

# The Inrush and Regress of Modernity. The Demise of the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts

Wiktor Komorowski

The Courtauld Institute of Art, UK

**Abstract** In 1955, the Biennial of Graphic Arts was inaugurated for the first time in Ljubljana (Yugoslavia). Its major diplomatic goal was to provide a regional alternative to the Venice Biennale and champion the Cold War East-West power division. Its formula quickly spread across the world, mostly thanks to members of International Association of Art Critics (AICA), who often sat on the juries of graphic art exhibitions. One of the sister shows that sprang to life following the example set by Ljubljana's show was the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts (Międzynarodowe Biennale Grafiki). When in 1966 the members of the Krakow's branch of Polish Association of Artists and Designers organized the 1st International Biennial of Graphic Arts, even in their wildest dreams they could not expect how significant their exhibition would become in the next 15 years. After the introduction of martial law in the Polish People's Republic, the operation of the Artists' Association was suspended and subsequently dissolved. Considering these events, the members of the Krakow's branch of Artists' Association refused to stage the Biennial despite the authorities insisting on preparing the show. When martial law was abolished in 1983, the exhibition returned, however many artists still decided to boycott the state supported event. The once great festival of international cultural diplomacy turned out to be an impossible desire. Finally, this paper also explores the last three editions of the Krakow Biennial (1984, 1986, 1988), focusing on the tensions introduced by martial law and the subsequent demise of its myth.

**Keywords** Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts. Modernism. Desire. Prints. Demise.

**Summary** 1 The International Network of Graphic Art Biennials. – 2 The Greatest (Yet Uneasy) Adventure of Polish Graphics. – 3 Against the Cold War Parochialism. – 4 The Mimetic Desire. – 5 The Turning Point. – 6 Just Another Exhibition.

The exhibition studies often concentrate on stories of significant success and put in the research perspective the politics that brought a particular event to successful execution. Very rarely exhibition studies discuss the fall

or dissolution of major, high-budget, periodic art shows.<sup>1</sup> Studies on failure emerge infrequently and debates attempting to uncover the reasons that led to a dissolution of major exhibiting projects are even scarcer.

This essay attempts to shed more light to the history of the decline of one of the biggest in terms of the volume of submitted works biennials that emerged on the Soviet side of the Iron Curtain, exploring the reasons behind the demise of the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts (Międzynarodowe Biennale Grafiki w Krakowie). This Biennial was established in 1966 as a bottom up project by a group of Polish printmakers with the consent of the communist authorities. The event was intended to become an important tool for decentralizing cultural politics in the country, as well as to become one of the new tools for implementing the Brezhnev-era cultural diplomacy. Unofficially, the Biennial was devised to become a materialization of a long emancipation process initiated by a group of artists who struggled with censorship and who attempted to overcome parochialism introduced by the Cold War geographical divisions. Right from its inception, the Biennial's organizers insisted on maximal internationalization of the show; a strategy that in the late 1980s paradoxically contributed to the progressing demise of Krakow Biennial. This essay highlights the long road the Biennial went from the rising star on the map of the early globalized art world, to the show ridiculed by the critics, weighted down by a constant influx of politically clichéd artworks selected by the jury.

## 1 The International Network of Graphic Art Biennials

The Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts was set up in 1966 as the second oldest graphic art exhibition in the Eastern Bloc and became one of the several graphic art exhibitions which followed the format of the oldest of periodic graphic art shows in the region – the archetypical Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, which was founded in 1955. Between 1955 and 1975 graphic art exhibitions with a program modeled on Ljubljana's spread all across the world, from Tokyo to San Juan. These exhibitions drew from the model developed in Ljubljana and formed a quasi-network of events, which invited the same jury members, awarded prizes to the same sets of artists, and devised a similar method for selecting works for display. The common characteristics of these shows, regardless of geographic location, was a strong emphasis put on the internationalization and inclusivity. These exhibitions were early indicators of the globalization processes of the post-World War II art world.

