

Behind the Image, Beyond the Image

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Soviet Criticism on ‘Contemporary Western Bourgeois Art’

Controversy and Satire at the Time of Khrushchev’s Artistic Thaw

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Abstract Taking into consideration the period of Khrushchev’s artistic Thaw (1956-62), the article analyses, with the help of satirical cartoons of the time, the leading and most widespread judgments expressed by Soviet criticism on contemporary Western art.

Keywords Khrushchev’s Thaw. Soviet caricatures. Soviet criticism. Soviet art theory. Informal art.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Contemporary Bourgeois Art Rejects or Deforms Reality and for This Reason It Cannot Be Defined as Art. – 3 Bourgeois Contemporary Art Is Incomprehensible. – 4 Western Bourgeois Artists Are not Technically Skilled. They Are Charlatans Who Operate in a Field Governed by Speculation. – 5 Contemporary Bourgeois Art Exhibitions Are not Visited. – 6 The Success of Informal Art Is Determined by the Support Given to It by the Capitalist Elite. – 7 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

In 1956, with the return of the USSR to the Venice Biennale, the brief interlude of Khrushchev's artistic Thaw began, which concluded in 1962 with the attack launched by Khrushchev himself, during his celebrated visit to the Moscow Manege, against the artworks inconsistent with the principles of socialist realism.¹ In this period the Soviet Union experienced, in addition to greater freedom in the artistic field, an unprecedented openness to Western art. Artistic exchanges with the West were revived through participation in international exhibitions abroad, such as the Venice Biennale and the *Expo 58* in Brussels, as well as the organisation of events and exhibitions at home, such as the *6th World Festival of Youth and Students* (1957), and the *American National Exhibition* (1959), both held in Moscow.² This openness was the effect of Khrushchev's new foreign policy, centred on Peaceful Coexistence, that is, on the non-military and exclusively ideological competition with the West, in which the communist system would have been shown to be better than the capitalist system in the ability to satisfy the needs of man (Khrushchev 1959, 4-5). Susan Reid (2016, 270-1) reconstructed how in this new scenario of international exchanges, beneficial for the détente of foreign policy, the USSR launched a "cultural offensive", dictated by the aspiration to assume a leadership role also in the field of culture, while at the same time taking care to implement an:

intense internal ideological vigilance to counterbalance the increased access to information about foreign ideas, lifestyles and art. (Reid 2016, 272)

Ideological vigilance was absolutely necessary, considering that the Western exhibitions held in the USSR aroused great interest among the population, who until this historical moment had remained almost completely unaware of the developments in European and American

1 On the 1st of December 1962, Khrushchev went to the Manege to visit the exhibition *30 Years of the Moscow Artists' Union*. On this occasion he also visited a small show of young nonconformist artists, which had been set up on the second floor of the building (Zelenina 2020, 54). For more information on this episode, see Moleva 1989; Reid 2005; Gerchuk 2008.

2 For an in-depth look at the return of the USSR to the Venice Biennale and the Soviet pavilions from 1956 to 1962, see Bertelé 2020, 159-252. Regarding the exhibitions held on the occasion of the *6th World Festival of Youth and Students* at Park Gor'kogo, see Reid 2016, 281-7. Regarding the contemporary art exhibited at the *American National Exhibition*, held at Park Sokol'niki, see Kushner 2002. Concerning the international exhibition *50 ans d'art moderne* held during the *Expo 58*, see Drosos 2017.

art.³ Long queues formed outside these exhibitions and the artworks exhibited sparked heated debates, finding supporters among young people (Golomshtok 1977, 89; Ivanov quoted in Prokof'ev 1959, 23). Books and magazines with reproductions and information concerning this kind of art were in great demand and the shops selling them quickly ran out of copies (Golomshtok 1977, 89).

In this essay we will examine the work of Soviet critics, within this context, to prevent the infiltration of Western artistic influences. Specifically, we will analyse the most widespread judgments expressed by the critics⁴ on 'contemporary Western bourgeois art', in other words, criticisms against creations that were not realistic and not socially engaged,⁵ presenting some satirical cartoons of the time in which they are reflected.⁶

2 Contemporary Bourgeois Art Rejects or Deforms Reality and for This Reason It Cannot Be Defined as Art

This accusation was certainly the most relevant of those made by Soviet critics since it was precisely on the discussion of the representation of reality that the two ideological systems of Western art and socialist realism collided. According to Soviet criticism, the main fault of the contemporary Western artistic movements consisted in the refusal to conceive art as a means of knowledge of reality (Lebedev 1962, 5). The Western artists, relating to reality in a completely subjective way, created artworks with a self-sufficient and self-referential meaning (Viaznikov 1958, 55; Golomshtok 1959, 24; Lebedev 1962, 5). It followed that since these artworks objectively did not represent or mean anything (Guber 1959, 25-6; Michailov 1960, 20), they could not be considered works of art (Abalkin 1957, 241; Lebedev 1960, 20; 1962, 5-6). Contemporary Western art, unlike socialist realism, therefore, could not serve to convey profound ideas and

³ Sokolovskaia (2013) noted the scarcity of information available on contemporary Western art in the mid-1950s in the USSR and Golomshtok (2019, 50) identified the *6th World Festival of Youth and Students* as the first opportunity for Soviet audiences to learn about this kind of art.

