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Transformation of the Canon: Soviet Art Institutions, the Principles of Collecting and Institutionalisation of Contemporary Soviet Art

ABSTRACT

In 1987 the Moscow art scene became preoccupied with the idea of establishing a museum of contemporary art. As Leonid Talochkin, an active member of Moscow alternative artistic life, collector and archivist mentioned in his letter to one of his émigré artist-friends “everyone seemed to have gone mad with all this museum business” and “various proposals were put

forward almost daily”. The article investigates these debates by analysing four museum strategies developed by various art practitioners and different criteria on the basis of which a new canon for collecting contemporary art was to be established. It suggests regarding those proposals in the contexts of social and political restructuring and openness introduced by Gorbachev’s liberalisation.

In 1987 the Moscow art scene became preoccupied with the idea of establishing a museum of contemporary art. As Leonid Talochkin, an active member of Moscow alternative artistic life, collector and archivist mentioned in a letter to one of his émigré artist-friends “everyone seemed to have gone mad with all this museum business” and “various proposals were put forward almost daily”.¹ What was the reason for such a sudden surge of interest in collecting and the ambitions to introduce a new institution?

By the late 1980s the Soviet Union had a wide network of museums of all kinds, including a significant share of collecting institutions devoted to art and culture. Moreover, their number was constantly growing while the existing collections were continuously

1 Leonid Talochkin, to Vorobiev, V. Letter. 4 August (unpublished; Moscow: Archive of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Section 2, Folder 5, 1987).

expanded. As many artists and art professionals claimed, however, the principles of the museums' functioning, their acquisition policies and the system of state commissions had become outdated. None of the existing museums were "contemporary" enough.

In spring 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and launched a major attack on the "old ways of thinking".² Already by the summer of 1986 he called for the radical restructuring of all the institutions within the Soviet system. Despite liberalisation in the art world lagging behind compared to other creative and social spheres, by 1987 the changes within the Moscow art scene had become obvious. In the art world the pluralism of opinions encouraged by the new state policy resulted in the recognition and wider dissemination of a greater variety of artistic practices, going far beyond the previously imposed canon of Socialist Realism. At the same time the increasing openness of the country to the outside world and the gradual involvement of Russian art in the global art markets further challenged previously existing norms and hierarchies. Both of these factors, namely the changes in national policy and the developing interconnections with the West drove a reconsideration of Soviet art structures and the functioning of its institutions.

The present article investigates four examples of museum proposals which were put forward from 1987 to 1991 by a range of professionals. They included a wide spectrum of ideas, such as creation of a new institution, expansion of the existing state collection, development of a private initiative by a Western collector, and establishment of an alternative organisation distancing itself from mainstream Soviet policy and social life. The article, thus, aims to explore the influence of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the above-mentioned factors on the transformation of the canon of contemporary art.

Art institutions and principles of collecting

A consideration of the selected proposals requires revisiting the principles of the museum system and creation of the Soviet art canon in the preceding years. As this section demonstrates, despite the pervasive control of the State, examples of alternative art collections can be found as early as the 1970s, during the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev.

The foundations of the Soviet art museum system were laid in the early 1930s. While during the first post-revolutionary years the Soviet art world had consisted of numerous artistic communities "each offering competing definitions of the appropriate art for a society constructing Communism", the 1932 resolution of the Central Committee "On the organisation of literary artistic organisations" transferred all decisions on art production, presentation and interpretation to the Soviet state.³ All aspects of artists' work from

2 Robert D. English, *Russia and the Idea of the West: Gorbachev, Intellectuals, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

3 Susan E. Reid, *Destalinization and Remodernization of Soviet Art: The Search for a Contemporary Realism, 1953 – 1963*; PhD Dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1996). For more information on the institution-

production process to final art displays were subjected to its control, exercised through the numerous institutions, specially appointed juries and committees. The adopted doctrine of Socialist Realism implied not only an art style, but also a set of “institutional structures and practices of the Soviet art world, including the system of patronage, practices of hanging committees, and art criticism”.⁴ Museums were to collect and display works according to Marxist-Leninist ideals and educate the masses by presenting art and social history as the history of class struggle.⁵

Throughout the Soviet period the predominant, although by no means only way of building and extending museum collections was by direct acquisitions from exhibitions. Their development, execution and subsequent distribution of art works among the museums were controlled by two major institutions – the Artists’ Union and the Ministry of Culture.⁶ Through specially created sub-divisions they commissioned artists to produce new works or acquired already existing pieces.⁷ The selection of the art objects and artists was made by specially selected *vystavkom*-s [exhibition committees], who were appointed for each particular show and consisted of the artist-members of the Union, and, in the case of the more important exhibitions, of the artist-representatives of the Ministry.⁸ It was the task of the *vystavkom* to filter out all the art which was considered not good

al structure of Soviet art see, for example, on the Stalin period: Jorn Guldborg, *Artists Well Organised: The Organisational Structure of the Soviet Art Scene from the Liquidation of Artistic Organisations (1932) to the First Congress of Soviet Artists*, in *Slavica Othinensia* no. 8 (1986); Elizabeth Valkenier, *Russian realist art: The state and society: The Peredvizhniki and their tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Igor Golomshtok & Alexander Glezer, *Unofficial art from the Soviet Union* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1977); on the Khrushchev period: Yuri Gerchuk, *Krovoizliianie v MOSKh, ili Khrushchev v Manezhe* (Moscow: NLO, 2008); on the Brezhnev period and beyond: Elena Kornetchuk, *Soviet Art and the State, in The Quest for self-expression: Painting in Moscow and Leningrad, 1965-1990* (Columbus, Ohio/ Seattle: Columbus Museum of Art, 1990); Jamey Gambrell, Report from Moscow, in *Art in America*, May (1985); Elena Selena & Alexandra Obukhova, *Reconstruction. 1990-2000* (Moscow: ArtGuide Editions, 2013).

