

INTELLECTUAL ART AT THE VENICE BIENNALE: UKRAINIAN COMPONENT

OLEKSII ROHOTCHENKO

Modern Art Research Institute of National Academy of Art of Ukraine (Kyiv, Ukraine)
Rogotchenko2007@ukr.net

Abstract: The Venice Biennale has always been and remains one of the most prestigious art forums in the world. Throughout the whole one hundred and twenty-three years, democratic principles were the driving force for artistic processes, constantly in full swing in this fantastic coastal city. The motto “Show new” is alive as ever, urging artists to present the contemporary or the most advanced art of the participating countries. Every two years competing artists and curators from all over the world exhibit their pieces at the Arsenal and Giardini (the largest venues), as well as at the hundreds of villas, churches, and galleries scattered around Venice, engaging in an art competition for the top prize –the Golden Lion. The Venice Biennale is an absolutely unique phenomenon within the artistic system of coordinates. The works are on display for half a year, building up regularity and adding intrigue to the show. Besides the presentation of cultural innovations, the clear leaders and trends in contemporary art are determined for the next two years. Ukrainian participation in the Venice Biennale is discussed in the article. The text covers the author’s view on the problems of participation of Ukrainian artists in the Biennale.

Key words: Venice Biennale / Artist / Art / Curator / Project / Arsenal.

EL ARTE INTELECTUAL EN LA BIENAL DE VENECIA: COMPONENTE UCRANIANO

Resumen: Uno de los foros artísticos más prestigiosos del mundo fue y sigue siendo el de la Bienal de Venecia. A lo largo de ciento veintitrés años, los principios democráticos han liderado procesos artísticos en la costa de la ciudad fantástica. El lema: “Mostrar lo nuevo” sigue vivo, empujando a los artistas a mostrar el arte contemporáneo o el más avanzado de los países participantes. Arsenal y Giardini son dos de las carreras artísticas más grandes, así como cientos de callejones, iglesias y galerías en Venecia, donde durante dos años hay otra bienal, donde artistas y comisarios de todo el planeta compiten para el León de Oro, el principal premio de la exposición. La Bienal de Venecia es un fenómeno absolutamente único en el sistema de coordenadas de las bellas artes. En la muestra de obras, que dura medio año, existe su propio patrón y su propia intriga. Además de presentar las innovaciones culturales de los países participantes, se identifican líderes artísticos explícitos y está surgiendo la tendencia principal en arte contemporáneo para los próximos dos años. En el artículo propuesto, discutiremos la participación de Ucrania en la Bienal de Venecia. Este texto cubre la opinión del autor sobre los problemas de la participación de los artistas ucranianos en la bienal.

Palabras clave: Bienal de Venecia / artista / arte / comisario / proyecto / arsenal.

Introduction

Biennale is like tuning fork in music. Without it, the professional existence of music becomes impossible. Unlike many other artistic forums, the liking or dislikings of the Venice Biennale audience are

not influenced by politicians, party leaders, heads of corporations, banks, or academies. Between the fairy-tale Venetian channels, the only thing that may help the creative duo of artist and curator to win the favor of millions of spectators is the talent – and novelty. Even the time is power-

* Fecha de recepción: 15 de abril de 2019 / Fecha de aceptación: 11 de diciembre de 2019.

less before the Venice Biennale. This wonderful event has been held biennially since 1895, being a competition not only of new but also of the newest offerings in the art world. This constant rhythm was broken just twice, with the First and Second World Wars interrupting the established course of events.

Ukraine as an state with vast artistic tradition participated in the biennial from 1924 to 1934. The next twenty-two years was the first break – until 1956. Then the break was prolonged for another 45 years. The second “window to Europe” opened only in 2001. Since then, Ukraine has not missed a single Venice Biennale.

To cover and substantiate the proposed topic certain means are used in the article, which highlight artistic, cultural and historical aspects of the issues associated with the participation of Ukrainian artists and curators in the Venice Biennale. Following the set tasks, the methods employed in the article are: cultural, historical, art research, bibliographic, comparative and cross-cultural. In addition, the author’s own observations, published art researches and interviews with participants are included.

Of course, professional art critics in Ukraine, as well as senior artists, knew about international art forums, but, just like it was with many other art issues, it was better to keep quiet about this. The first substantive research works on art were made public only in the 21st century. Soviet ideologists imposed rigorous and constant control over coverage of the events of the “bourgeois history”, even when Soviet artists were participating. Along with other artistic events, the phrase “Venice Biennale” was practically removed from Ukrainian art studies. Exhibitions in the Italian city of Venice were labeled a “Sabbath of formalism” by the official Soviet art researchers. According to the rules of the time, formalism and its followers felt into disgrace. In practice, this meant a verdict.