The catalyst for disseminating the Ljubljana's format were the jury members, who traveled between different exhibitions and helped to spread the word about the new exhibitions. In the case of the International Biennial of Graphic Arts, the key figure for the process was a Polish art historian Mieczysław Porębski working as a jury member at the 3rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts of 1959 (cf. "III Międzynarodowe Biennale Grafiki" 1970) [fig. 1].

<sup>1</sup> An exception to this trend is the studies on the 34th edition of the 1968 Venice Biennale, see Collicelli, Martini 2020, 83-100. For the overview of troubled politics of the Venice Biennale see Portinari 2022, 81-98.



**Figure 1** Jury examining the prints at the 3rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, 1959. From the left: M. Porębski, J. Leymarie, N. Abe, G. Marchiori, P. Floud. The National Digital Archive, Warsaw

Porębski, along with another Polish art historian active in Ljubljana – Ryszard Stanisławski, brought their experience to Poland where they became jury members for the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts transferring the matrix of modernization ideas from Ljubljana to Krakow.

In the Eastern Bloc countries, graphic art exhibitions were quickly appropriated for the purpose of promoting a positive image of socialism and utilized for the needs of cultural Cold War. Following the ground-breaking exhibition titled *Art in Socialist Countries* held in Moscow in 1958-59, an entire wave of periodic cultural events aimed at developing comparative and confrontational modes of discussing art came to life (Reid 2016, 270).

The Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts also belonged to this wave of new cultural ventures and had similar foundations to Ljubljana's Biennial of Graphic Art. Both Krakow's and Ljubljana's exhibitions were designed to maximize international participation, expose the exhibition to the widest possible international audience and demonstrate the superiority of the locally produced graphic art over the prints submitted from the Western countries.

## 2 The Greatest (Yet Uneasy) Adventure of Polish Graphics

In the title of the book devoted to the first edition of the Biennial, Zofia Gołubiew described the year 1966 as the onset of the "greatest adventure of Polish graphics" (Wróblewska et al. 2006a). It is worth noting that then both graphic genres – workshop graphic art and graphic design – received equal exposure at their own international events. The 1st International Graphic Biennial was organized in Krakow, and the 1st International Poster

Biennial in Warsaw.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, both events celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first editions. As noted by Andrzej Banach, the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts was a kind of extension of the formula of the pre-war International Woodcut Exhibition in Warsaw.

In 1933 and 1936 there were two editions organized by the Institute of Art Propaganda (Banach 1966, 24-6). It was not until 1966 that the organizers of the Krakow Biennial secured permission to invite artists from abroad. It is worth noting that the idea of setting up an international exhibition of prints in Krakow can be traced back to the late 1950s. However the Krakow's community of artists could not convince the central authorities who were reluctant to any international initiative, especially those which were proposed beyond Warsaw. Despite their efforts, the centralized authorities showed no interest in organizing a competition with international reach. Krakow was treated as a provincial city, while graphic art, as a reproducible medium, was still widely disrespected.

Even though the ideas of the printmakers from Krakow were treated with a significant degree of skepticism and mistrust, the authorities finally recognized their plea by granting them a permission to organize a show with a nationwide outreach. The striving of the artists in Krakow brought to life the Polish Nationwide Biennial of Graphic Art, which was a watershed for the printmakers in Krakow and was the key event that altered their position. The Biennial established in 1960 on the initiative of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers. Three editions were held in the years 1960, 1962, and 1964. The first and third editions took place at the Palace of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts (Palace of Arts) in Krakow, and the second at the National Museum in Krakow. This periodic event gathered and displayed prints from across the Polish People's Republic and replaced the Nationwide Exhibition of Graphic Art and Drawing (namely *Ogólnopolska Wystawa Grafiki i Rysunku*), which had been regularly organized since 1956.<sup>3</sup> Its limited scope was far insufficient for the growing aspirations of Krakow's printmakers, who established their own event that was independent from the centralized authority and the Central Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions (*Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych*).<sup>4</sup> The Nationwide Biennial was the first sign of consolidation among Krakow's printmakers, and a significant step towards setting the foundation for the emergence of the International Biennial of Graphic Arts.