- 4 Susan E. Reid, Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The Industry of Socialism Art Exhibition, 1935-41, in *The Russian Review*, no. 60 (2002), 153-184.
- 5 K. E. [Victor] Grinevich, The First All-Russian Congress of Museum Workers, in *The New Ways of the Soviet Museum*, in *Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul’turnoi sviazi s zagranitsej* [All-Union association of cultural connection with foreign countries], vol.2 no. 4 (1931), 81; and Fedor Nikolaevitch Petrov, The New Ways of the Soviet Museum, in *Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul’turnoi sviazi s zagranitsej* [All-Union association of cultural connection with foreign countries], vol.2 no. 10-12 (1931), 129.
- 6 Elena Kornetchuk, *The politics of Soviet Art*, Ph.D. dissertation (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University, 1982), 54.
- 7 The financial organ of the Artists’ Union was the Art Fund, established in 1940. In 1959 the Ministry of Culture established the Directorate of the art funds and heritage projects, which in 1977 was renamed into *Rosizopropaganda* [Russian Visual propaganda]. The organisation supervised the activities of the Art Funds and organised exhibitions of Soviet art in the USSR and abroad.
- 8 Mikhail Lazarev, The vehicle of All-Union exhibition. Interview by Gleb Napreenko, in *OS Colta. Archeology of Soviet Art with Gleb Napreenko* (2011), available at [<http://os.colta.ru/art/projects/30795/details/31510/?expand=yes>].

enough or, more importantly, was not in accordance with the principles of socialist education.⁹

From the mid-1970s, however, artists whose practice did not fit into the strict canons of Socialist Realism because it diverged either in style or subject matter became more visible on the Moscow art scene. The moment to emerge from the woodwork was triggered by the notorious *Bulldozer* exhibition of 1974, when a group of alternative artists took their paintings to a vacant piece of land in a Moscow suburb.¹⁰ Their peaceful display was instantly destroyed by the authorities, which met with significant resonance in the foreign press where a heated debate evolved on how the Soviet State treated its artists and suppressed their creative expression.¹¹ In an attempt to improve its international reputation, but also trying to get a better grip on this growing artistic community, the Ministry of Culture and the Artists' Union had to reconsider their policies towards alternative art.

Since the mid-1970s alternative artists had been granted some access to public exhibition venues and managed to gain some exposure to audiences beyond their closed community of like-minded friends and acquaintances, making their presence more noticeable.¹² One of the most striking examples of easing cultural policy was the art museum in Yerevan, Armenia, founded by the artist Henrik Igitian in 1972.¹³ The museum collected and showcased the art of the Armenian *shestidesiatniki* [those from the 1960s], the generation of artists who came to maturity under Stalin but experienced the “thaw” and liberalisation introduced by Khrushchev, and whose art explored subjects that were unorthodox for the Soviet canon and whose styles challenged existing norms. The museum managed to get the venue due to the help and support of the city mayor Grigor Khastratian. However, due to a lack of financial support, its collection was formed through donations of

9 Vystavkom-s exercised the important role of selecting the works for the exhibitions, however, the contents of most of the shows, especially the large-scale ones were also controlled by other committees, such as city committees or inspectors from the Ministry.

10 For a detailed account of the exhibition and the following events see, for example, Viktor Agamov-Tupitsyn, *The Bulldozer Exhibition* (Moscow: AdMarginem, 2014); Alexander Glezer, *Art under Bulldozers (The Blue book)* (London: Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd, 1976); and Oscar Rabin, *Tri zhizni: kniga vospominanij* [Three lives. Book of memoirs] (Paris: Tretja volna, 1986).

11 For examples of responses in the foreign press see: Alexander Glezer, *Art under Bulldozers*.

12 Two weeks after the *Bulldozer* exhibition the city authorities sanctioned an outdoor display of art in Izmailovsky park. The following important displays of alternative art which took place in the state-sponsored exhibition venues were the exhibition of Moscow artists in the Beekeeping Pavilion, VDNKh, February 1975 and the Exhibition of Moscow Artists in House of Culture, VDNKh, September 1975. Another outcome of the *Bulldozer* exhibition was the establishment of the painting section of the City Committee of Graphic Artists [*Gorkom*]. This organisation united many artists – participants of the alternative exhibitions, providing them with the membership in the Soviet creative Union and official employment. During the first years of its existence it was hoped that *Gorkom* would become the first official platform for alternative art.

13 Neery Melkonian, Culture Stewart. My meeting with Henrik Igitian, in *Armenian International Magazine*, no. 08-09 (1991), 76-77.

artist-friends. Even though it had opened before the *Bulldozer* affair, its further existence and development were facilitated by the events around this exhibition.