Recollections of Ukrainian artists’ participation in the Biennale were perceived as anti-Soviet. This was not surprising since the overwhelming majority of the representatives of those exhibitions from Ukraine were executed in the 1920s and 1930s or sentenced to labor camps by the punitive system. The Venice Biennale, like all other modernist phenomena, originating of the turn of the 20th century, was qualified as hostile to the mainstream Soviet artistic process by the art criticism of the period.

During the era of totalitarianism many names of artists, art historians, certain artistic phenomena and events were erased from the history of Ukrainian art that ultimately contributed to the deformation of art studies and cultural science and diverted the true scientific perception. “In the 20s, everything seems different than it is now, and completely different from what is beginning to blossom in the near future. The signs of change barely mow on the horizon, thus there is a need in competent artists able to unravel their significance. It’s a time in which the rhythms of jazz and cardiograms of utopia have coherently intertwined, the time is unique, as well as its artists, who have shown themselves, and then quietly dejected”.¹

Still, history cannot be reshaped. The facts remain the facts: 14th Biennale (1924) – Oleksandr Usachov; 16th (1928) – Fedir Krichevsky, Mykhailo and Timko Boychuk, Kyryl Gvozdyk, Konstantyn Yelava, Victor Palmov, Vasyl Sedlyar, Oleksiy Taran, Karpo Trohymenko, Ivan Hovorostetsky, Mykhailo Sharonov; 17th (1930) – Oleksiy Bogomazov, Oleksandr Dovgan, Vasyl Kasiyan, Ivan Padalka, Zinoviy Tolkachov, Vasyl Sedlyar; 18th (1932) – Borys Blank, Vasyl Kasiyan, Ivan Padalka, Moses Fradkin; 19th (1934) – Vasyl Kasiyan, Oleksiy Shovkunenko; 28th (1956) – Gavriilo Gluk, Mykhailo Deregus, Oleksandr Kovalev, Georgiy Melihov, Tetyana Yablonska; 29th (1958) – Mykhailo Deregus; 49th (2001) – Valentin Raevsky’s project; 50th (2003) – Victor Sydorenko’s project; 51th (2005) – Mykola Babak, Oleksiy Tytarenko; 52nd (2007) – project of Victor Pinchuk with six artists participating; 53rd (2009) – Ilya Chichkan; 54th (2011) – Oksana Mas; 55th (2013) – Gamlet Zinkovsky, Mykola Ridnyi, Zhanna Kadyrova; 56th (2015) – Zhanna Kadyrova, Nikita Kadan, Eugenia Bilorusets, Mykola Ridnyi; 57th (2017) – Borys Mikhailov, Jürgen Teller.

Despite the fact that the Soviet press had long been silent about the participation of Ukrainian artists in the Venice Biennale, foreign art historians (especially during the era of socialist realism) mentioned it repeatedly. In 1928, Kyryl Gvozdyk was labeled as the “Ukrainian Gauguin.”

It should be noted that the break between 1958 and 2001, which eliminated the European country of 50 million people from the world artistic process, was overlong.

What is the role of the Venice Biennale in the context of global contemporary art? It is the “coolest”

¹ SYDOR-GIBELINDA, Oleg, 2008, p. 129.

and the most expensive contemporary exhibition of contemporary art that defines artistic fashion for the next two years and declares leaders in the field of the most advanced art. It is a tricky plexus of political, financial, creative and individual qualities of the state and its artist and, most importantly, the acceptance or rejection of the participant and his state within the context of the world art. The art of contemporary time is the most up-to-date manifestation of all possible types, subtypes, and areas of visual art, when the author is entitled to use for his image anything surrounding him in his everyday or fictitious life. The criterion of success is whether the viewer is impressed and what is his opinion about the work of art. The same could be said about any other art, but the strength of contemporary art is in its innovations, novelty, and relevance. Here and now. There are no restrictions in subject, and the choice of methods, techniques, and materials is up to the author. It would seem to be easy for the artist to find his own path, not squeezed into the framework of the official Procrustean bed, with no regard to the official censorship. In recent decades art turned to indirect aides – audio, video, theater, cinema, installation, animation. Another feature of the biennial that contributed to its success is the participation of the state or sponsor in the project (financial aid). The double bond “state – artist, artist – state” becomes a mechanism for overcoming obstacles in the first phase and useful for both sides in the second phase – to win recognition.

As for Ukraine and its contemporary art in Venice, there is no clear answer.

