archive excursus, in the exhibition held in Kumu. During the exhibition, seminars and meetings took place as comments, extensions and topic developments, connections were also offered by Kumu’s autumn conferences about art history (“Different modernisms, different avant-gardes”) and film history (“Via Transversa. Lost
Cinema of the Former Eastern Bloc”), and by a film programme. At the exhibition, the event that dates back thirty years was placed on a historical axis, in a cultural and political frame, as well as in the filter of real memories, and the archive was renewed.

In the art world the Venice Biennial is an extremely important, old and dignified institution that has never caused revolutionary art changes, but has always been the central forum of international contemporary art. In fact, it is an extensive organisation that also organises, for instance, the Venice Film Festival, contemporary music festival etc. In addition to figurative art, film, music and theatre the sphere of activities of the biennial has in the course of time incorporated also dance and architecture, but thirty years ago the former fields were the main units of the programme of the Dissident Biennial. In addition, they were accompanied by theoretical sections organised by social scientists, historians, literary scholars, formal scientists and religious figures. Knowing the international situation of the 1970s, it will probably not come as a too big surprise that such an event took place – the question of nonconformists and human rights in the Eastern Bloc was one of the main topics in the relationships between the East and the West, especially after the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Likewise, it is no surprise that due to its provocative theme the biennial’s fate, could it be held or not, was uncertain until the last minute. Already in March, 1977 after the official press conference where the plan of the Venice Biennial to organise a cultural festival that would focus on dissidents in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries was announced, the ambassador of the Soviet Union in Rome submitted a protest to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: the Soviet Union and other countries of the Warsaw Pact are resolutely against this plan. The text was short: “We have many reasons.
including commerce, to keep friendly relations, don’t we?”

Italian Government was in a difficult position. The idea of organising a biennial dedicated to the unofficial culture of the Eastern Europe did not develop overnight. The Venice Biennial that had been thoroughly reformed after the protests of 1968 had started working with a new strategy that was based on thematic exhibitions and was socially and politically active. In 1974 a biennial of solidarity towards Chile took place that sharply criticised U.S. participation in the Chilean coup. Also, the issue touching upon the situation of Spanish culture under conditions of dictatorship had been treated. The dissident culture of the Eastern Europe was in that context a natural object of interest. This, of course, did not seem so natural, and even less necessary enough to some Italian government officials. In retrospect it is difficult to judge how cheerfully did the second largest party in the government, the leaders of Italian Communists receive this news. In spite of their rhetoric that declared the ideals of Eurocommunism and independence from Soviet Union, a great deal of sharper notes were also heard about the institution of the biennial. In any case, the parliament was for many months unable to pass the correction act that would have reinforced the budget of the Venice Biennial. Carlo Ripa di Meana, the president of the Biennial threatened to resign, and the events of the festival were postponed from traditional summer time to the end of the year.

As Enrico Crispolti, the curator of the Biennial’s art exhibition recalls in the interview given to Kumu there were also dissenting opinions among the organisers about how precisely to define these cultural phenomena. The unofficial culture of the Eastern Europe was prevalingly non-political, forced under ground not because of political
convictions, but rather due to esthetical convictions in a more general meaning (unless the presumption of freedom of creation is treated as a political statement), and for many people considering it in political context had an effect of instrumentalizing the culture. Eventually the differences of opinion were solved, the government accepted the budget of the biennial and the Dissident Biennial could begin on Tuesday, November 15. Of course, the Soviet Union and its satellite countries boycotted the events of the Biennial in every possible way. Not one of the speakers who had been invited from behind the Iron Curtain made it to Venice. Instead, many representatives of the unofficial culture who had already emigrated to the West were present. Those in the West interested in dissident culture were mainly represented by Italian, French, German and British cultural figures, by Slavophiles and Sovietologists. Seven international conferences, three exhibitions, an endless number of concerts and film sessions, open debates and seminars were held during 31 days. In all 220,000 people visited the events of the Dissident Biennial, and 350 cultural figures and scholars from 24 countries performed. 2