The strict regulations ruled out the possibility of submitting monotype prints, which aroused contradictory feelings in the community due to the popularity of this technique at the time. Only works made on clichés were eligible for the national competition, which made it possible to obtain more prints (Bogucki 1960, 30). The decision to exclude monotype techniques from the competition may have been due to the broad definition of this medium, which can refer to almost any technology that uses printing methods. Traditionally, the monotype process used a copper etching plate as the matrix, but in contemporary work it can vary from zinc to glass to

<sup>2</sup> For the history of the International Poster Biennial in Warsaw, see Matul 2015, 15-41.

<sup>3</sup> The 1st Nationwide Exhibition of Graphic Art and Drawing took place at CBWA in Warsaw from 1 June until 2 July 1956. The exhibition of the second edition of the show was open between April 7 and 3 May 1959. See Egit-Pużyńska 2021, 46.

<sup>4</sup> See also Jakimowicz 1997, 225.

acrylic glass. The monotype process also produces a unique print and thus for some critics it does not fall under the definition of 'reproducible' medium.

The 1st Polish Biennial of Graphic Art gathered 412 works by 159 artists. Lucjan Mianowski was awarded one of the main prizes for a print titled *Jeune fille à Paris*. In 1956, Mianowski graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, after completing his studies in graphic art at the studio of Konrad Srzednicki.<sup>5</sup> His diploma from the Academy earned him much acclaim. In 1959, Mianowski received a scholarship from the French Government to study at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in the lithography studio of Pierre Clairin. Mianowski studied there between 1959 and 1960 and later between 1963 and 1964.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Lucjan Mianowski and Tadeusz Łapinski were the two printmakers recognized internationally, who had the opportunity to travel and gain international experience.<sup>6</sup> By recognizing Mianowski's work, the jury of the show clearly set the tone for future editions of this show, which were meant to become a quest for avant-garde solutions and boldly look to the West. The Nationwide Biennial in Krakow was organized also in 1962 and 1964, with a similar outreach and similar strategy of amassing possibly the biggest number of participants, especially young artists and recent graduates of academies of fine art. The strategy paid off and the fourth edition of the show planned for 1966 was already turned into an international event.

### 3 Against the Cold War Parochialism

From the very beginning, the International Biennial of Graphic Arts was funded by the Ministry of Culture and Art and the municipal budget of the City of Krakow. Thorough preparations for the establishment of the first edition began with a personal invitation to all foreign artists who, according to the organizers, might be interested in participating in the competition. This rule was not implemented in the case of Polish artists to whom no invitations were sent. In subsequent editions of the Biennial, most artists sent their works on their own initiative, but the organizers sent invitations to select, well-known artists. This practice allowed organizers to expand the international outreach of the project and significantly increased its prestige.

Invitations were sent out abroad to all likely participants, but at home no names were specified for it was decided to select works in open competition. In view of the limited exhibition space and the need to maintain a clearness of display, the selectors chose 1,000 entries, including some 700 prints from abroad. The exhibition, which was general in scope and contemporary in form, provided insight into present-day graphic art standards of forty countries and a review of all conceivable techniques. On show there were works by many of the world's most famous artists. The immensity and

<sup>5</sup> On this artist see Nosek 2002, 27.

<sup>6</sup> In 1961, Łapiński's lithographs were noticed at an exhibition in Toronto by Gustave von Groschwitz, who, at that time, was a senior curator at the Cincinnati Art Museum and who was known as the founder of the International Biennial of Contemporary Colour Lithography. On his invitation, in 1963 Łapiński moved to the United States, where he received the position of 'artist in residence' at the Pratt Graphic Center in New York. See Stapowicz 2007, 59.

richness of the display simultaneously posed the danger that the viewer might be overwhelmed by a cacophony of different motifs.