⁴ The titles of the paragraphs of our article take the form of a systematic and synthetic reworking of the opinions expressed by Soviet critics on the same argument.

⁵ This definition does not include, therefore, the creations of Western communist artists and sympathisers of the USSR, such as those of Italian neorealism. In our article, to avoid using the negative expression 'contemporary Western bourgeois art', we will refer to the concept expressed by it using the formula 'contemporary Western art'.

⁶ Vinogradova (2017), briefly, and Bertelé (2020, 236-46), in depth, examined the positions of Soviet criticism regarding the Venice Biennale exhibitions, while Sokolovskaia (2013) studied the Soviet cartoons of the 1950s concerning contemporary Western art. Our article follows in the footsteps of these valuable contributions.

subjects matters, and consequently could not be a tool for educating people and improving the world (Lebedev 1962, 5-6).

This idea of Western works of art as 'non-artworks', as they deform or even reject reality, is perfectly illustrated by the cartoon *As in Nature* (1956) by the Kukryniksy artistic collective [fig. 1], dedicated to the XXVIII Venice Biennale.⁷ In this image, three painters are working *en plein air* in Piazza San Marco, each of them embodying a different type of Western artist. On the right, there is a caricature of an abstract expressionist/spatialist artist, recognisable by the fact that he paints on a canvas resting on the ground and that he uses useful tools to tear it apart, such as a paintbrush-fork, a corkscrew and a knife. In the centre, there is an expressionist artist who paints a landscape based on her subjective perception of reality: on her canvas, the bell tower of the Basilica of San Giorgio seems to be about to collapse, as it is depicted based on the oblique and singular point of view she has adopted. Finally, on the left, a caricature of a tachist artist is represented: she executes an abstract painting, consisting of stains, completely covering the view; highlighting that she is totally disinterested in the surrounding reality. The fact that all three characters of this cartoon are represented in greyscale, may not be dictated by a simple colour choice, but, perhaps, by Kukryniksy's desire to highlight, in a symbolic way, that they are anonymous individuals, without authentic artistic inspiration. In the top right, a caption explains the scene:

В Венеции много иностранных туристов-художников из западных стран. Все они работают с натуры. Но натура им нужна лишь для того, чтобы их «произведения» как можно меньше были похожи на неё.

There are many foreign Western artist-tourists in Venice. They all paint from nature. But they only use nature to make sure that their "artworks" look like it as little as possible.⁸

This caption, by placing the word 'artworks' in quotation marks, underlines the fact that the deviation from the faithful representation of reality produces 'non-artworks', indirectly suggesting that Western painters are not true artists.⁹

⁷ The cartoon was published in 1956 in the magazine *Krokodil*. For an in-depth analysis of the role of *Krokodil* in the Khrushchevian era and the relationship between the satire of the cartoons published in it and the ideology of the Party, see Etty 2019.

⁸ All of the translations presented in the article are the work of the Author.

⁹ The specific use of quotation marks to refer in a disparaging way to Western bourgeois art and its artworks is recurrent in articles by Soviet critics. See for example Guber 1957, 62; Lebedev 1960, 20; 1962, 3.



Figure 1 Kukryniksy, *As in Nature*. 1956. Published in *Krokodil*, 23, 1956

The rejection and deformation of reality were considered to be the cause of one of the characteristic features of contemporary Western art of the time: the absence of beauty. Soviet critics were amazed by the fact that Western artworks, particularly informal ones,¹⁰ were alien to beauty (Zardarian 1959, 24; Michailov 1960, 20), if not downright enemies of it because of their indisputable ugliness (Guber 1959, 20; Lebedev 1962, 82). This theme was dealt with in the cartoon *The Three Graces* by Kukryniksy, published in 1958 in the magazine *Krokodil* [fig. 2]. It depicts the *Venus de Milo* and the *Capitoline Venus*, symbols of beauty par excellence, horrified that they are being exhibited together with a Western bronze sculpture, whose features resemble that of an animal. The caption at the top reads:

В одной павильоне одной международной выставки.
Венера Милосская – Венере Капитолийской:
– Так вот она, новая Венера, капиталистическая!..

In one of the pavilions of an international exhibition.
The Venus de Milo to the Capitoline Venus:
– Here she is, the new Venus, the capitalist one!..

Contemporary Western art had therefore seemingly decided to renounce the ancient canons of beauty, a secular source of inspiration, to embrace ugliness. A comic strip from the cartoon by Iuliĭ Ganf *On Some Overseas Art Trends*, published in 1956 in *Krokodil*, makes fun of the harmful consequences of the denial of beauty. The comic strip in question, entitled *The Portrait of the Beloved Woman* [fig. 3], illustrates the story of a painter who paints a cubist portrait of the beautiful woman he is in love with. The beloved, not recognising herself in the painting and seeing herself ugly and deformed, gets furious, breaks the canvas over the painter's head and leaves.¹¹

10 Soviet criticism does not use the expression 'informal art', but the term абстракционизм (abstractionism) with a very broad meaning that indicates all those contemporary Western artworks that are far from the exact representation of reality or non-figurative. In our contribution, we felt that the best way to render the concept of абстракционизм in English was to use the expression 'informal art' coined by Antoni Tapiès in *Un art autre où il s'agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel* (1952), that includes all those Western artistic movements which, following different methods and approaches, embrace abstraction to break with the figurative tradition. In the translation of passages from Soviet criticism, however, we considered it more correct philologically to report the literal translation of the term абстракционизм and of the other expressions deriving from it.

