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S. Helme

Conflicts and Adaptions: How to Display the Art of the Soviet Period

The aim of the current paper is to present the views and possibilities of the Art Museum of Estonia, to explain how we have twice opened the permanent exhibition about art in the Soviet period, that 50-year period when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union and was forced to follow the ideological requirements of the occupation power. In 2006, the Art Museum of Estonia opened its new building, its fifth branch, Kumu [2]. A display of Estonian art from the 17th century to the present was planned in the new building. Along with the permanent exhibition, there were temporary exhibitions in order to support different themes presented in the permanent exhibition. One of the permanent displays shows the period from 1940 until 1990, i. e. the years when Estonia was forcibly included into the Soviet Union, when culture was strongly influenced by state ideology, and the artists' creative freedom was censored. The first permanent display, with small alterations, was open from 2006 to 2016; it was changed for another permanent exhibition, which is open today [1].

The main issue of the exhibition was the format and the main axis. The crucial problem was the issue of politics interfering in culture and the results of this interference. This poses problems not only in Estonia, but also in art museums in many other former Soviet states. Then comes the question of how this highly problematic material containing numerous different power relations, psychology, and cultural issues can be presented in a museum where dialogues, oppositions, and opportunities can be underlined by the means of art-space and artworks, and not by long analytical texts.

Is it possible at all to create an adequate intellectual and aesthetic environment of the era, and should this actually be an aim? There are numerous possibilities: oppositions (the mainstream — non-official art), aesthetics (naturalism — modernism), timeline (time axis — theme blocks), etc. The harshest time for Estonian culture, 1945–1953, even raises ethical questions, because the years marked by mass state crimes were presented on the museum walls by the paintings depicting yellow fields, blooming orchards and new buildings [6, pp. 15–56; 125–174]. Besides, curators can choose among quite impressive material, not just Stalinist works; they possess the work of several generations, produced in the course of 50 years, and that period was not a static row of years, but both cultural and economic environments changed considerably. Despite everything, it was a dense period, occasionally contradictory and it did not tell the same story all the time.

During the last decades, different interpretations have emerged in the research of the Soviet period art; new discourses have emerged, such as postcolonialism, self-colonisation etc., used

more or less successfully, and a similar approach is often expected in museum displays. At the same time, art itself is the constantly researched material and not something that provides conclusions. The roles of text and image do not coincide, although it was demanded and expected back then, in socialist realism discourse. What is more, the aims of works of the Soviet period are often quite ambivalent, even if they do not belong to non-official art.

In the current paper, I would like to focus on some main questions on which we have structured our two permanent exhibitions of the Soviet art. The solutions of permanent exhibitions of 2006 and 2016 differ, and they do not only reflect the generational change of the public, but also more general processes occurring in the museum field: museums, including art museums, have indeed changed a great deal in the course of ten years, re-interpreting their relations with the public and today's role in the ever expanding entertainment environment.

The starting points of the display, themes that could not be ignored by either display:

relations between art and politics;

— multilayered art history, oppositions and dynamics;

— sources and originality of changes;

— generational view;

— expectations of the public.

1) The basis of both exhibitions is the issue of the relations between **art and politics**. The period under observation in our history is highly politicised; in 1940, Estonia lost its independence, and subsequent art life was arranged according to the ideological decisions of the Soviet leadership. However, this does not mean that Estonian art lost its independent outlook that no dynamics or changes occurred at all. This did not happen even during the most difficult era, when we can even claim that Estonian artists never acquired the “brushwork” of Stalinist realism. This is obvious in the 2016 Kumu exhibition “Romantic and Progressive. Stalinist impressionism in Painting of the Baltic States in the 1940s” [7].

The discussion about the borders between the impact of political domination and an independent artist's position continues to this date [8, pp. 26–58].