The main exhibition of the Biennial took place at the Palace of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts (Pałac Sztuki) and in the newly built Exhibition Pavilion of the Art Exhibitions Bureau (currently the Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery).<sup>7</sup> The new building provided ideal conditions for organizing large exhibitions. The first edition amassed an overwhelming number of 1,003 prints by 134 authors representing 41 countries (Skrzynecki 1966).<sup>8</sup> The main organizing bodies included the Ministry of Culture and Arts, the Presidium of the People's Council in the City of Krakow, and the Association of Polish Artists and Designers. In this way, the organizers received legitimacy from all political levels – the central, the regional, and the professional. The Biennial was organized under the protection of Józef Cyrankiewicz, the Prime Minister of the Polish People's Republic.

The importance and breakthrough of this event was not immediately noticed. Jacek Gaj, a Polish master of copperplate etching, recalled: “for the artists this undertaking was almost unreal, the importance of this event was absolutely beyond comprehension” (2006, 79). The event was endorsed by the President of Krakow's branch of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (ZPAP) and also, thanks to the support of Lucjan Motyka, by the Committee of Culture at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party.

The initiators of the 1st Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts were Witold Skulicz, Mieczysław Wejman, Włodzimierz Kunz, and Konrad Srzednicki. Two of them, Wejman and Skulicz, held the main organizational duties, while Srzednicki and Kunz performed supportive roles. Konrad Srzednicki was the most senior out of the four, and also a long-time member of the teaching body of the Krakows Fine Arts Academy. Skulicz, Wejman, Kunz, and Srzednicki were working at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow and were members of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (ZPAP). The academy and the association became two progressive bodies which swelled the ranks of the Biennial's organizational committee.

#### 4 The Mimetic Desire

The Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts came to life during politically turbulent times. Due to its international character, the edition was organized with a number of self-imposed political precautions by the organizational committee. Around 1966 many Polish citizens still had fresh in their memories the fate of Antoni Słonimski, Karol Estreicher and 32 other repressed members of cultural life in Polish People's Republic who in 1964 signed the *Letter of 34*, addressed to Józef Cyrankiewicz in defense

<sup>7</sup> The Exhibition Pavilion (BWA Gallery in Krakow) was built in 1965. The Biennial and later the triennial of graphic arts were organized there. The tradition was taken over recently by Bunkier Sztuki (Contemporary Art Gallery in Krakow).

<sup>8</sup> The 1st International Poster Biennial in Warsaw exhibited 608 posters of 349 designers from 32 countries. See “608 prac 349 autorów na I Międzynarodowym Biennale Plakatu w Warszawie” 1966.

of the right of free speech (Eisler 1993).<sup>9</sup> Lucjan Motyka, who acted as the Minister of Culture at the time of opening of the first edition recalls that, despite the tense atmosphere, the biennial was organized without any official interference from the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (Motyka 2015, 105-6). However, there were two top-down conditions on which the biennial could be brought to life. The first one mentioned an obligation to invite artists from the Soviet Union. The second one assumed that a section titled *The Man and the Contemporary World* would be established to award prizes to the works that approached problems of the contemporary world, often related to a specific socialist ideology promoted at the time by the authorities. This part of the biennial was meant to function almost as an independent and parallel competition to the main contest, a biennial within a biennial.

Interestingly, the main prizes were awarded mostly to representatives of the Western schools of graphic art in order to promote the biennial on the international arena as a modern and progressive event and to maintain a degree of curatorial and artistic autonomy from the communist authorities. Since 1966 until 1988 only artists from the West and Polish artists won the main prize. The Grand Prix of 1966 in the open section of the exhibition was awarded to a Japanese printmaker, Kumi Sugai. The decision to honor Sugai had more of an artistic foundation, rather than political. Kumi Sugai was part of the first generation of twentieth-century Japanese artists to become acquainted with Western painting techniques, but he also explored both typography and Japanese calligraphy, which were important in his graphic art.