11 The subject of the woman, annoyed or angry at the lack of similarity of her cubist/abstract portrait, enjoyed great success during the 1950s and 1960s, becoming a recurring iconography in cartoon production. See for example: the cartoon by Leonid Soifertis, published in *Krokodil*, 1953, no. 13; that of Boris Leo, published in *Krokodil*, 1957, no. 29; the poster *In the Abstract Artist's Studio* (1963) by Dmitrii Oboznenko. All three of these artworks were published by Zolotonosov 2018, 436, 440, 447.



Figure 2 Kukryniksy, *The Three Graces*. 1958. Published in *Krokodil*, 31, 1958



Figure 3 Lulii Ganf, *The Portrait of the Beloved Woman*. Published in *Krokodil*, 20, 1958

As can be deduced, for Soviet criticism the Western artists, refusing to faithfully represent reality, were guilty, not only of abandoning the traditional and fundamental principles of artistic production but also of the denial of simple common sense.

3 Bourgeois Contemporary Art Is Incomprehensible

As we have seen, the subjective approach of Western artists to the representation of reality meant that their artworks were completely self-referential, thus triggering a short circuit in the understanding of it. In the Soviet reviews of the Venice Biennale exhibitions, the authors defined informal artworks as “заумные головоломки”¹² (abstruse riddles) (Ivanov 1957, 22), “ребусы” (rebus) (Guber 1957, 63), “запутанные ребусы” (intricate rebus) (Abalkin 1957, 242), and “замысловатые ребусы” (complicated rebus) (Zardarian 1959, 24). For the Soviets, the inability to decipher these ‘riddles’ and ‘rebus’ was not due to their lack of tools for critical analysis, but to the fact that, in general, these types of artworks were incomprehensible to anyone, even to the Western specialists. In this regard, the artist Aleksandr Viaznikov, reviewing the exhibition *50 ans d'art moderne*, held in the setting of the *Expo 58* in Brussels, recounted and commented on an interesting anecdote:

На наш вопрос: что представляет собой абстрактное искусство в павильоне США? – девушка-гид смущенно ответила:

– Это необъяснимо...

Художник в своем творчестве жаждет передать какие-то мысли и чувства, но оказывается, что все им созданное необъяснимо. Не смертный ли это приговор его произведению? (Viaznikov 1958, 54)

To our question: what does the abstract art represent in the US pavilion? The girl who was the guide replied with embarrassment:

– It's inexplicable...

The artist in his artistic production longs to convey some thoughts and feelings, but it turns out that everything he has created is incomprehensible. Isn't that the death sentence for his work?

12 In this case the use of the adjective *заумный* appears as a reference to the *заумный язык*, the “transmental language” of the Russian futurists, underlining, in a derogatory sense, the derivation of informal art from futurism, therefore from historical avant-gardes tout court. For an in-depth analysis on *заумный язык*, see Korotaeva 2015, 42-8.

This view of Soviet criticism on Western artists, who enjoy creating incomprehensible and unsolvable puzzles, is perfectly illustrated in Boris Efimov's 1958 cartoon depicting Robert Rauschenberg [fig. 4]. It was published in 1959 in the periodical *Tvorchestvo* to accompany the article "Ustrashaiushchiĭ talant" (A Terrific Talent), an English-Russian translation of John Ashbery's review (1958, 40) of the Rauschenberg exhibition held in March 1958 at the Leo Castelli gallery in New York. In this review, Ashbery describes Rauschenberg's creative process, which consists of the reuse of objects collected from trash; he writes on the combines *Bed* (1955) and *Rebus* (1955), and praises the artist calling him a 'terrific talent'.¹³ Efimov, taking a cue from this article, depicted Rauschenberg on one of his missions in search of garbage for his creations. In the image, Rauschenberg can be seen framing a stinking pile of garbage, consisting of a mouse, a dead cat and all kinds of waste; on the plaque in the centre of the frame is the title of the artwork: "Роберт Раушенберг Портрет" (Robert Rauschenberg, Portrait). The artist is represented fat (his physiognomy resembling that of a pig), with a cigarette in his mouth and glasses, which give him an intellectual air; he wears a very original shirt decorated with symbols, such as a square root, numbers, letters and a question mark, all attributable to the image of a riddler. This caricature of Rauschenberg can be interpreted more generally as the stereotypical image of the contemporary Western artist, who is, in the eyes of the Soviets, a riddler devoted to the realisation of incomprehensible and meaningless artworks, which are the result of his laziness and dishonesty, rather than a thoughtful artistic choice.