Another fascinating case which the resonance of the *Bulldozer* exhibition had undoubtedly enabled was the official registration of the collection of alternative art assembled by the archivist, art supporter and collector Leonid Talochkin.¹⁴ Talochkin had never been educated as an artist or an art professional and had held a number of non-art-related, low-skilled jobs to support himself. Nevertheless, he was actively involved in the Moscow alternative art scene and became its unofficial chronicler and creator of many art displays. Due to his close connections with many artists, by the late 1970s he had collected a substantial amount of works. Most of these did not have any political connotations but broke away from the official norms of Soviet art, were rarely if ever shown in the state-sponsored venues and were, of course, not acquired.¹⁵ The collection resided in Talochkin's home, but as the building was due to be demolished the issue of its long-term location and preservation became urgent.

Trying to find a solution, Talochkin approached many artist-friends for advice and ended up meeting Aleksander Khalturin, then the Director of the Administration of Fine Arts and Cultural Heritage.¹⁶ To his great surprise, Khalturin was not only well informed about his collection, but offered a solution to Talochkin's problem. New legislation on cultural heritage had recently been introduced, and Khalturin offered Talochkin to use this opportunity to register his collection as such. Two days later Talochkin was allocated a two-bedroom flat for himself and the artworks, which became recognised as the heritage of the USSR despite disregarding official rules for art production. Such unexpected action from the art-regulating authorities can be seen as an attempt to gain better control of the circulation of such "dangerous" art. Moreover, Talochkin speculated that such a turn was also influenced by the financial opportunities of alternative art, which were

14 As Waltraud Bayer writes in her comprehensive essay on private art collectors in the Soviet Union, the existence of a private collection was rare, but not unique. (Waltraud Bayer, *Gerettete Kultur. Private Kunstsammler in der Sowjetunion 1917-1991* (Wien: Turia & Kant, 2006), 15). Moreover, in many cases the state was fully aware of their existence and even provided some support. Already in the late Khrushchev and early Brezhnev periods some private collections of icons and paintings had been made publicly available through donations, foundations, publications and exhibitions, and some private art collections were even given their own museums, such as the Vishnevsky Collection, upon which the museum of V.A. Tropinin and other Moscow artists of his time was based, which opened in 1971.

This type of art collection managed to remain privately owned through the granting of a State-registered title (*Okhrannaia gramota*). These rare protection certificates, on the one hand, guaranteed the continuity of the collection and protected it from confiscation by the state, however on the other hand, they also facilitated state access to the collections and control over them, because whoever was "registered was identified as the owner of a collection".

15 Already by the mid-1970s Talochkin's collection included around 600 works by artists such as Oscar Rabin, Lev Kropivnitskii, Yuri Zharkikh, and Evgenii Rukhin.

16 Leonid Talochkin, *Mne prosto darili kartiny* [I was just gifted the paintings]. Interview by Nikita Alekseev in *Insotranets* [Foreigner], no. 9, 7 March (2000).

slowly being recognised by the state.¹⁷ Governmental support and interest in the collection did however not last long and finally ceased with Khalturin's departure from the Ministry of Culture in 1979.¹⁸

Under Brezhnev, alternative art existed in a highly precarious position. Any freedom of artistic expression and communication between artists and their audiences was heavily restricted and censored by the state, and many of the practitioners lived in constant fear of either losing the means for making art, such as access to art studios and art materials, or even losing their freedom. However, state control was not omnipresent. As discussed by a number of scholars, it was during Brezhnev's time when numerous alternative forms of cultural expression managed to find room to exist outside the government's penetrating gaze, either "dropping out" of the prescribed ways of Soviet life or existing "vne" [outside] of it.¹⁹ Arguably, these developments were the forerunners of the following projects.

The influence of Gorbachev's reforms on the Soviet art world and its institutions

The transformation of social and political life under Gorbachev had an undeniable effect on the course of artistic life which became characterised by "urgent optimism" about the possibility of imminent changes and hopes for a restructuring and renovation of existing art institutions.²⁰ I suggest that two main factors explain the intensification and transformation of artistic life in the period – firstly, the dissemination of alternative art and secondly, an opening towards the global art market.

The first factor was provoked by the statute "On amateur associations" introduced in 1986. It allowed the establishment of interest clubs "on the basis of voluntary involvement, common creative interests and individual membership for the purpose of satisfaction of spiritual needs and interests of people".²¹ A variety of such clubs mushroomed at that time, ranging from a club of chess players to a club of environmental activists to a club of yoga practitioners. Alternative artists also used this opportunity to officially

17 Fedor Romer, Relics. Pennies from heaven. (Dissidents of Union-wide importance. Collection of Leonid Talochkin displayed in RGGU takes Russian contemporary art a quarter of a century back) in *Itogi* [Conclusions], 7 March (2000).

18 Leonid Talochkin, Other art of Leonid Talochkin, interview by Ina Makharashvili, in *Russkaia mys'* [Russian thought], no.4316 (2000), 15.

19 For more on the concept of "dropping out" see Julianne Furst & Josie McLellan *Dropping out of Socialism. The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016); for more on "vne" see Alexei Yurchak *Everything Was forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006).