Sugai dedicated himself to painting, occasionally working with other media such as prints. He moved to Paris in 1952, enrolling at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. In 1962 he began to shift away from the abstraction that was in vogue on his arrival in Paris, moving from calligraphic, mainly monochromatic, organic motifs to more hard-edge geometric imagery. In 1966, Sugai was already a well-recognized artist. He participated in the Pittsburgh International (now Carnegie International) five times between 1955 and 1970; Exposition Universelle in Brussels in 1958; documenta in Kassel in 1959 and 1964; and the São Paulo Biennial where in 1956 he obtained the Prize for Foreign Artist. As a member of École de Paris, his name on the list of prize winners was the best testimony to the direction that the biennial organizers would like to assume with their show. The biennial was meant to become one of the global centers where graphic art would be judged and discussed, not different from the events on the other side of the Iron Curtain. In 1966, Sugai reached the top of his career. The recognition Sugai received in Krakow can be seen as an example of Westernization of the Krakow Biennial and manifestation of more particular interest of its organizers who were looking to strengthen the biennial's position by awarding prizes to the 'big names' of the contemporary graphic art world.

The Grand Prix in the 'Man and the Contemporary World' section went to Hannes Postma, who was a Dutch printmaker educated at the

<sup>9</sup> The *Letter of 34* was a two-sentence protest letter prepared by Polish intellectuals in a protest against censorship. The letter was addressed to the Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz. It was delivered on 14 March 1964. The letter resulted in repression of its signatories. A Polish writer, Melchior Wańkowicz faced the most severe repressions and was sentenced to three years in prison. The sentence was later suspended by the authorities to avoid public criticism. For the history of the consequences the signatories faced, see Łuczak 2022.



Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. His oeuvre consists of prints that sought a connection with the New Figuration, combining figurative with abstract elements. In his prints, the viewer can occasionally find recognizable figurative motifs, such as human figures; torsos or limbs seem to float through space. The decision to award Postma a prize was a surprise. An even bigger surprise was the fact that his work was an example of colorful abstract figuration that did not allude to any political events nor was it clearly relating to socialist internationalism. Even though this decision was unexpected, there was a strong reasoning behind it. In April 1966, right before the opening of the 1st Krakow Biennial, the Central Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Warsaw organized a blockbuster exhibition titled *Contemporary Tendencies. Painting from the Collection of Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven* (Współczesne tendencje. Malarstwo ze zbiorów Stedelijk Museum w Amsterdamie i Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum w Eindhoven) (Potocka 1996). The main organizer of the exhibition was Edy de Wilde, who, from 1946 until 1963, worked as director at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and from 1963 until 1985 led the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (Verhulst 2002). This exhibition introduced many works of Western artists, including apparently neutral Dutch artists. Postma was then a safe choice which would neither stir much controversy nor it would be too conservative to spoil the efforts towards modernization of the biennial the organizers had assumed.

The selection of prints recognized with the main prizes was, in fact, an amalgam of different tendencies in printmaking, which reflects the abundance of trends presented at the biennial. Finding one key which might explain the choices made by the jury is impossible, however until the 1980s the show insisted on the internationalization of the list of invited guests as well as it supported the idea of confrontation between the representatives from the Western countries with the artists from the Eastern bloc. A Polish printmaker and one of the organizers of the biennial, Ryszard Otręba recalled that there was no singular overarching policy, and every prize was discussed and justified separately (Raczek-Karcz 2019, 53). Interestingly, the only policy that ruled the selection process was the diversity and parity to include some number of prints from the East and keep the distribution of topics and countries awarded evenly. Interestingly, while the award of the Grand Prix usually stirred up heated debates, the main prizes usually went unnoticed. In fact, those prizes were given for actual artistic merit and the printmakers who received one of the main prizes either excelled in technical aspects or the program they proposed in their work was particularly compelling.