13 Considering the propagandistic intent of the Russian translation of Ashbery's review, a comparison of the two texts was carried out to understand if it presented interpolations aimed at distorting the meaning of the original text. The translation is almost entirely faithful. Apart from the change made to the original title of the review and the lack of reference to the author, probably dictated by the absence of the rights for the translation of the piece, the other changes made by the translator are omissions of information that would have been incomprehensible to a Soviet reader, such as: the gallery where the exhibition was held, a reference to Kurt Schwitters' collages and a comparison with Jean Cocteau.

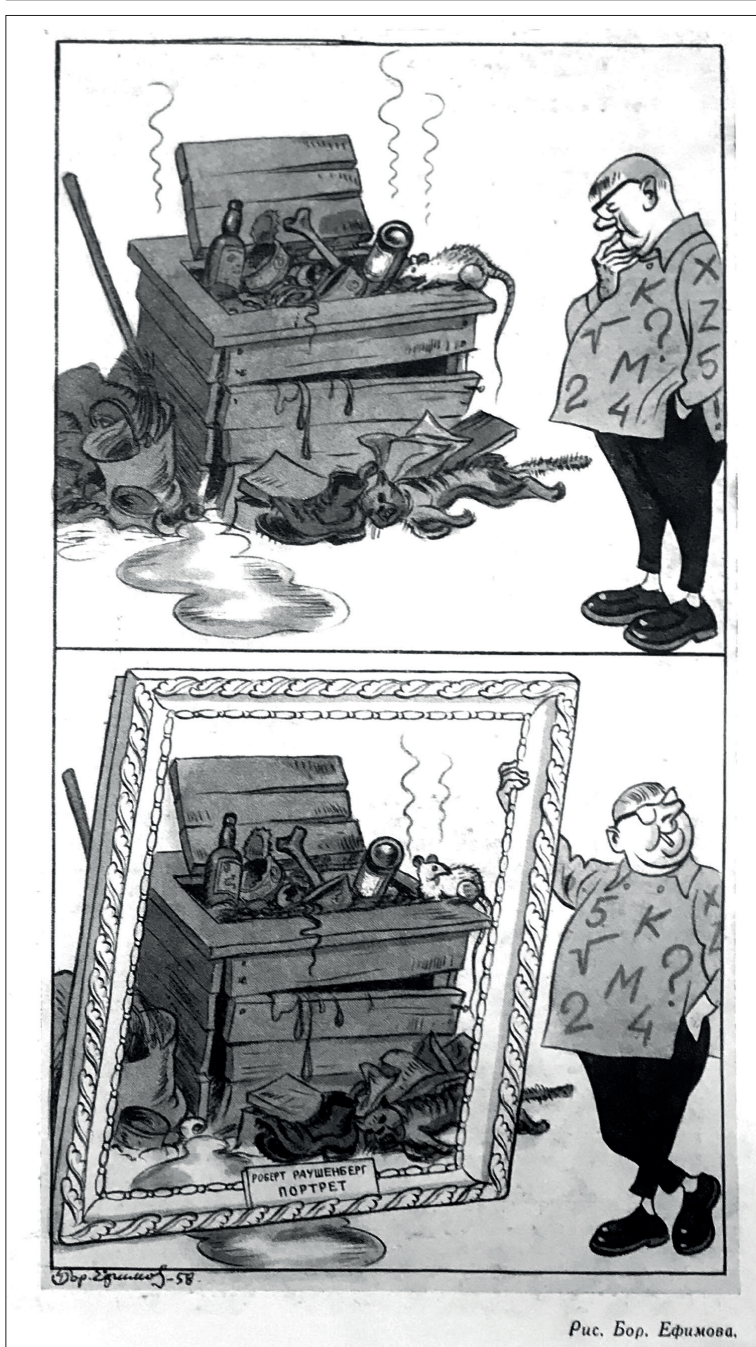


Figure 4 Boris Efimov, *Robert Rauschenberg, Portrait*. 1958. Published in *Tvorchestvo*, 1, 1959

4 **Western Bourgeois Artists Are not Technically Skilled. They Are Charlatans Who Operate in a Field Governed by Speculation**

In reviewing contemporary Western artworks, Soviet critics often highlighted the poor quality of their workmanship, a clear manifestation of the authors' technical incompetence. The painter Viktor Ivanov (1957, 22), describing the sculpture *Inner Eye* (1952) by the Englishman Lynn Chadwick, winner of the *Presidency of the Council Award reserved for a foreign sculptor* at the 1956 Biennale,¹⁴ defined it as “бессмысленное металлическое соноружекикикеруке” (a senseless metal construction of crude blacksmith workmanship), while the critic Andreï Lebedev, writing in general on informal works of art described them as:

совершенно бессмысленные, непонятные и уродливые изделия из камня, дерева, металла, красок, бумаги, холста, которые никак нельзя назвать скульптурами или картинами. (Lebedev 1960, 20)

Completely meaningless, incomprehensible and monstrous products, made of stone, wood, metal, paints, paper, canvas, which cannot in any way be called sculptures or paintings.