20 Jamey Gambrell, Notes on the Underground, in *Art in America*, November (1988).

21 Anon., Regulation on amateur association, interest club of 13.05.1986, in *Kulturno-prosvetitel'skaia rabota* [Cultural and educational work], no. 5 (1986), 26-28.

register their previously unofficial associations, examples of which were the amateur association of artists *Hermitage*, established in 1986, or the Club of Avant-Gardists [*Klava*], established in 1987.

The very idea of a union based on common interest was nothing new for the Russian art world. *Kruzhok* [a circle] had been a central phenomenon of Russian intellectual life from the late eighteenth century well into Soviet history.²² Throughout the Soviet period, unofficial clubs, circles and gatherings became a major form of existence for alternative art and, in the absence of a liberal-democratic public space, provided an informal semi-private/semi-public arena.²³ The novelty introduced by the 1986 statute, however, consisted in the fact that previously existing alternative associations became recognised as accepted organisational forms of social activity, thus receiving a new status in Soviet social life. The statute granted certain rights to the association, including some financial support from the state, and access to state exhibition venues.²⁴ Moreover, the new law implied a new level of interaction with society, as alternative art became more easily accessible and open to wider audiences outside the profession.²⁵ The shift in state policy from prohibiting or ignoring alternative art to some facilitation of its development and its growing exposure to the Soviet publics led many practitioners to believe that more experimental and radical artistic practices could not only be included in temporary art displays, but could also be preserved, collected and fully incorporated in the Soviet cultural scene.

The second factor was closely connected to so-called *Gorbi-mania*, resulting in growing European and North American interest in all things Soviet, including the arts.²⁶ Foreigners had for a long time occupied a special position on the Moscow art scene, as foreign diplomats, journalists and researchers had previously constituted the main audience for alternative art. In the 1980s, however, the popularity of Soviet art spread far beyond this limited circle of connoisseurs, and the tastes and preferences of foreigners began to play a significant role in art production and presentation.

22 For more on the importance of *kruzhok* see, for example: Barbara Walker, *Maximilian Voloshin and the Russian Literary Circle: Culture and Survival in Revolutionary Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 5; and Maria Gough, *The artist as producer: Russian constructivism in revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 18-25.

23 Matthew J. Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.

24 Anon., Regulation on amateur association, interest club of 13.05.1986, in *Kulturno-prosvetitel'skaia rabota* [Cultural and educational work], no. 5 (1986), 26-28.

25 While the previous habitat of alternative art was artists' apartments and studios in the 1960s to early 1970s, becoming semi-public on rare events organised by state sponsored institutions in the late-1970s to early 1980s, after 1986 it fell to the local exhibition halls which were attended by unprepared local audiences with little, if any, knowledge of art, its emergence, meaning and context.

26 Boris Orlov, Freedom test, in Georgy Kiesewalter, ed. *The critical eighties in unofficial Soviet art* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2014), 258-262.

One of the major triggers in this process was a Sotheby's auction held in Moscow on 7 July 1988. Apart from masterpieces by Russian avant-garde artists such as Rodchenko, Stepanova, Udaltsova, Drevin or Ender, it also included works by contemporary Soviet artists, both those of the older generation such as Kabakov and Yankilevsky, and younger ones such as Zakharov or Shutov. The auction was a success, as all of the works sold and many of them went far above their estimates. The fact that works which had only recently not been considered to be "art" were sold at unexpectedly high prices had a significant effect on all aspects of artistic life and questioned the previously established understanding of this type of art's value.²⁷

The intervention of Western art professionals not only made the authorities reconsider their attitude towards alternative art, but also questioned existing hierarchies within the art world, which were often based on personal interconnections and relations.²⁸ Artists who achieved the biggest success among Western dealers and collectors were not necessarily those previously favoured within the inner domestic circle. For example, Grisha Bruskin whose work *Fundamental Lexicon* reached the highest price at the auction was never a favourite or among the most acclaimed artists included in the sales. His success came as a surprise both for himself and his fellow artists, and recalibrated his place in the pantheon of Soviet contemporary art.²⁹

Both of these factors signified the growing irrelevance of the previously dominant criteria according to which art had been valued, acquired, preserved and promoted. The urgency of a revision and reconstruction of the canon for contemporary art was undeniable. Who was to shoulder this responsibility and whose interests and tastes should be acknowledged, were points open to debate. The following four proposals offered different solutions to this issue.

Proposal 1– A Russian Centre Pompidou: Leonid Bazhanov and amateur association of artists Hermitage

One of the most considered proposals for a museum collection was put forward by the amateur association of artists *Hermitage*. At the moment of its establishment the organisation had neither a permanent space nor regular financial support, but its creator and leader, the art theorist Leonid Bazhanov, had very ambitious plans for its development. Bazhanov aspired to the creation of a cultural institution which would become a Russian version of the Centre Pompidou in Paris and which would eventually acquire its own col-

27 For more on the auction see, for example, Grisha Bruskin, *Past tense imperfect* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2007), 301; Suzanne Muchnic, Soviet artists sceptical after historical auction, in *Los Angeles Times*, 07 (1988); Simon de Pury, Russian art in the middle of attention, in Kate Fowle and Ruth Addison, eds. *Exhibit Russia: The New International Decade* (Moscow: Art Guide, 2016), 57-59; and Andrew Solomon, *The Irony Tower. Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost* (New York City: Knopf Publishing Group, 1991), 15-25.