The deliberate attempts to open the Krakow Biennial to the contemporary Western artistic trends were quickly spotted by critics. Sławomir Bołdok, who wrote for one of the most important Polish art magazines *Przegląd Artystyczny* (which was published by Krakow's branch of Polish Artists' Union) noted:

I have a great deal of respect for the jury of this year's edition of the Biennial, however, I keep my right to disagree with their judgements. I think that Hannes Postma from Holland and Kumi Sugai from École de Paris received the Grand Prix not just because of the pure artistic merit of their works. [...] I think that the jury followed the current international



vogue for op-art and abstraction and their decision presents a compromise between pure abstract art, and subtle Japanese prints. (Bołdok 1967, 3-10)

Bołdok's observation, although fueled by a sentiment for the local Krakow school of graphic art, seems to raise a valid point. From almost 1,000 prints selected by the jury for the first edition of the biennial, the majority seemed to be works representing variations on abstract art. This trend is particularly visible in the works of the members of École de Paris and other well-established artists of that time such as Hans Hartung or Henry Moore (Haber 2015, 27-33). Other significant entries included op-art works by Getulio Alviani and Victor Vasarely, who held particularly high esteem among critics and received prizes in 1966 and in 1968. A particularly strong representation came from Japanese artists, such as Yozo Hamaguchi or Kunihiro Amano. Japanese artists submitted possibly the most technically advanced works, which often combined traditional woodcut techniques with contemporary motives.

Although the Graphic Art Biennial in Krakow was not a ground-breaking novelty on the European stage, the initial editions still required complex thinking and compromises from all the organizers due to the fact that they did not operate with a full degree of political freedom.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, it was agreed that two parallel prizes would be awarded, which corresponded to the thematic division into two categories. As Maria Hussakowska, an art historian and critic associated with Krakow, recalled, the emphasis was placed on keeping the right proportions between artists from the Soviet Union and those from other countries (Hussakowska 2006, 21). Another requirement was the presence of at least one Soviet jury member (Skulicz 1970, 16). The composition of the international jury had to be approved each time by the Ministry of Culture and Art and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. If the organizational committee wanted to invite a judge from the Federal Republic of Germany, for example, a judge from the German Democratic Republic had to be present. This procedure was long, and the approval of the authorities had to be obtained with regard to the program of foreign visitors' stays, which included, among others, trips to Wieliczka and Zakopane, or rafting down the Dunajec River (Górka-Czarnecka 2006, 88). Despite these limitations resulting from the cultural policy of the authorities, in the opinion of the organizers, the biennial was considered a success of Polish art on the international stage.

After the first edition, it was time for press reviews that insisted on the extension of the Biennial program with new artistic ventures. From the very beginning, the Biennial was to be a meeting between artists – art practitioners and theorists. It seems like one of the main objectives of the organizational committee was that the biennial would become a “mental space”: a place where practice and art theory met in the international arena, becoming a platform for exchanging ideas and confronting various creative attitudes (Bogucki 1961, 2) [fig. 2].

<sup>10</sup> The Organizing Committee of the first edition also included: Konrad Srzednicki, Tadeusz Jackowski, Włodzimierz Kunz, Grzegorz Napieracz, Andrzej Pietsch, Tadeusz Zachariasiewicz.



**Figure 2** The 2nd Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts, Palace of Art, 1968.  
The National Digital Archive, Warsaw

It can be argued that this aspiration for modernization can be compared to the socio-psychological mechanism termed by René Girard the ‘mimetic desire’ (1965, 24).<sup>11</sup> The desire mechanism described by Girard assumes two patterns of influence. The internal mediation is based on the direct competition between the imitator and the model, potentially leading to rivalry and conflict. In the external mediation, on the other hand, the model is mediated ‘from the outside’ meaning the model doesn’t become a direct obstacle to the imitator’s desire. In case of the Krakow Biennial, the internal mediation was likely not at play, as such pattern would only have occurred if the organizers had become influenced by Western models of cultural production and strived to directly transfer these Western solutions to home ground. This did not happen, as the organizers attempted to create their own glocalised version of the periodic exhibition and tailor it to their own local needs. The latter process described by Girard, external desire, is therefore more fitting in this case.