It should be remembered that artists living in the Soviet Union were forced to work under the slogans of socialist realism, and, of course, to follow the formula of “the best of the arts” (denoting socialist realism) – i.e. national in form, socialist in content. It was impossible for spectator in Venice to adequately perceive the structure of such piece. The dissonance was bilateral. Sporadic exhibitions with the participation of Soviet artists held abroad were organized similarly to the exhibitions of the achievements of national economy. Perhaps, the overall context of the Biennale was not violated. After all, the main principle was to display the most advanced art; however, for the free Europe such art made no sense, since the mainstream Soviet and Ukrainian Soviet art aimed to show the achievements of the socialist system.

After a twenty-two years break, in 1956, Gavrilo Gluk, Mykhailo Deregus, Oleksandr Kovalev, Georgy Melikhov, Tetyana Yablonska took part in the

Venice Biennale. All of them were highly respected in Soviet Ukraine and belonged to the elite of Soviet artists, but in Venice their works were not accepted by art critics and visitors. The 29th Biennale in 1958, where famous Ukrainian professor Mykhailo Deregus was among the participants, became the last for Ukraine for decades. The Arsenale and Giardini were closed for Ukraine for the next forty-three years. The sporadic participations of the artists with some links to Ukraine did not make significant difference. Such trips were the privilege only for the trusted artists. In 1976, Tetyana Yablonska first visited Italy as part of a delegation of Soviet artists participating in the Biennial. Surprisingly, such talented and progressive artist as Tetyana Yablonska did not understand the meaning of what was happening in the gardens of Giardini. In 1956 her painting *Bread*, which was a landmark artwork not only for Ukraine, but also for the whole USSR, was exhibited at the 28th Venice Biennale. Soviet art critics hoped that the foreign viewers and critics would welcome this signature artwork of socialist realism. The painting was created in 1949, praising the slavish women’s labor on harvesting. There are few male figures on the canvas.

The piece was socially themed and showed the philosophy of the postwar life when there were virtually no men in the villages and women performed the hardest work. The young artist immediately won favors of leadership and received one of the most significant awards – the Stalin Prize. Works similar to *Bread* subsequently appeared in many republics of the Soviet Union. The topic was relevant and understandable to the common people. However, there was an innuendo between the lines. The glorification of hard female labor exposed another problem – the sexual dissatisfaction of young heroines. Subsequently, Matthew Bowen, a leading researcher of socialist realism, will list Tetyana Yablonska’s *Bread* as a symbol of the era of socialist realism. Still, back then, in 1956, the audience in Venice did not understand and did not accept the Ukrainian exposition. Apparently, that was so because the art offered by other countries did not try to stay out of politics, which since the Second World War seemed boring to the art world. Nevertheless, other art exhibitions in Europe did not stick with this criterion. In two years (in 1958) *Bread* by T. Yablonska was exhibited at the World Exhibition in Brussels, where the artist was awarded a bronze medal.

The universal values of the capitalist and socialist worlds were too different. A progressive Ukrainian artist in 1972 visited Italy for the second time.

Impressed by the trip, the artist produced a painting *Evening. Old Florence*, which presented her view of the city. The Italian Renaissance strongly impresses the master, reverses her consciousness. Comparing the artistic experiments of the 1960s with the works of Piero Della Francesca, Masaccio, Gozzoli, Ghirlandaio, Mantegna, the artist calls the works of her contemporaries the "self-obsessed affectation." "All the Western art I saw in Venice then at the Biennale, seemed to be some nonsense. The point was to be original, to stand out, to prove that you are more talented or inventive than others. To shock, to astonish. What for? In the whirlwind of "isms", which are constantly changing, to show off their "Self." In the pursuit of originality the art is long lost".²

Thus, the second attempt of Ukrainian artists to find their place among the topical works of the world art turned out to be a failure. From the cultural and philosophical points of view that was quite logical.

It is no big surprise that Western Europe knew little about Ukraine until the proclamation of Independence in August 1991 in Kyiv. By the mid-1990s, the Soviet country was separated from the pan-European overall development, particularly cultural. The undeniable fact is that Ukraine was mostly known as the state of the infamous Chernobyl disaster and the homeland of football and boxing stars. There was no mention of the artists. Ukrainian art was rarely mentioned – in specialized publications on art. The artistic world was interested in something else.

In 2001 after a long break Ukrainian artists participated in the Venice Biennale. The project by Valentin Raevsky was highly significant for Ukraine, at the center of its social agenda, revealing the horrors of the Chernobyl tragedy. Clearly, the world art community had minimal interest in Ukrainian problems. It explains why the art world was so little interested in Ukrainian exposition telling about the pain of Chernobyl – the well-off Western world just was not concerned with the others' pain. The ethnographic project of Mykola Babak had the same ill fate. Ethnic culture is imminent to all countries, with no exception. The artist did not get the fact that at a forum where more than seventy countries are represented, the national identity of some of them is not an object of contemporary art, but is simply a statement of fact.