Finally ruling that:

абстрактное искусство игнорирует мастерство. Чтобы изобразить непонятное, чтобы просто набрызгать или накапать краску на холст, чтобы сделать бессмысленную глыбу из гипса или металла, не нужно никакого мастерства. (21)

Abstract art ignores mastery. To represent the incomprehensible, to simply spray or drip paint onto the canvas, to create a senseless piece of plaster or metal, no mastery is required.

Soviet critics, therefore, did not recognise the new Western artistic processes, considering them a clear manifestation of technical inability. This judgment is illustrated in the caricature «*The Artistic Method*» of the *Abstract Artists* (1959) [fig. 5], by Ivan Semënov.¹⁵ The expression 'artistic method' is placed in quotation marks to em-

¹⁴ ASACdati: <http://asac.labiennale.org/it/passpres/artivisive/annali.php?m=230&c=p>.

¹⁵ The cartoon in question was found in an article published in *Tvorchestvo* in 1963 (Semënov 1963, 14), but since it is dated 1959 it is very likely that it had already been published a few years earlier, in another location.

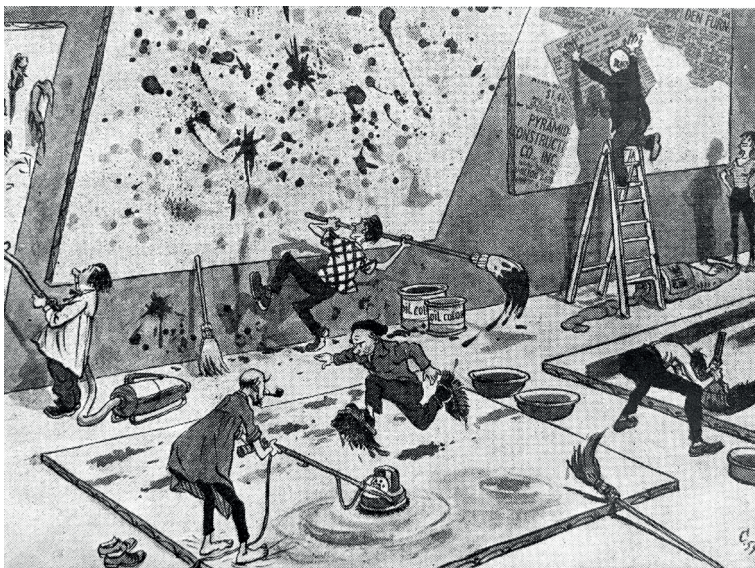


Figure 5 Ivan Semënov, "The Artistic Method" of the Abstract Artists. 1959. Published in *Tvorchestvo*, 5, 1963

phasise, indirectly, that the method of informal art, compared to that of socialist realism, has no value. The image depicts some informal artists intent on working with unconventional tools: one is using a vacuum cleaner; two are painting with a broom; another jumps on a canvas with paint-soaked brushes on his feet, while his colleague is passing over it with a polishing machine; while another, at the top of a ladder, makes a collage with newspaper sheets. Semënov, by not inserting palettes and brushes into the cartoon, traditional attributes of the painter, wants to indirectly state that the characters depicted are not true artists. The fact that they use cleaning and housework tools for their creations, that is, tools for tidying up, while paradoxically the studio is dirty and in disorder, underlines the profound state of confusion that animates them.

The lack of technical skills masked by the use of 'innovative artistic procedures' was interpreted by Soviet critics as an expression of the charlatanism of Western artists (Zardarian 1959, 24; Lebedev 1962, 74), whose aim would have been to get rich:

И если некий ветеринарный врач, переключившись на живопись, представляет на Биеннале свои абсурдные, то бишь абстрактные, «поиски» вроде дырок на картоне «отсюда туда и оттуда сюда» и наживает на этом изрядный капитал, то это

позволительно назвать профанацией и шарлатанством, которое ничего общего не имеет с высокой и благородной областью человеческой культуры, называемой изобразительным искусством. (Zardarian 1959, 25-6)

And if some veterinarian, having converted to painting, presents his absurd, that is, abstract, "researches" at the Biennale, like a hole in some cardboard "from one side to the other" and makes a lot of money, then it is legitimate to call this profanation and charlatanism, which has nothing to do with the high and noble sphere of human culture, called figurative art.

For Soviet criticism, Western artists were, therefore, in general, dishonest profiteers. A perfect example of this was Salvador Dalí - nicknamed 'Avida Dollars' by André Breton (Pine 2007, 12) - who had publicly admitted his preference for money over any artistic value (Lebedev 1962, 60). Artists, however, were not the only profiteers in the Western art system, among them the same criticism also included art dealers. And in this regard, in an article by Igor' Golomshtok (1959, 24) there is an interesting reference to the fact that art dealers in the West made money from tachist artworks painted by monkeys. On investigation, it was discovered that Golomshtok's accusation referred to the *Paintings by Chimpanzees* exhibition, held in 1957 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The event, organised by the English zoologist Desmond Morris, who was also a surrealist painter, presented to the public the abstract paintings of two chimpanzees: Betsy from the Baltimore Zoo and Congo from the London Zoo. The exhibition had a specific scientific purpose: to present the results of Morris's research that demonstrated how chimpanzees were able to control visual patterns that are the basis of artistic creation, and therefore to produce, albeit in a primitive way, works of art (Coles 2016; Morris 1962, 13-14). Morris later admitted that, on this occasion, a serious mistake was made: the Institute of Contemporary Arts put up for sale, at high prices, all the 24 artworks exhibited that had been made by Congo. He realised that this could compromise the seriousness and scientificity of the experiment in the eyes of public opinion, and decided to stop the sales, but by then it was too late: almost all the artworks had already been purchased (Morris 1962, 27-8). Regretfully, he admitted that the press, for the most part, did not understand the meaning of the exhibition:

One or two art critics recognised that it was a serious experiment but of course the tabloids just had fun with it. There were two errors: one was to say it was rubbish and just random dots which it wasn't, and the other was to say that Congo was a brilliant artist, which he wasn't. He was just struggling to try and begin to

organise patterns. One reviewer reviewed him as though he was a major artist. That annoyed me too because it was mocking of a different kind. They are not great works of art, but they are extraordinary records of an experiment which proves beyond doubt that we aren't the only species that can control visual patterns. Controlling visual patterns is the essence of art - that's what visual art is. (Coles 2016)

The story of this exhibition inspired Iuliĭ Ganf's cartoon *He's Aping* [fig. 6], published in *Krokodil* in 1958. In a studio, a chimpanzee dressed as an artist is making an informal painting using one hand and a brush. He doesn't seem fully aware of what he is doing: he has dirtied the wall, the floor and even his smock. In the foreground, a painter, whose attributes (beret, glasses, thin moustache, pipe and a bottle of alcohol in his pocket) makes one think of a bohemian, carefully copies every stroke and stain of the chimpanzee's painting. In the background on the left, there is a painting hanging on the wall, in which we can distinguish a cylinder, juggling balls and an audience of spectators. The subject depicted could be a circus show, and therefore an allusion to the painter's scoundrelly deed, devoted like a 'clown', to amaze and deceive the public by any means, even by using a trained monkey. This cartoon, in addition to denouncing the unscrupulousness of Western artists, raised a fundamental question that emerged from Morris's experiment and was promptly underlined by Soviet criticism: informal art, unlike realistic art, could also be successfully achieved by monkeys (Abalkin 1958, 247).¹⁶ This kind of art therefore lowered man to the level of animals, "extinguishing" the artists' consciousness in the creative act (Lebedev 1962, 72, 81). It followed that the truly 'backward'¹⁷ art was the informal one, as it resulted in a manifestation of relegation in the evolutionary line of man, while the figurative one represented the right way to artistic progress.

¹⁶ Morris's experiment was also the object of ridicule in the famous triptych by Fëdor Reshetnikov *The Secrets of Abstractionism* (1958), a parody of the evolution of abstract art, in which the monkey Betsy appears intent on painting in the company of a monstrous capitalist and hired art critics. For more information on this artwork, see Reshetnikov 1963.

¹⁷ The accusation of backwardness of Soviet art, since it is figurative and impervious to the innovations of informal art, was one of the strong points of Western criticism (Guber 1957, 65). For further information see Bertelé 2020, 223-6.



Figure 6 Lulii Ganf, *He's Aping*. 1958. Published in *Krokodil*, 6, 1958

5 Contemporary Bourgeois Art Exhibitions Are not Visited

The artists and art historians, who in those years had the privilege of going abroad to visit international exhibitions, such as the *Expo 58* and the Venice Biennale exhibitions, unanimously ascertained that the exhibition halls were almost entirely deserted (Ivanov 1957, 22; Goncharov 1958, 7; Viaznikov 1958, 55; Zardarian 1959, 25). With regard to the Biennale, the artists Ivanov (1957, 22) and Zardarian (1959, 25) made unfair comparisons between the streets, squares and museums of Venice filled with tourists and the absence of visitors at the International Art Exhibition. Naturally, the USSR pavilion was an exception, which according to Soviet reports was the most visited in 1956, with 188,000 visitors overall (Guber 1957, 65), and heavily visited in 1960, with 4,000 visitors a day (Goriainov 1960). However, these numbers must be considered with extreme caution. In the case of the 1956 Biennale, there is, for example, an unofficial source, which contradicts them: Romén Nazirov (1934-2004), a student of linguistics at the time, refers in his diary entries to the failure of the Soviet pavilion.

Рассказывают, на Венецианской всемирной выставке изобразительного искусства наше изобразительное искусство потерпело сокрушительный провал. Советские залы были совершенно пусты, а все другие залы заполнены восторженной толпой. Смотрели сюрреалистов, всяческих формалистов, а советские залы пустовали: соцреализм заставляет их просто зевать. (Nazirov 2016, 78 quoted in Chuprinin 2020, 254)

It is said that at the world exhibition of figurative art in Venice our figurative art has suffered a terrible failure. The Soviet halls were completely empty, while all the other halls were filled with an enthusiastic crowd. [People] looked at the surrealists, formalists of all kinds, but the Soviet halls were empty: socialist realism simply forced them to yawn.