When Kumu was being built and the first display of this period had to be compiled, a lengthy discussion emerged turning around the main question — should our sparkling new museum present artworks created during the harshest years of Stalinism? The content of such art was mostly propagandistic and the issue of aesthetic attitudes non-existent. Despite strong criticism, the museum was convinced that this period had to be displayed; the issue was how to do it. The first display strongly marked the power lines, separated periods and emphasised their differences. The curator presented typical examples of Stalinism adding to numerous propagandist works the few paintings that expressed genuine spiritual torment and were not allowed to be shown in the Soviet era. These were known only to few people, and were probably well concealed. The new permanent display is more ambivalent and discursive, taking into consideration the attitudes of the younger generation towards the long-ago period, made the works talk to one another, as it were, putting into the same room the art of the Stalinist 1950s and later works that criticised the same period or tacked it ironically.

2) About multiple layers: as I already said, art of these years was not even and similarly controlled, but I am not going to describe the process here in greater detail. Instead, I would like

to underline that our art history at the time was divided into **three quite distinctive histories**. Firstly, there were the works that could be shown to the public, the so-called mainstream, which nevertheless contained independent national and social-critical approaches. Secondly, there were the works that were never been displayed, or shown in spaces with limited access; for example, in the back room of the Artists' Union, or in the Art Academy's painting classes, etc. Thirdly, there were the works of those who escaped in 1944 to the West and continued living there as artists at the first opportunity.

All this put together is our art history, although it is not easy to tie together and even more difficult to present in a museum as spatial and temporal consensus. Comparing the two permanent exhibitions, it is clear that the material is increasingly blending into one visual world. The first permanent exhibition, for example, introduced Estonian pop art as an alternative work, whereas the new display does not make such distinctions, and, considering the influence of the language of pop on mainstream works, blends them more into one. This leads us to totally different approaches than art history has so far suggested. If our aim is to produce an all-inclusive narrative, this may be the only way to present the three different art histories in one display. At the same time, we have to admit that this kind of presentation includes strong fabulation and ignores historical reality. Nevertheless, we have preferred this interpretation and left discussions and analyses to seminars, and publications.

It is not fair to claim that the whole period, from artworks made in fear of Stalinist repressions until the end of 1980s, was ideologically impaired. If this were the case, no alternative, dissident, or non-official art would have emerged in Estonia and in other Soviet territories (it does not matter here how to call it). Art history and theory increasingly tackle this quite expansive cultural border area between binary opposition, art that created forms of difference, plurality and conditionality. Estonian art history has researched the "border area" reaching social structures and has also suggested a theory of a third way, which analyses creative space between the avant-garde and surrendering to power [10]. New treatments increasingly consider the museum displays, and they are reflected in the second exhibition.

3) Originality: during the nineties, issues about the relations between the work of artists in the Soviet sphere of influence and Western prototypes emerged especially sharply. It was asked what could we add to the radical years of Western art in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In reply, the value of Estonian avant-garde means using and mixing the local psychological, cultural, and material issues with the Western neo-avant-garde. The role of local avant-garde is diverse: on the one hand, the borders of radicalism innovation are tested, and on the other hand, this is used to feed the mainstream, as the majority of artists always adopted something [4, pp. 29–83]. This is especially valid about pop art. Local developments are numerous and diverse. A simple example about later modernism occurred in Estonia in the late 1950s, and 1960s. We were unable to participate in the long discussions about the negative role of modernism; quite the opposite — we valued it highly. In painting, for instance, the local aesthetic discourse based on the developments of the early 20th century French painting was the only bridge from the past through which we linked ourselves with European tradition and tried to maintain cultural identity [5].

We have relied on the theory of different modernisms, of horizontal art history suggested by Piotr Piotrowski, which ignores the exclusive right of a vertical axle [9, pp. 82–86]. I also

like the idea of Hans Belting about the state of innocence, about painting in East-European areas that was as if frozen and continued dealing with the same painting issues that were adopted from the 20th century classical modernism [3, p. 57]. This is also valid in our art of painting. Thus — the more deeply we investigate, the more we perceive originality.