Participants of the Dissident Biennial got a quite thorough overview of the Eastern European culture. The film programme of the Biennial was probably the largest – over fifty films were shown, almost half of these originating from Czechoslovakia and a quarter being produced in the Soviet Union. These were more or less alternative artistic films, several of which were forbidden in their own country. The musical programme of the biennial was also popular, consisting of concerts of protest singers and performances of avant-garde music. The *Samizdat* phenomenon was examined by thorough and informative exhibition in the Correr Museum that in addition to paper booklets gave an overview about the amateur documentations of
The exhibition “New Art from the Soviet Union. Unofficial viewpoint” offered allegedly the largest overview about Soviet underground art in the West. At first the curators planned to organise an exhibition about avant-garde art of the whole Eastern Europe, but due to the Eastern Bloc boycott they had to use only art and documentation available in the Western collections and thus they concentrated on the Soviet, mainly underground art of Moscow. The curators Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella Moncada avoided the notion “dissident” in the title of the exhibition, stressing in this way that they were dealing with avant-garde art that exists in its own world by its own rules, in which the political arguments are not important.

According to curator Crispolti it is difficult to give meaning to the notion “cultural dissidentism,” but even more so to do the same in the context of figurative art that is in its statements no doubt much less political than, for instance, literature. In his opinion it is far more interesting to consider the whole – the world of avant-garde art in its multiplicity, the abundance of internal tensions and dialectics, the real oppositions beyond bureaucratic and political limits and frames – than to see in it just the forbidden, opposing and emigrated art. The purpose of the exhibition was thus to point out as different positions of artists as possible that existed in unofficial Soviet art, stressing their differences from the pursuits of the Western avant-gardes, and yet also to find influences of the latter. The opening of the exhibition was accompanied by a conference “Avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes in the Eastern Europe” where among others presentations were given by an emigrated art collector Alexander Gleser, critic Igor Golomstock, artists Ernst Neizvestny, Lev Nussberg and Aleksandr Melamid.
The exhibitions of unofficial Soviet art had actually been held in the West already since the middle of the 1960s, all containing works of art that had been smuggled out from the Soviet Union through different channels – for example, we can recall the legendary participation of Estonian graphic artists in those exhibitions with works that had been sent by mail, or by more traditional channels created by diplomats with interest in art. In any case, dedicated European professionals had some knowledge about avant-garde behind the Iron Curtain in the 1970s, at least they were aware that unofficial art actually existed in the Eastern Bloc. Already in the second half of the 1970s a few chosen (young) authors participated in the official overview exhibitions of Soviet art. At the same time, in conjunction with massive emigration and branding of underground art in the West the exhibition programme of unofficial Soviet art was particularly intense during the last years of the decade. Hence, in some ways the Venice exhibition was only one of many of the same kind.

Then why to pay attention now, thirty years later, to this one event that at present has been completely forgotten in the cultural and art history?

Firstly, of course, because little is known about this Biennial outside Italy, information about it has been limited to the Italian cultural space (and even there it has been restricted to a narrow circle of professionals). Secondly, the “Biennale del dissenso” and other political exhibitions preceding the latter, for example, “Freedom to Chile” of 1964, reflect one of the most active phases of the history of Venice Biennial when the institution went through some major changes. Namely, the aforementioned events were not “biennials” in their traditional sense. Both the Dissident Biennial, as well as other similar events in the middle of the 1970s were thematic curatorial...
projects with social undertone in the years between art biennials, trying to give voice to the politically suppressed, to countries and phenomena outside the official cultural exchange and national pavilions, having also a wider range across different fields of culture. Thus the event has its specific role in the history of the institution. Thirdly, in its totality (through thematic conferences, exhibitions, concerts, literature evenings and film programme a very big part of Eastern Bloc’s unofficial culture, mainly that of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia was analysed) this event is a good example about the interest of the West towards what was happening behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, and about dissident discourse as it was then created. Among this kind of events this was definitely one of the most large-scale occurrences. The “Biennale del dissenso” also reflected its time: more than just the Cold War tensions between the East and the West it illustrated Italian power relations in local politics. Therefore, in order to understand these events better it is important to change the viewpoint and to examine next to the legendary heroic deeds in culture also the more pragmatic context of their occurrence.