However, the *Millstones of Time*, a project by Victor Sydorenko, which was exhibited in 2003, attracted the attention of the audience and art critics. Young men, who seem to have descended from the old frescoes, are grinding something using the devices, the purpose of which is not clear today. It turns out that they "grind time." In the white underwear, with bare torso, these youngsters remind the viewer of angels. Their mission is to combine the past with the future. The modern fresco was quite real, executed in the traditions of the old masters: the painting was exhibited upstairs. "Analysis of the processes that took place in the field of visual arts in the 20th and early 21st centuries results in certain conclusions. For instance, an interesting phenomenon: a significant part of Ukrainian artists of the late twentieth century reverted to the avant-garde forms and means of expression, imminent to the beginning of the century".³

The seven-minute video that the audience run into at the exhibition at the first place had a blurry drawn picture and gradually turned into a real act, where the heroes of the video came to life.

The next attempt to conquer the contemporary art world took place in 2007. To design a new society and new worlds is just a contemporary art endeavor in order to find a possible way out of the crisis produced by globalization. Apparently, any dictatorship is immoral. Who but us, born in the former USSR, would know such a thing? The project was titled *The Poem about an Inland Sea*. Liking or dislikings of the art world pave the way to success or failure. What originally seemed to be courtesy to the event (the participation of foreign artists), in fact, greatly added to the evaluation of the Ukrainian pavilion by world art critics. Famous artists Jürgen Teller, Mark Titchner, Sam Taylor-Wood, Borys Mikhailov joined the project. And the world liked it. On behalf of Ukraine the artists showed a bit of erotica, ballet, beer in a foreign pub, American skyscrapers with so familiar foreign-language advertisement, a large banner with an inscription that made little sense, naked female body distorted with chains in some forest, girls in the Soviet-style graduation gowns, the homeless people, almost compulsive for such work, nice buttocks in the window, pseudo-national flowers, mocking figure of the worker at the factory, and a window view to the blast furnace, where the metal is transformed

² YABLONSKA, Tetyana, 2004, p.143.

³ SYDORENKO, Victor, 2008, p. 145.

into money. And that is it. In 2009 the Pinchuk Art Center represented Ukraine at the Biennale one more time. The organizers of the exhibition, presenting the works of Ilya Chichkan and Mihara Yasuhiro, wanted to take the lead and chose the world-famous and beloved boxer Volodymyr Klitschko as a curator; his huge photo was hanging over the Grand Canal. Still, even that did not add any benefits. Second biennial with the participation of Pinchuk's team was not a failure, but it was not flattering for the state as well.

The project of Oksana Mas *Post vs. Proto-Renaissance* (Commissioner Victor Sydorenko, curators Oleksiy Rogotchenko, Achille Bonito Oliva), presented to 54th Biennale, became a landmark one for Ukraine. *Renaissance* was the key word in the title. Second Renaissance. The revival of the past centuries. Revival of Truth. Revival of spirituality. Revival of forgotten values.

The project was created as an intellectual one, targeted on the educated viewers, being rather provocative at the same time. The artistic creed of the well-known Ukrainian artist Oksana Mas was amalgamation. Amalgamation of creative styles, techniques, concepts, beliefs, perceptions of reality. Oksana Mas is a professional artist and philosopher, so her works always differ from the others due to the depths of their images' meanings. "Second revival" is grandiose (24 meters height) both in its physical dimensions and impression. From its very start, that is, sketches and narrative part, the project was very complex and complicated. Oksana Mas came out as a visionary of a kind, offering the new interpretation of the world-famous 1432 work by the Van Eyck brothers. It was about the Ghent Altarpiece, which, according to many art historians, actually started the Renaissance. The first title (and eventually the working one) of Oksana Mas' project was the "Second Renaissance." What exactly did it imply? The Ukrainian project wanted to show the modern world in its current transformation. That meant that the piece should have been based on the artwork, familiar and interesting to everyone. Besides, the Ghent Altarpiece is a point of reference for the Renaissance specifically. This piece started a revolution in the history of world art. As for the technique, this grandiose composition was made in the style of Pointillism. The module of the size of a chicken egg served as the dot. From a distance of several meters, it was no longer possible to understand that this was actually a module. Rich colors of the painting filled the space, and coming closer one could examine each module – an actual egg, painted – in detail.