4) Generational view: the curators who today compile a display about, say, the years 1940–1980, as a rule, lack any personal relations with the era, since, in their own memory, there is an increasing distance with past events. Causes, backgrounds, events are being deconstructed and reconstructed, an individual solution is sought — in a word, a process takes place that always happens with history, with each generation writing its own history. It should be pointed out that today's generation is more text-oriented and mistrusts artworks. We have been writing a so-called new art history since the early 1990s, and while doing that, it is possible to be multi-layered, to explain, comment, discuss etc. The text and image languages are quite different. I already mentioned the exhibition becoming more uniform, avoiding abrupt changes. It must, however, be added that the curator of the new display, much younger than the curator of the previous exhibition, has solved the relations between art and politics namely via commentaries — he has divided the crucial exhibition hall into two lengthwise. Using large panels, the exhibition space was divided into two: one presenting documents, photographs, films, i.e. historical information of that time. The other side displayed the official art next to the art which was not officially accepted. Two processes occurred simultaneously — on the one hand, viewers perceive a conflict between information of two kinds, as photos and old films depict quite another world than that presented by artworks; at the same time, there is the complicated nature of art, its adequacy, how it relates to its time. The method of placing different discourses in different blocs is replaced by commentaries and creating separate realities, which functioned then and function in the current display. Different personal times could run in parallel. At the same time, we can see the complicated creative processes, the emotional impact of the environment, relating to relevant time. The method of the previous permanent exhibition, where different discourses were divided into different blocks and aesthetic opportunities emphasised, was in the later display replaced with art history underlined as social phenomenon; an artwork does not have to confirm the essence of a black-and-white era, but to create differences within it.

5) Expectations: when a new museum is opened the expectations run especially high. In Estonia the expectations were special — the decision to build a new art museum in a country that had regained independency only recently was the very first major cultural-political decision. The decision was so crucial that it inevitably influenced all the museum's pre-election discussion.

Generally, the expectations were of two kinds: those of the artists and those of the public.

In 2006, many artists, especially those who had never succumbed to Soviet rules, called dissident, underground, nonconformist, unofficial, alternative, etc. expected a new, all-inclusive approach to art. Certain glorification was expected, showing respect for those who had stayed faithful to their own artistic principles during the that long period.

The expectations of the wider public were similar — a tale of the wonderful early 20th century when artists rushed to modern art without questioning anything, of the grand art of painting which for decades consoled the viewers and encouraged faith in national culture. What was wanted was the “best part of our art history”. Upon the opening of the new museum

building, the living memory, a glance trying to map history and the popular all blended. The long-awaited museum had to fulfil all expectations.

A museum exhibition, however, is not just the permanent display, but, as mentioned before, also includes temporary exhibitions which support and supplement the permanent one, or get into a dialogue with the presented material. In any case, the museum has to maintain its independent concept, which was actually done. The public quickly got used to it.

This is now our choice, which does not mean that the next permanent exhibition will not be different. Next year, we plan to reshape the early 20th century permanent exhibition.

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Title. Conflicts and Adaptions: How to Display the Art of the Soviet Period

Author. Sirje Helme — Ph. D., director. Art Museum of Estonia (KUMU). Weizenbergi 34 / Valge 1, 10127 Tallinn, Estonia. sirje.helme@ekm.ee

Abstract. In 2006, a new main building (named Kumu) of the Art Museum of Estonia was opened. Creating a new permanent exhibition, museum confronted by the question how to show Estonian art from the Soviet times as exceptional period in our art history, intertwined with the topics of power and imposed-upon art ideologies. We have tried to find an answer to this question twice by now (in 2006 and 2016).

The article is about two different ways of creating the exposition, although the basis of both of them is the issue of the relations between art and politics. The first display strongly marked the power lines, separated periods and emphasised their differences. The new permanent display is more ambivalent and discursive, taking into consideration the attitudes of the younger generation towards the long-ago period. Our art history at the time was divided into three distinctive histories. First, the works that could be shown to the public, which nevertheless contained independent national and social-critical approaches. Second, the works that

were never displayed for the general public. Third, the art of those who escaped in 1944 to the West and continued living there as artists at the first opportunity.