In order to understand the “Biennale del dissenso” that took place in Venice we need to know a little about the political history of Italy: problems in left-right axis, background of the restless 1970s, the regular big advantage of Christian Democrats compared to other political powers and its reasons, competition between Socialists and Communists, accession policy between Communists and Christian Democrats etc. As a critic from the United States of America who reviewed the art exhibition of the Biennial pointed out: “That the subject of “B77” would be political in nature is not hard to comprehend in a country where no blade of grass moves without its political
implications being analyzed”. Equally natural was also, of course, that the Socialist Countries under the leadership of the Soviet Union boycotted the Biennial and carried out active propaganda against it. Hence, not a political culture but culture as politics. At the opening of the Kumu exhibition cultural researcher Daniele Monticelli and political scientist Oudekki Loone introduced the political events of 1977 in Italy and their background. Later it was possible to view the video recording of that presentation as a part of the exhibition. Oudekki Loone wrote a thorough article “The Hot Seventies in Italy” discussing this theme also in the newspaper Sirp’s “Dissident special” that was published on 14 September, 2007.

Dissidentism was of course a thoroughly provocative topic; a knowingly political programme raised by the administration of the Biennial, in particular by the director of the Biennial, Carlo Ripa di Meana. The debate over the notion “dissident” and discussions about the borders between unofficial and official culture and their political meaning became a common trait in all conferences and seminars held during the Biennial. In the conditions of the Cold War and especially after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 the human rights issue had become the main propaganda argument between the East and the West, and the term “dissident” had developed a very sharp political colouring during that information warfare. On the one hand it was asked in the Biennial discussions, whether it is possible to speak about dissident culture, concerning the culture created in the Eastern Bloc countries, because in most cases those works of art were rather critical, they had messages hidden between the lines, so to say, but dissidentism is expressed mainly in direct political activity. Yet, it was felt that the problems faced by the cultural figures behind the Iron Curtain were often much more complicated than simply the
limiting of freedom of speech and thought. There are many individuals
with different beliefs to be found among nonconformists, and thus
it is difficult to point out similarities just based on opposition to
totalitarian regime. Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski summarised
the criticism about dissident notion as follows: “What does ‘dissident’
mean? If this word refers to people, who do not believe in the official
ideology, who ‘think outside the power’ then this notion could be
applied to almost all inhabitants of the Socialist countries. On the
other hand, every act of creation is already in its essence dissident
towards the surrounding reality.”

In the course of arguments a conclusion was reached that dissidentism should by no means be
interpreted simply as a political position, that first and foremost
it is a moral choice. In other words there is no point in developing
“hierarchies of subversive citizens”, to talk about dissidentism as an
assessment criterion without analysing the context of these choices.
In the end, the participants of the event held most important the fact
that even though none of the invited nonconformists living behind the
Iron Curtain were able to participate, the Venice event was, in addition
to European researchers of Soviet culture, philosophers and activists,
attended by uniquely many emigrated dissidents from the Eastern
Europe, whose first-hand explanations helped to form a picture about
the real situation of dissidentism. For many the fact that people met
and discussed these topics outweighed the what actually was said.

In every seminar of the Biennal the attention was turned to colleagues in
imprisonment and a number of documents were compiled for freeing
the political prisoners. These documents were addressed to the sequel
meeting of the Helsinki Final Act that took place in Belgrade at the
same time, as well as for governments of many countries.
The greeting of a Soviet dissident Andrei Sahharov that was played from a tape in the opening seminar of the Biennial became symbolic. He stressed the importance of free thinking and public debate, pointing out that limiting the freedom of speech and creation, discrimination of nonconformists and the gradual destruction of the society by widespread anti-intellectualism and separation from the world culture, should be considered the greatest problems in the societies of Socialist countries. Italian playwright Dario Fo stressed in the Biennial’s theatre seminar that the Western society is also not representing ideal democracy – censorship on his works had been remarkably similar on both sides of the Iron Curtain: fear of satire tends to be common to every power. Also, authors’ self-censorship was discussed that had been forced upon many by the means of power terror. This phenomenon is not reflected in statistics of court hearings or prohibitions, but is in its essence maybe even more tragic.