28 Susan E. Reid, From Artist Outsider to Absolute Bourgeois, in *Art Monthly*, no. 131 (1989), 3-7.

29 Grisha Bruskin, *Past tense imperfect*, 301.

lection.³⁰ Bazhanov continuously pointed to the exclusion of radical art from the official art discourse as the major issue preventing Russian culture from further development.³¹ *Hermitage* aimed to solve this issue by developing a wide spectrum of exhibition projects which would bring together otherwise dispersed segments of contemporary Moscow art and would develop necessary critical tools for their better interpretation.

Despite its amateur status the organisation consisted of art professionals, most of whom were members of the Soviet creative unions, including artists, architects, art theorists, and photographers. Moreover, Bazhanov invited other artists and art professionals, non-members of the organisations to work on particular projects in order to expand their scope and outreach. The major endeavour of *Hermitage*, which reflected its ethos and goals, was the large-scale exhibition *Retrospective of the practices of Moscow artists: 1957-1987*, held from 22 September to 29 October 1987. It was this exhibition which was designed to lay the foundations of the future collection.

Retrospective was seen as a learning process in developing the principles of building the collection and delivering it to the public. As its title suggests it was conceived as an overview of art that emerged from the late 1950s until the moment of the exhibition's opening and was supposed to start filling the gaps in the existing knowledge of contemporary Soviet art by offering an analytical and thoughtful approach towards the display. The show was initially envisaged as a year-long project in which the works would be constantly rotated and complemented.³² After the closing of the display in Moscow the organisers intended to tour this exhibition around the country, which would have allowed them to raise awareness of their institution and to gain some time for finding appropriate storage and display facilities. The initial idea, however, was never realised. The restrictions on the use of public venues, as well as the considerable number of artists and works that were included, made the organisers reconsider their idea of a rotating display, splitting it into three parts. A viewer would need to attend all three to take in the full historical retrospective of the art of the preceding three decades.

Two of the central aspects of the organisation of *Retrospective* were the decision on who should be responsible for the selection of works and how the new criteria should be developed. If the majority of the exhibitions in previous decades were put together by the artists themselves, Bazhanov advocated a different approach. Despite the dissatisfaction of many artists with intervention in the process which had traditionally been exercised by them, he insisted on the involvement of a number of specialists, each of which would be responsible for allocated segments of the show. Such a distribution of authority could allow maximum objectivity and a realistic representation of the state of Soviet art. Unlike

30 Leonid Bazhanov, The eighties were full of despair, but created the potential, in Georgy Kiesevalter, ed., *The critical eighties*, 78-90.

31 Leonid Bazhanov, Regulation on the amateur association of artists Hermitage (Unpublished, Moscow: Media Archive of the National Centre of Contemporary Art, 1986).

32 Leonid Talochkin, Personal Diary (unpublished, Moscow: Archive of Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, , Section 1, Folder 3, 1987, unpaginated).

the preceding practice, such an approach did not mean collective work, but rather collaboration.

One of the first “curators” to join the organisation was Leonid Talochkin.³³ By 1987 his collection exceeded 1,000 pieces and, as he continuously mentions in his diaries, he was keen to find an appropriate space for the works’ preservation and display.³⁴ In the early stages of preparation he refers to the exhibition as a “show of the art of the 1960s, where some art of the 70s and 60s will also be included”.³⁵ Such a focus reflected that of his collection itself, but a presentation of a single private collection and approach towards Soviet art had never been the aim of *Hermitage*. The show changed considerably once the other “curators” became involved, such as Andrei Erofeev, then a researcher in the Central Research Institute of Architecture, and Maria Bessonova, a specialist from the Pushkin Museum.³⁶ More works by younger artists were added, while other works had to be taken out, and their spatial arrangement was amended.

Relying on the expertise of the invited specialists, Bazhanov accepted their suggestions with only minor comments.³⁷ One of his more substantial interventions was the inclusion of artists whom neither Talochkin nor Erofeev had initially been willing to show due to their supposed traditionalism. This was the case for some artists of “left MOSKh”, who were outside the usual social circle of the other organisers and whose art practices seemed to represent little of interest for Talochkin and Erofeev. Nonetheless, Bazhanov was resolute in his intention to show the full diversity of the artists, disregarding their political stances and relations with the state.

The ambitions of *Hermitage*, however, were not realised. One of the most controversial aspects of the exhibition was the inclusion of émigré artists, which was sharply criticised in reviews of the show.³⁸ The ensuing discontent among art officials explains the fact

33 However, even though the organisers did not refer to themselves as “curator” and the term was not widely used at the time, the functions of the roles they exercised were fundamentally curatorial. For more on the understanding of the concept of curator in late Soviet Russia see Marina Maximova, *Curatorial Authority and Construction of Publics. Art Exhibitions in Moscow: 1974-1993*. PhD Thesis (unpublished, 2018).

34 Leonid Talochkin, Personal diary.

35 Leonid Talochkin, to Sokov, L. Letter. 18 August (unpublished; Moscow: Archive of Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Section 2, Folder 5, 1987).