All this together constitutes our art history, although it is not easy to tie it together, and it is even more difficult to present it in a museum as spatial and temporal consensus.

Keywords: Art Museum of Estonia (KUMU), Estonian art, collection, exhibition, Soviet art

Название статьи. Конфликты и адаптации. Как показывать искусство советского периода

Сведения об авторе. Хельме Сирье — Ph. D., директор. Художественный музей Эстонии. Вейценберги 34/Валге 110127 Таллин, Эстония. sirje.helme@ekm.ee

Аннотация. В 2006 г. было открыто новое здание Художественного музея Эстонии (KUMU). Создавая новую постоянную экспозицию, сотрудники музея столкнулись с вопросом: как показать эстонское искусство советского времени? Это исключительный период, который тесно переплетён с темами власти и навязанной идеологии в искусстве. Мы уже дважды пытались найти ответ на этот вопрос, и оба раза возникала дилемма, касающаяся не самого факта показа работ, созданных по заказу и подчиняющихся государственной политике в сфере искусства, но того, как именно это сделать.

В этом вопросе может быть множество отправных точек, отличающихся коренным образом. Приведём несколько спорных моментов, которые обсуждались. Во-первых, как примирить разногласия между поколениями: ныне живущие свидетели советской эпохи против растущей дистанции, отделяющей нас от событий прошлого, так называемого взгляда стороннего наблюдателя, свойственного молодёжи. Каковы риски и возможные ошибки обоих подходов? Во-вторых, в какой степени мы должны учитывать политический и социальный контекст того времени и в какой — эстетические качества произведений искусства? В-третьих, как вместить в единое повествование так называемое мейнстримное искусство и историю неоавангарда, который со своими идеями и представлениями был практически неизвестен широкой публике? Мы рассматриваем всё вместе как единую систему, однако как описать принципы её функционирования? В-четвёртых, как включить в экспозицию ещё одну главу нашей истории искусств, а именно «Эстонское искусство в изгнании» — произведения художников, которые бежали в 1944 г. на Запад, остались связанными с эстонскими общинами в других государствах и в то же время переняли художественный язык своих новых стран, то есть поздний модернизм послевоенной Европы и Америки?

Написать новую историю искусства действительно можно — именно это и было сделано в монографиях и статьях, но остаётся главный вопрос: как это всё показать в выставочном зале? Экспозиция диктует свои требования и никогда не будет идеально отражать написанную историю искусства. Перед кураторами и дизайнерами выставок встала непростая задача — продемонстрировать одну из самых неоднозначных глав нашей истории в пространстве музея. Необходимо было решить, что станет основным критерием отбора работ, главным образом — в какой степени этот выбор должен быть продиктован эстетическими оценками, а в какой — политическими реалиями. Может ли экспозиция показать взаимодействие между властью и умами, и если да, то как именно?

Первая экспозиция 2006 г. (куратор — Эха Комиссаров) положила начало жарким спорам, раздавались упреки, что мы выставляем неприятные политические работы и игнорируем изобразительное искусство. Нас спрашивали, действительно ли нам так нужно начать с низкопробных и идеологически ангажированных работ при открытии нового прекрасного здания музея.

Вторая экспозиция (куратор — Ану Аллас), открывшаяся в 2016 г., не является строгим историко-художественным обзором, но предлагает зрителю множество документальных материалов, дополняющих исторический контекст, в том числе старые видеозаписи, фотографии и тому подобное. Перед куратором стояла цель представить материал максимально широко, с разных точек зрения.

Интерпретация сложных исторических периодов была и будет непростой задачей для историка искусства. Каждое новое поколение переписывает историю искусства от своего лица, и это, наверное, надо просто принять, даже если это иногда оказывается умозрительной конструкцией. В конце концов, невозможно закрыться в какой-то одной парадигме, включая эстетическую.

Ключевые слова: Художественный музей Эстонии (KUMU), эстонское искусство, коллекция, экспозиция, советское искусство