## 5 The Turning Point

A major catalyst for the demise of the Biennial’s formula came in 1981, when martial law was introduced in the Polish People’s Republic on the morning of Sunday 13 December. The Association of Polish Artists and Designers was among the first professional bodies to openly express support for the strikes in Gdansk. Due to the lack of loyalty among the Polish representatives of the Association of Polish Artist and Designers (ZPAP), the operation of the union

<sup>11</sup> For a breakdown of Girard’s mimetic theory, see Palaver 2013, 33-134 and also Golsan 1993, 29-30.

was suspended the same day martial law was introduced. The Association of Polish Artists and Designers was responsible for organizing events and exhibitions and its branch in Krakow was responsible for bringing to life the International Biennale of Graphic Arts.

In 1982, after eight successful editions, the Biennial was not held. The authorities feared that the printmakers would turn the event into a protest and wanted to maintain the status quo.

Paradoxically, the period of martial law provided a strong creative stimulus for artists, despite the obstacles they faced. It had the opposite effect on cultural life in Poland than the authorities had intended. In 1984, when martial law was finally abolished, exhibiting activities resumed, but many Polish artists still refused to take part in an event sponsored by the state. They joined the so-called Ruch Kultury Niezależnej (the Independent Culture Movement), an informal and illegal formation which had to seek alternative spaces for exhibiting. The Catholic Church in Poland cooperated as allies with artists, transforming churches into temporary art galleries: one such event was the Anti-Biennial of 1984 organized in the cellar of the Church of Saint Maksymilian Kolbe in Mistrzejowice in Nowa Huta. The Anti-Biennial displayed everything that the State-supported Biennial could not and therefore resembled a true Bakhtinian carnivalesque, just like in the prints of Romuald Oramus, who presented his cycle entitled *Rituals*. The graphics from the *Rituals* series were created in exceptional circumstances. Romuald Oramus had his studio in a tenement house on the Market Square in Krakow. From its windows he could see all the demonstrations and activities of the militia.

## 6 Just Another Exhibition

After the watershed of 1982, the Biennial attempted to restore its position by presenting as many examples of Western European, American, and Japanese prints as possible. During these editions, the discussions of new artistic techniques and the problems related to these, including graphic methods (serigraphy, offset, photography, computer graphics, and video) became more prominent (Kowalska 1988, 4). At the same time, in the minds of critics, reflections arose that situate graphics in a rather marginalized position in the field of art. The form of the main exhibition did not change, however, and was still based on the same, simple layout – the works were hung next to each other in several rows on the wall or on specially prepared racks. This was rather surprising because, at that time, other similar biennials around the world experienced more curatorial intervention in the layout of the exhibitions since the large-format graphic sheets (exceeding 100 × 100 cm) became popular in the 1980s.

The 9th edition of the Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts finally took place in 1984. At that time, the date of the biennial was changed from June (all previous editions took place this month) to September. The jury, headed by its Chairman Włodzimierz Kunz, awarded the Grand Prix to Walter Valentini from Italy (*Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych w Krakowie* 1984). It is significant that one of the members of the jury was the winner of the previous edition, Albin Brunovsky, which was a sign of generational change. The custom of inviting the laureate of the previous competition to the jury committee was practiced twice.