36 Leonid Talochkin, Personal diary.

37 He insisted on the inclusion of artists whom neither Talochkin nor Erofeev were initially willing to show due to their supposed traditionalism. This was the case with some artists of “left MOSKh”, often looked down on by representatives of the alternative art scene due to the conformity of their art. Examples are father and son Tabenkin, Basyrov, Nesterova, Ratner, father and daughter Elkonin. Such artists were outside of the usual social circle of the other organisers and their art practices seemed to represent little of interest for Talochkin and Erofeev. Nonetheless, Bazhanov was resolute in his intention to show the full diversity of artists regardless of their political stances and relations with the state. (Leonid Bazhanov, personal interview with the author (unpublished, 10 November 2016).

38 The most heated debate was ignited by the works of three artists: Oscar Rabin, who was forcefully deprived of Soviet citizenship, Ernst Neizvestny, who signed the notorious *Letter of Ten*, and Igor

that the *Hermitage's* lease for the venue was not extended. Being deprived of even that minimal support, *Hermitage* ceased to exist. Moreover, the rapid development of market relations meant that many artists were much more interested in selling their works abroad and promoting themselves in the global market rather than reserving works for a not-yet-existing national collection with no resources and very doubtful prospects.

Proposal 2 – A radical collection within a traditional institution: Andrei Erofeev and the Museum of Decorative and Applied Art located in Tsaritsyno

Andrei Erofeev, one of the co-curators of *Retrospective*, did not give up on the idea of creating a museum after the dissolution of *Hermitage*. In fact, his first attempts at launching a new collection preceded *Retrospective*. Even in the 1980s Erofeev had formulated his ideas for a collection proposal to the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.³⁹ He intended to propose this to the department of graphic art, and several artists donated their pieces. In 1983 a small collection was proposed to the museum. Except for a few works that eventually ended up in the museum, the collection was rejected.

By the end of the 1980s, after the failure of *Hermitage* plans, Erofeev renewed his attempts. As he mentioned in a number of interviews, his biggest motivation was the fact that the best examples of Soviet alternative art were leaking out of the country to foreign, often private, collections which were not open to the public. He realised, however, that it would not be enough to establish his own collection. Acting on behalf of known institutions would give him more credibility and the opportunity to outbid sale proposals coming from the West. Erofeev thus pretended to be endowed by the Ministry of Culture with the power to create a state art collection and began approaching artists.

Eventually Erofeev managed to garner actual support from the state institution when his idea was accepted by the Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts located in the museum-reserve *Tsaritsyno*. In June 1989 the Museum established a department of contemporary trends, with Erofeev appointed as its director. By 1989 its holdings included a diverse range of Russian applied arts: collections of Central Asian crockery, Palekh miniature painting, crystalware from the Lomonosov factory, embroidery from Valdai, Baltic amber and Dagestan tapestries. The establishment of the new department was felt to be potentially beneficial for the museum as it offered an opportunity to refresh the institution's image and improve its reputation in line with wider, on-going reforms.

Viktor Egorychev, the recently appointed vice-director of the research department, offered Erofeev the opportunity to develop a strategy for the future collection and to demonstrate it in practice through a series of exhibitions before any further steps would

Shelkovsky, publisher of the oppositional magazine *A-Ya*.

39 Andrei Erofeev, personal interview with the author (16 October 2017).

be taken.⁴⁰ Moreover, the format of an exhibition was also seen as a way of obtaining the works, since neither the Museum nor the Ministry of Culture had allocated sufficient resources for acquisitions. Erofeev, however, in many cases managed to negotiate conditions under which the artists left works after the show or sold them for a token price.⁴¹ As a result Erofeev produced a programme of three exhibitions *To the Object, In Rooms*, and *The Artist Instead of the Artwork*, which were organised with the help of a group of co-curators.

All three exhibitions proposed by Erofeev were devoted to the “interpretation and display of unconventional types of works and genres, which even in the West were only starting to be collected by museums”.⁴² This initiative had a two-fold intention. On the one hand, it was an aspiration to better situate Soviet art in the international arena, which was especially important at a time when the country was becoming actively engaged in the global market. On the other hand, it was an effort to rehabilitate those new genres which, as Erofeev notes, were often not seen even by the artists as “finished products, which could have the status of art works, not to mention viewers, who were still accustomed only to the conventional presentation dominated by painting”.⁴³ Moreover, Erofeev assumed that the major art institutions such as the Tretyakov or Pushkin already had extensive collections of sculpture and painting at that time to which he would have nothing to add.⁴⁴ Focusing on under-recognised artistic media was Erofeev’s attempt to expand the traditional Soviet canon by offering a new approach towards museum classification.

The major basis for the future collection was laid by the first exhibition *V storonu objekta [Towards the object]* held in the *Kashirka* space between 18 April and 13 May 1990. Despite its location, the show was set up under the auspices of the “Collection of Contemporary Art of Tsaritsyno Museum”, which was clearly indicated on the invitation and poster for the show. Erofeev and his co-curators Vladimir Levashov and Natalia Tamruchi were listed as Museum staff and exhibition organisers.