Beyond the question of the actual presence in the pavilions of the Biennale, it is interesting to note how Soviet criticism used this argument to demonstrate the supremacy of socialist realism over contemporary Western art. It was believed that the cause of the absence of the public at exhibitions in the West was due to the prevalence of informal works of art (Viaznikov 1958, 55; Goncharov 1958, 7; Goriainov 1962, 22), because they were incomprehensible to ordinary visitors and unable to meet their aesthetic needs. Then, the disappointment and irritation for the time wasted took over the visitors, who generally decided not to go to the exhibitions anymore (Lebedev 1962, 3-4). According to Viaznikov (1958, 55), the few people who visited the *50 ans d'art moderne* exhibition in Brussels were

attracted by simple curiosity and not by the desire to experience aesthetic pleasure. To support the theory that the widespread contempt for informal art in the West was the reason for the absence of an audience at exhibitions, in his article he employed the demagogical expedient of reporting the judgment of an ordinary person, which showed that the Soviet critical view was shared by the Western *vox populi*:

Я спросил служителя павильона, пожилого бельгийца: хотел бы он иметь у себя дома самое лучшее из выставленных здесь абстрактных полотен?

- Что вы, что вы, никогда! - сказал он и замахал обеими руками. (Viaznikov 1958, 55)

I asked the employee of the pavilion, an elderly Belgian gentleman, if he would like to have the best of the abstract paintings on display here in his home.

He replied by waving both hands:

- But what are you saying, what are you saying, never!

The theme of the absence of the public at contemporary Western art exhibitions was addressed by Kukryniksy in the cartoon "Art" and Life [fig. 7], published in *Krokodil* in 1956. The image, at first appearing romantic, shows a young couple kissing in a room set up with sculptures and informal artworks. At the top right there is a caption that explains the meaning of the scene:

На международной художественной выставке «Пьеннале» в Венеции многие павильоны заполнены абстрактными «произведениями». Как правило, эти павильоны совсем не посещаются зрителями.

At the international art exhibition "P'ennali" in Venice, many pavilions are filled with abstract "artworks". Usually, these pavilions are not visited by spectators at all.

In addition to the usual derogatory use of quotation marks, in this case for the terms 'art' and 'artworks',¹⁸ it is interesting to note the distortion of the term 'Biennale' into 'P'ennali' - pronounced 'Pien-nali' -, which, in our opinion, could be a play on words based on the Italian adjective *pieno* (full), aimed at ironically highlighting the fact that the halls of the pavilions are empty because they are full of informal artworks. At the bottom of the cartoon, the wording "Павильон

18 In the caption, the Russian word 'artworks' is also distorted.

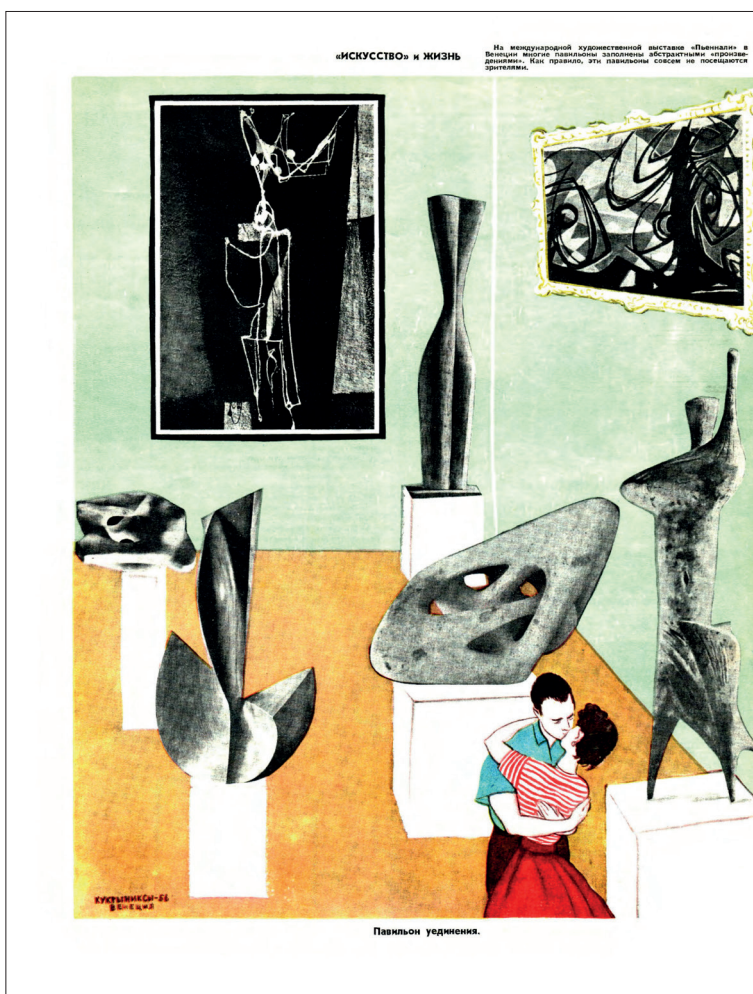


Figure 7 Kukryniks, "Art" and Life. 1956. Published in *Krokodil*, 23, 1956

удинения" (The isolation pavilion) is displayed, which explains the reason for the presence of the couple in the scene: in Venice, for lovers there is no better place to hide from prying eyes than the empty pavilions of contemporary Western art.