That was manifestation of the philosophical component of the project. Hundreds of people from all over the world contributed to this artwork. It embodied of the leading idea of amalgamation: not in words or in curatorial texts, but in the work itself. The task was the following: to depict your own sin on an egg. When finished, hundreds of eggs formed a general composition. The main criterion for assembling the ready-made egg-modules was the color. No one knew, in which part of the whole composition would the certain egg fit. The project covered all social groups. Very different people from 54 countries of the world contributed to the project. The wives of the Ukrainian ambassadors helped in delivering boxes with eggs and paints to various countries.

Also there was a web-site, open to any person, who after reading and understanding the concept of the project, could draw a picture and send it by Internet to Ukraine, where professional artists would reproduce it on eggs, and thus everyone could become a participant of the project, its co-writer and co-artist. The project embraced thousands of people. Among those who did the egg paintings were children from the elite schools, general education schools, inmates of secure female and male facilities, drug addicts and alcohol-dependent people in rehabilitation centers. Everyone painted their sins: ministers, women clad in furs and diamonds, manual workers, businessmen. Practically all social groups of the planet were involved. When everything was assembled, the face of the saint arose. Standing at the one-meter distance from the work, one could see each and every sin in detail. Prisoners of the female facilities painted phalluses, male inmates – vaginas, those treated for drug addiction painted syringes and poppy heads, buds, and a little boy painted, how he tricked his mother. Many people depicted what they considered sinful. And suddenly it turned out that sin can be not only individual, but also global. It turns out today that a brand can also be a sin: since it replaced the icon and people are already praying for Mercedes, or on MacCoffee because they cannot live without it. Standing at the two-meter distance from the work, it was almost impossible for the viewer to see all the sins depicted, and from the distance of three meters they disappeared altogether. "The installation *Post vs. Proto-Renaissance* presented at the Venice Biennale in Pavilion of Ukraine is a section of the monumental work (92 x 134 m), composed of 3,640,000 wooden eggs. The eggs form a veritable architecture whose structure evokes a mosaic

in which the eggs' iconographic tattoos constitute the single elements".⁴

The project was exhibited in the functioning Catholic church, not far from the Cathedral of San Marco. For the first time in the history of the Biennial, the Catholic Church opened its doors and hosted the Slavic project in the fold of Italian culture and Gothic church. In such a way the cultures engaged not in a fight, but, instead, in a union. Journalists, researchers of art and culture from around the world liked the exhibition *Post vs. Proto-Renaissance*. Unfortunately, this was the last Ukrainian project, which attracted attention of the art critics.

Ukrainian artists Gamlet Zinkovsky, Mykola Ridnyi, and Zhanna Kadyrova worked on 55th Biennale project for Ukraine. Zhanna Kadyrovova, Nikita Kadan, Eugeniya Belorusets, Mykola Ridnyi together with poet Serhiy Zhadan, Anna Zvyagintseva, and Artem Volokitin participated in the 56th Biennale. Borys Mikhailov and Jürgen Teller took on with the 57th. None of the abovementioned projects won.

Conclusion

The overall impression of Ukrainian projects of the 21st century is positive. In the end, Ukrainian

artists can state that the world is as it is, and we are equal in it. Not better, nor worse, but equal. This great victory was initiated by Boychuk, Gvozdyk, Petrytsky, Krychevsky, Yablonska, Raevsky, Tytarenko, Sydorenko, Mas, and successfully supported by the younger generation of artists. Perhaps, were it not for two forced breaks for sixty years, there would be a contemporary different outline of Ukrainian art at the Venice Biennale.

Bibliographical Reference List

- ILLUMINATIONS*. Venice: Studio Fasoli, 2011.
- ROGOTCHENKO, Oleksiy. "B-52, or Fifty-second Venice Biennale". *Contemporary Art*, 2007, Vol. 4, pp. 49-54.
- SOM-SERDYUKOVA, Olena. "The Venice Biennale and the Ukrainian Context". *Contemporary Art*, 2005, Vol. 2, pp. 232-238.
- SYDORENKO, Victor. "Venice Biennale and Problems of Contemporary Art in Ukraine". *Contemporary Art*, 2004, Vol. 1, p.
- SYDORENKO, Victor. *Visual art of the avant-garde shifts to new directions: development of visual arts. Ukraine XX-XXI centuries*. Kyiv: BX studio, 2008.
- SYDOR-GIBELINDA, Oleg. *Ukrainians at the Venice Biennale: One Hundred Years of Presence*. Kyiv: Our time, 2008.
- YABLONSKA, Tetyana. "Memories of the 70's". *Ukrainian Art*, 2004, Vol. 3, p. 124.

⁴ *ILLUMINATIONS*, 2011, pp. 460-461.