Responding to accusations of lack of criticality and tendency towards “ethnographic overview” rather than a critical representation Levashov responded that they had deliberately tried to avoid a “problematic exhibition”. He emphasised the fact that the show was created “not by a group of like-minded people, but on behalf of the museum, which is building a collection”.⁴⁵ The first exhibition was meant to demonstrate the seriousness

40 Andrei Erofeev, Building a museum through curating exhibitions, in Keith Fawle and Ruth Addison, eds., *Exhibit Russia: The New International Decade* (Moscow: Art Guide, 2016), 113.

41 Georgy Kiesewalter, personal interview with the author (16 November 2016).

42 Andrei Erofeev, Building a museum through curating exhibitions, in in Keith Fawle and Ruth Addison, eds. *Exhibit Russia*, 113.

43 Andrei Erofeev, Building a museum, 113.

44 Andrei Erofeev, personal interview with the author (16 October 2017).

45 Vladimir Levashov, In other genre, in *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo* [Decorative art] no.11 (396) (1990), 8.

of their intentions, their ability to build a state collection and to create a display in a “museum genre”.

With the support of the Ministry of Culture, most works from the display were purchased and added to the *Tsaritsyno* collection. Erofeev’s initial ambitions, however, were never fully realised. Soon after the exhibition in *Kashirka*, he organised an official museum opening celebration in the ruins of the palace in Tsaritsyno. Not only artists, but also musicians and architects were invited to participate. But this remained its sole event. Erofeev never managed to secure the space for a permanent display and most of the time the collection was kept in storage in a former bomb shelter on the territory of Tsaritsyno. Ironically, Erofeev, who aspired to create a museum to tackle a contemporary situation in which the majority of artworks never reached display and were forever buried in storage, fell victim to the same system.

Proposal 3 – The elitist museum of conceptual art: Moscow Conceptualism and the *Klava* museum.

While many artists enjoyed the fruits of growing publicity, others chose the opposite direction, moving towards self-isolation. A case in point was the Moscow Conceptual School. In 1987, following the example of *Hermitage* conceptual artists also registered their organisation, the Club of Avant-Gardists, which soon became known as *Klava*. Unlike *Hermitage* they neither aspired to objectivity in their approach nor to a wider outreach. Despite moving from artists’ studios to public venues their exhibitions maintained the atmosphere of a sect, or of an exclusive club which did not welcome external interaction.⁴⁶ Works by *Klava* members were included both in *Retrospective* and *V storonu objekta*, yet the Moscow Conceptual School had its own concept of a museum.

In the late 1980s, the creation of the MANI museum was announced. MANI was an acronym for Moscow Archive of New Art, an initiative introduced in the early 1980s to facilitate the distribution and presentation of conceptual art. It started with the creation of four MANI folders, each of which was a collection of works which had to fit in an A4 envelope. Almost simultaneously, Nikolai Panitkov, one of the artists of the conceptual circle, started collecting his friends’ works and documentation, housing them in the attic of his *datcha* where the folders were also eventually stored. In 1988 he suggested adding

46 The choice of location for exhibitions illustrates the desire of the Moscow Conceptual circle to limit their audience, going back to the idea of a closed, semi-private display. For example, in 1987 they staged an action-exhibition *For the dwellers of the nether world*, during which the selected works were buried underground. No public was invited to the event and the intended audience was humorously defined as those living in hell, under the surface of the earth. Another example was the exhibition in *Sandunovskie Bani*, 1988, one of the oldest baths in Moscow, where the art display was located in one of the pools. The audience at the opening included the members of the same circles, while those who wanted to attend the show at a later day had to buy entry tickets to the bath, which significantly limited the number of potential viewers.

the most recent works and to turn this private collection into a museum. The organisation was aimed at preserving the specific atmosphere of Moscow Conceptualism based on internal references and close connections of its members. The space of a private country house corresponded perfectly with such an idea, and no other venue was required. The museum was not intended to be integrated into the state system, remaining an alternative artist-run institution and rejecting any interference by curators or specialists from outside the closed and exclusive circle of Moscow Conceptualism.

Proposal 4 – The Soviet outpost of the Western private collection: Peter Ludwig and the private museum of Soviet art

Not all proposals for a new institution and new collection came from Russian professionals. The last case studied in this article is a museum proposal which originated outside the Russian art scene. In 1988 the East German ambassador Nikolaus Meyer-Landrut mentioned in conversation with Party Secretary Aleksandr Yakovlev the desire of the German art collector Peter Ludwig to establish a museum of contemporary art in Moscow. Ludwig's interest in contemporary Soviet art had developed in the 1970s when he became acquainted with some of the artists through the help of Vladimir Semenov, Soviet ambassador in East Germany and also an avid art collector. As Semenov wrote in his diary, contemporary painting played an important role in the establishment of international relations.⁴⁷

The proposed museum was supposed to hold not only Soviet, but also Western artists. For example, Ludwig proposed to donate six works by Picasso from his own collection. He also offered to fund further acquisitions of contemporary Russian art by the Artists' Union members and display some of the previously purchased works. According to the ambassador, the Ministry of Culture showed some interest in this proposal but had not offered any assistance at that point, and thus, the ambassador was asking for Party support. The proposed museum was therefore intended to combine the power of the Soviet art institutions with the expertise of a German patron who would introduce his knowledge of the international art scene to revive the Moscow museum system. This initiative did not progress, however, and there are no indications of any further discussions.