In the description of the preparations for this edition, Andrzej Pietsch emphasized the organizational aspects of the exhibition. The Biennial was not only a platform for presentation of works, but it served also as a platform for theoretical debates.<sup>12</sup> Within the framework of this event, discussions were held on the definition of graphics, the limits of graphics, criteria for the evaluation of submitted works, and the modes of presenting them during the exhibition. According to Pietsch, the Biennial would never be able to fulfill all the expectations, because there is no ideal formula for a competition of this kind. There is no single recipe for dealing with the overwhelming number of works and the simultaneous presentation of each of them in accordance with the intention of the creator.<sup>13</sup> While summing up the main biennial exhibition of 1984, a Polish art critic Stanisław Stopczyk noted moreover that many artists known from the previous edition of the biennial also qualified for the 1984 edition. The assessment of this fact was negative, because the printmakers presented very similar works, which, according to Stopczyk, showed a certain stagnation in the development of the graphic art world, which is a sign of desperation of the jury to maintain the credibility of the event, and to rely on a certain proven 'canon' in graphic art. This was one of the main issues that contributed to the demise of the show, which sometimes resembled a para-private event organized for the state's money.

In 1986, the jury decided to award the Argentinean graphic artist Liliana Porter, which was a rare example of honoring a female artist from Latin America. In relation to the main exhibition of the Biennial of 1986, various allegations were made against the verdict of the jury. On the one hand, it was recognized that honoring so many different works gave the impression that the jury had set itself the goal of recognizing all directions, styles, and trends. On the other hand, there were accusations of a lack of objectivity and the omission of representative trends such as the booming at that time 'Neue Wilde' movement. The 12th edition of the Biennial did not bring a breakthrough and the traditional formula of organizing the main exhibition was exhausted, which was reflected in Polish art critic Bożena Kowalska's diagnosis:

For at least ten years Krakow International Biennial of Graphic Arts has not brought any revelations. There is no revealing of new phenomena here, nor new trends that would herald something that has not yet happened. It is also true that the many recognised graphic artists ignored the show. But these are not the artists from whom one would expect innovative ideological and artistic concepts. They had formulated them long time ago. Such entries are rather expected from young, yet unknown authors. (1986, 3)

According to Kowalska, the Biennial did not stand out with anything new, neither in terms of its direction nor its artistic level. She emphasized that the rules allowing submission in any technique and in any format had not changed in decades. However, this openness, which was once the pride of

<sup>12</sup> For the analysis of the impact of the Biennial in the 1980s on Krakow's circles of printmakers and the value of discussions around the Biennial on the position and understanding of graphic art, see Brdej 2017.

<sup>13</sup> See also "X Międzynarodowe Biennale Grafiki w Krakowie" 1984, 2.

the organizers, had two further consequences. On the one hand, it built up a variety of the show, and on the other hand, it caused trouble to the organizers due to the sheer size of the exhibition.

The peak of criticism came in 1988 which brought the case of Marek Jaromski who received the Grand Prix from the jury. His prize was controversial as he was recognized instead of a Czechoslovak artist, Jiri Anderle, who was at that time much more internationally acclaimed and favored by the critics. The decision to present the main award to Marek Jaromski was rooted in the fact that giving a prize to an international artist would spark more criticism towards the outdated by that time modernization campaign that was still pursued by the biennial's organizers. The titles of Jaromski's prints were also alluding to the vernacularised stories from the New Testament which was meant to become the organizer's answer to the accusations of showiness and excessive internationalization. It was the third prize from the Biennials organizer's in a row for Jaromski, a fact that was widely noted by the press. It was also the last edition of the Biennial under its old management, prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall and its reinstitutionalization in the 1990s.

By 1988, the once great festival of international cultural diplomacy turned into a desire impossible to fulfill and maintain in new political and cultural conditions. The Biennial quickly crumbled under its own political weight, challenged by the outside forces, which pressed the organizers to either terminate the operation or to change its formula. The modernization dream of Krakow's printmakers that assumed staying local but, at the same time, becoming global in the late 1980s became a political burden that could not be held any longer. After 20 years of continuous successes, the modernist legacy of the Krakow Biennial turned this periodic show of graphic art into a scapegoat for the media, changing the once-rising-star Biennial into the so-called "just another exhibition", to use the title of a book by Vittoria Martini and Federica Martini (2011). The great modernization myth became way too heavy to carry on into the new reality after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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