During the “Biennale del dissenso” a number of concerts of classical, and avant-garde music, as well as of protest singers’ were held, several authors were personally present in Venice, and three author evenings under a joint title “Dissident Songs” became very popular. The recorded album “Bratříčku, zavírej vrátka” of a Czech protest singer Karel Kryl (1944-1994) who performed in the hall of Ateneo Veneto on November 28, 1977 was used as sound design for the exhibition in Kumu, and was one of the few details that realistically conveyed the atmosphere from decades ago. Back at the “Biennale del dissenso” the critics pointed out parallels between Kryl’s romantic, soulful and intimate performance and contemporary musicians in the West rather than that of traditional fighting protest singers in the Eastern Europe. Kryl himself also preferred not to be identified with dissidents. Other performers of dissident songs in Venice were...
Alexander Galich (Ginzburg) (1918-1977), whose concert on December 3, which unfortunately remained the last public performance of the author, was a tremendous success, and Wolf Biermann (1936), an East German dissident and protest singer, who explained his views in the press conference held before the concert, stating that his criticism comes from love and not anger towards Leftist worldview. He explained that the Eastern European dissidents are often rebuffed among the Western Leftists, while right-wing politicians gladly use their actions, even though in their home country many dissidents represent, despite discrepancies, rather the Socialist worldview.

As in its format the exhibition in Kumu could be classified also as an archive exhibition, the authors of the exhibition did not set the goal to reproduce as much as possible of the authentic visual materials, or try to show the works of art exhibited in Venice in 1977. On the one hand the complete reconstruction would be impossible even in the case of specific art exhibition, on the other hand, while concentrating on the “translation problems” of the archives the organisers of the exhibition had a much wider view of the events in mind. Hence only three works of art with rather symbolic meaning were exhibited in the current exhibition, all lacking direct connection with the Dissident Biennial of 1977, yet the indirect, content-based connection was maybe even more powerful. Gordon Matta-Clark’s video “The Wall” documents the action of an American artist by the Berlin Wall in 1977. Having arrived at the West-Berlin exhibition “Soho in Berlin” as a performer, the artist had a firm intention to explode part of the notorious Berlin wall. After the organisers successfully persuaded him to abandon the plan, Matta-Clark finally limited himself to gluing ironic posters on the wall and writing critical graffiti on it, for example “Made in USA”
and “From USSR mit love”. It is probably unnecessary to explain that this video represented everything that the dissident culture under observation in Venice was not, and at the same time also physical as well as ideological closeness with the mystical unofficial culture behind the very same wall. Other two works that were exhibited formed in a sense the other extreme on the imaginary axis of the artistic freedom. Evald Okas and Alo Hoidre belonged among the top official artists in the Soviet Estonia, who had the privilege to visit the Venice Biennial in the 1960s. Both authors created prints of their exhibition impressions: Okas “At the Art Exhibition” (1962, dryneedle, aquatint), Hoidre “At the Venice Biennial” (1964, lithography) – works that on the one hand expressed propagandistic criticism of what the authors had seen, but on the other hand still documented, not to say mythicized examples of abstract art.

In addition to aforementioned works of art and the music the exhibition visitors could enjoy the main textual narrative in Venice Biennial and a time axis reflecting the events connected directly or indirectly with dissidentism. The reading corner at the exhibition provided materials about the specific events in Venice, articles from Western and Soviet press, Soviet newspapers from 1977 (Pravda, Sirp and Vasar, Izvestija, Literaturnaja Gazeta), Estonian samizdats, theoretical literature on the topic of the Soviet unofficial art and avant-garde, and different exhibition catalogues. Fifteen Soviet and Socialist Bloc nonconformists and representatives of unofficial culture, all of whom had been connected one way or another with the “Biennale del dissenso”, were accentuated by short biographical boards. In the seminar room of the exhibition three discussions took place about dissidentism, art and politics. An extract from the video interview with Enrico Crispolti, curator of “New Art from the Soviet Union. Unofficial
The viewpoint” that is published on the present page was also exhibited.

Read more:
2 Interview with Enrico Crispolti
3 “Adventure of Dissidence” Between Channels