Conclusion

All of the discussed proposals had the same objective, namely to find a new type of criteria for the evaluation of contemporary art, both cultural and monetary. In a situation where old norms were rapidly becoming outdated, new tools and approaches were to be developed. Their advancement, however, was soon put on hold. Due to the ensuing financial struggles in the country, the oversaturation of the Western market with Russian art and a lack of support from the state, the foundation of the first Russian museum

47 E.V. Semenova and B.L. Khavkin, From Khrushchev to Gorbachev. From the diary of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Deputy Minister of International Relations, V.S. Semenov, in *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia* [Modern and contemporary history] no. 3 (2004).

of contemporary art was postponed. However, it would be misleading to claim that the proposals of the late 1980s were irrelevant to the contemporary Russian realm. On the contrary, those very ideas laid the foundation for many of the institutions existing today.

After the dissolution of *Hermitage* and the later unsuccessful attempt to create the not-for-profit centre of contemporary art in 1992, Leonid Bazhanov established the National Centre of Contemporary Art (NCCA). From the moment of its foundation in 1994, the institution started collecting both national and international artists, acquiring the works of those who only recently had been considered as “alternative”. As NCCA exists under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture, the foundation and development of its collection can be seen as a positive resolution of artists’ attempts to introduce previously neglected and prosecuted art into the official state canon.

The collection assembled by Andrei Erofeev is also now on public display. Despite the modes of its acquisition still being debated, the collection was transferred to the Tretyakov Gallery, where it became part of the contemporary art display. Leonid Talochkin’s collection had a similar fate. In accordance with his will, it was bequeathed to the museum of the Russian State Humanitarian University. Due to the university’s limited resources, however, Tatiana Windelstein, the widow of the collector, decided to retract and donate it to the Tretyakov gallery, where it is now housed.⁴⁸

Despite the fact that Peter Ludwig never succeeded in opening the museum in Moscow, he and his wife Irene eventually opened a museum in Budapest in 1989, donating 70 works and lending 95 more. The institution became the first in Hungary to collect and display works by international contemporary artists. In 1994 a number of works from their collection were donated to the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg, where they now constitute part of the permanent display. Moreover, in the 2000s the Russian art scene became increasingly populated by all sorts of private institutions which offered an alternative to the state museums of art.⁴⁹

The MANI museum also did not escape some form of institutionalisation. In 1991 it was relocated under the umbrella of E.K.Art Buro, a private cultural organisation aimed at the study and promotion of Moscow Conceptualism. The institution opened the archives for researchers as well as became involved in facilitating international exhibitions of the Moscow Conceptual School.

48 Ekaterina Allenova, Что ожидает коллекцию Леонида Талочкина [What will happen to the Leonid Talochkin collection], in ArtGuide. 3 April (2014). Available at <http://artguide.com/posts/562-что-ожидает-коллекцию-леонид-талочкина>.

49 Among them are the Ekaterina Cultural Foundation, established in 2002 by collectors Ekaterina and Milhail Semenikhiny, the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art founded in 2008 by businessman Roman Abramovich and art philanthropist Dasha Zhukova, the Institute of Russian Realist Art opened in 2011 by businessman Alexei Ananyev, the Museum of Russian Icons opened in 2011 by Mikhail Abramov, the Museum of Russian Impressionism founded in 2014 by businessman Boris Mints, and AZ Museum, established in 2015 by art philanthropist Natalia Opyleva and curator Polina Lobachevskaia, to name only Moscow-based institutions.

While the Russian art scene of the 1980s was characterised by a lack of functional infrastructure, the contemporary conditions demonstrate the opposite. The discussed proposals offered a fresh alternative back in the 1980s and, even if not realised at the time, inspired creation of the new institutions throughout the 1990s. Alternative art, once neglected and prosecuted, is now fully institutionalised and embedded in the museum canon for collecting. But if this outcome can be regarded on the one hand as the well-deserved victory of the artists, on the other hand, such institutionalisation might also cause an adverse response.

The issue of the canon of contemporary art and the authority governing its creation and development seems to remain highly topical today. One of the most notorious examples is probably the case of Erofeev, who in 2006 in collaboration with Yuri Samodurov curated the exhibition “Zapretnoe iskusstvo” [Forbidden art] at the Moscow museum named after Andrei Sakharov. The show featured a number of controversial works on religious themes and was soon closed by force and its creators made subject to legal punishment. Such reactions from the authorities caused a wave of discussions about the role of state officials, artists, institutions and curators in deciding what is appropriate for public viewing.

The debate has not lost its urgency. The most recent example is the restructuring of NCCA and its forced merger with Rosizo, the successor of the monetary organ of the Soviet Ministry of Culture, in 2016. Such change presupposed a very different hierarchy of decision-making and participation in the definition of institutional strategy or canon for further collections. As a result of the uneasy process of the restructuring of the institution, Leonid Bazhanov had to leave his position and the future of the institution is still unclear.⁵⁰ While the study of today’s museum system is not the objective of the current article, re-visiting the proposals from the late-1980s, including their merits and drawbacks, can shed new light on this issue.

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50 Leonid Bazhanov. I do not see a possibility to work in such climate. Interview by Daria Palatkina, in *The Art Newspaper Russia* 25 October (2016). Available at <http://www.theartnewspaper.ru/posts/3612/>.