In the narrative proposed by Soviet criticism, Western audiences, fed up with the predominance of informal art, no longer went to exhibitions, however, when artworks of socialist realism were on display, they did not hesitate to return.

6 The Success of Informal Art Is Determined by the Support Given to It by the Capitalist Elite

Although informal art, in the eyes of Soviet criticism, was incomprehensible, ugly, poorly made and to be despised, it was the most widespread and successful artistic direction in the West. The same criticism ascribed the fictitious success of this kind of art to the activity of a small circle of people who financed it, ensuring that it was exhibited, advertised, published and purchased. Behind this operation there would have been the capitalists (Viaznikov 1958, 55; Zardarian 1959, 26; Lebedev 1960; 1962, 86), who were implementing a very specific plan. By promoting informal art at the expense of realistic art, they had created a system that in fact forced artists, who aspired to assert themselves, to produce non-figurative artworks (Viaznikov 1958, 55; Lebedev 1960, 21). The myth of Western art as a synonym of freedom was therefore false. It was instead “Искусство в оковах” (an art in chains), as Lebedev (1962) stated in the evocative title of his book, because it imposed on the artists “Духовное рабство” (a spiritual slavery) (Viaznikov 1958, 55) that forced them to satisfy the wishes and whims of patrons and collectors (Lebedev 1962, 86-7). But why would the capitalists go to such lengths to support and finance informal art? According to Soviet criticism, the capitalists were afraid of the development, in the West, of social realism. In fact, informal art, empty and decorative, was a means of distracting the masses from social problems and daily needs; while social realism was a means of knowledge of reality and its contradictions opened the eyes of the masses and could undermine capitalism by contributing to its collapse (Zardarian 1959, 26; Guber 1959, 23; Lebedev 1960, 21). The cartoon *The Art Connoisseurs* [fig. 8] by the Danish Communist artist Herluf Bidstrup,¹⁹ published in *Tvorchestvo* magazine in 1961, perfectly illustrates this idea. In this image the reactions of the bourgeois to paintings of different styles are represented: a chubby man looks hungrily at the food present in a still life; a couple argues in front of a desolate landscape; three men look with keen interest at a sensual female nude; another couple is delighted in front of a painting depicting a poor beggar; two others enthusiastically admire a landscape in the style of Van Gogh; a trio carefully analyzes a cubist still life; and a couple looks at a Picassian portrait with some perplexity. But when some of the visitors to the exhibition come across a portrait of a muscular worker, a symbol of the working class, who menacingly pulls up his sleeves to fight, the bourgeois flee in terror.

19 The publication of this cartoon by Bidstrup is a valid example of the extensive campaign of promotion of Western pro-Soviet art in the USSR, aimed at demonstrating the spread of Marxist ideological-artistic principles in the West.

7 Conclusion

These contemptuous and severe judgments by Soviet critics of 'contemporary Western bourgeois art' appear as an expression of the policy of Peaceful Coexistence, under which the improvement of trade and international relations with capitalist states did not in any way imply a retreat in ideological positions (Khrushchev 1959, 5). The Soviet ideology had to be reaffirmed and re-launched with force, even in the field of the arts, as an instrument to win the competition with the West. From this point of view, Soviet criticism did not limit itself to demonising contemporary European and American art, but took care to recontextualise it within the framework of Soviet artistic theory, offering readers ideologically correct explanations and interpretations, in order to prevent the spread of Western artistic ideas and influences. At the same time, the critics tried to exploit the direct comparison between Western art and Soviet art to give new life to the latter, arguing that the citizens of the USSR, by deepening their knowledge of Western artistic trends, would consequently appreciate socialist realism more (Zardarian 1959, 26; Ivanov quoted in Prokofiev 1959, 23). As for the cartoons, it should be noted that they constituted a means of propaganda useful to support, even by means of a visual language, the work of the criticism. The unfamiliarity of Soviet citizens with contemporary Western art could have made it difficult to read the articles dedicated to it, and therefore the cartoons had the function of disseminating, through entertaining and easily understandable images, the correct ideological interpretations formulated by the critics themselves. Finally, it must be considered that this artistic-ideological campaign, by publishing a large amount of material on Western art, such as cartoons, images of artworks and descriptions of new artistic processes, indirectly provided useful information to all those young Soviet artists who had already questioned socialist realism and who were looking for new ways of expression. Here, we do not have room to go into detail on the results of this campaign, however it seems interesting to us to report as a conclusion the acute judgment of Golomshtok, which summarizes well the results of the competition between the USSR and the West on the arts front in the context of Peaceful Coexistence:

But, as always, the country's rulers understood the widening of cultural links as merely the extension of Soviet ideology abroad. Against an influence in the opposite direction they deployed an efficient enough propaganda apparatus of mis-information and non-information. But this time the effect was the opposite of that desired: the stock of Socialist Realism hardly rose at all in the art world of the West, whereas Western culture, formerly only

glimpsed through chinks in the Iron Curtain, became for the wider Soviet intelligentsia a light in the darkness, a beacon of freedom and a model for imitation. (Golomshtok 1977, 89)

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