



WHAT IS TO BE DONE – *Now?*

DISCUSSIONS OF
SCHOLARSHIP ON SO-CALLED
“RUSSIAN” ART AND CULTURE

10th Graduate Workshop of the
RUSSIAN(?) ART
& CULTURE GROUP

September 27-28,
2024

Constructor University
Campus Ring 1
28759 Bremen
Lab 3

Cover: Vadim Sidur, *Der Gefesselte (Den Opfern der Gewalt) [The Bound One (To the Victims of Violence)]*, 1974, aluminum, 180 cm high, Kassel.
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WHAT IS TO BE DONE – *Now?*

DISCUSSIONS OF SCHOLARSHIP ON SO-CALLED “RUSSIAN” ART AND CULTURE

The ongoing Russian war against Ukraine has caused a deep crisis of scholarship and put into question a range of terms, definitions, and points of view that have long been established in the history of art and visual culture of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The tenth workshop of the Russian(?) Art & Culture Group takes this as a point of departure to facilitate a critical discussion with the aim to find appropriate terms, approaches, and strategies that give new insights into Imperial Russian and Soviet art and culture and will contribute to these ongoing debates about the future of art historical scholarship in this particular geography.

The workshop is guided by a critical reconsideration of the term “Russian” in relation to the study of Imperial Russian and Soviet art and culture. It reflects on key issues such as re-readings and re-evaluations of Russo-centric narratives, the re-definition of cultures in the territory of the former Soviet Union, blind spots and marginalized areas of knowledge, as well as the entanglements and responsibilities of scholarship in light of the ongoing war.

10th Graduate Workshop of the Russian(?) Art & Culture Group

Constructor University Bremen
Campus Ring 1, 28759 Bremen

Lab 3

PROGRAM

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27

13.30 *Registration*

14.00 **Opening: Introduction and Anniversary Review**
Isabel Wünsche, Constructor University Bremen

14.30 **Keynote: The History of Art in the Shadow of War:
On the Necessity of Revising the Narrative of Russian/Soviet
Modernism**
Konstantin Akinsha, independent scholar, Ferrara

15.00 *Coffee Break*

Panel I: IMPERIAL IMAGINARIES

Chair: Julia Secklehner

15.30 **Intersections of Empires, Intersections of Cultures: On Traces of
Occident and Orient in the Russian Empire's Visual Culture**
Kacper Radny, Justus Liebig University, Giessen

16.00 **Russian Empire = Russian Culture? A Transcultural Approach to
Artists of a Multinational Empire**
Mira Kozhanova, University of Bamberg

16.30 **Ruscism as Artistic Geo-Imagination and the Challenges to Its
Hegemony**
Nikolay Smirnov, documenta Institut, Kassel

17.00 *Coffee Break*

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Moderation: Georg Sokolov

17.30 What Is "Russian" Art and Culture?

With Konstantin Akinsha, independent scholar, Ferrara,
Louise Hardiman, Kingston University, London,
and Maria Silina, Ruhr University Bochum.

19.00 Book Presentation: *What Is to Be Done?* (2024)

Ludmila Piters-Hofmann (editor), independent scholar, Bonn

19.15 *Dinner Reception*

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28

09.00 *Morning Coffee*

Panel II: CHALLENGING IMPERIAL HISTORIES

Chair: Sebastian Borkhardt

09.30 Russian Imperial History of the Nineteenth Century: The Territory of Others

Marat Ismagilov, Ruhr University Bochum

10.00 What Is to Be Done at the Crossroads?

Ludmila Piters-Hofmann, independent scholar, Bonn

10.30 *Coffee Break*

Panel III: AVANT-GARDE ARTISTS IN A TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXT

Chair: Irina Riznychok

10.45 Navigating Boundaries: Varvara Bubnova's Artistic Journey through the Russian Revolution, Constructivism, and Pre-War Japan

Olga Isaeva, University of Bonn

11.15 What Is to Be Done with Kandinsky?

Sebastian Borkhardt, documenta archiv, Kassel

11.45 *Lunch Break*

Panel IV: DECENTRALIZING "RUSSIAN" TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART

Chair: Ludmila Piters-Hofmann

12.45 **The Denial of Artists' Self-Determination: Causes and Consequences**

Olga Olkheft, University of Bielefeld

13.15 **On the Margins(?): Soviet Art Outside Moscow**

Irina Riznychok, Constructor University Bremen

13.45 **Neither Center nor Periphery: How to Decolonize the Study of Leningrad Nonconformist Art**

Georg Sokolov, Constructor University Bremen

14.15 *Coffee Break*

Panel V: ARTISTIC POLITICS AND RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE

Chair: Georg Sokolov

14.30 **Living Dead: Artistic Crafts in the Context of Soviet and Russian Necropolitics**

Elizaveta Berezina, University of Leipzig

15.00 **Recontextualizing Unofficial Soviet Art in the Wake of Russia's War on Ukraine: The Case of Vadim Sidur's *Death by Bombs* in Dnipro**

Charlotte Adèle Murphy, University of Freiburg

15.30 **CONCLUDING DISCUSSION**

Initial idea and organization: Isabel Wünsche, Sebastian Borkhardt, Ludmila Piters-Hofmann, Irina Riznychok, Julia Secklehner, and Georg Sokolov.

Founded in 2014, the Russian(?) Art & Culture Group is based at Constructor University Bremen (formerly Jacobs University). Headed by Isabel Wünsche, it brings together international scholars and young researchers whose work focuses on Imperial Russian and Soviet art and culture.

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ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTE

The History of Art in the Shadow of War: On the Necessity of Revising the Narrative of Russian/Soviet Modernism

Konstantin Akinsha, independent scholar, Ferrara

Putin's war against Ukraine has triggered the collapse of the cultural model that has dominated Russia since the early 2000s. This model, characterized by its inclusiveness, embraced all historical cultural products, from radical modernism to Socialist Realism, as manifestations of the "greatness" of Russian culture. The "Russian avant-garde" (an umbrella definition coined by the Western art market during the 1970s) was prohibited in the USSR but embraced during the period of perestroika. Since then, it has been utilized as raw material for the instrumentalization of culture by Putin's ideologists and propagandists.



Decorative board in the Sheremetyevo Airport, 2021.
Photo © Konstantin Akinsha.

constructivist imagery, topped off by a glorification of Soviet space exploration. This version of the avant-garde had a specific feature: its revolutionary essence was disregarded entirely, reducing its works to mere decoration. The aversion to the very idea of revolution led to such

A notable example was the opening ceremony of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, directed by Konstantin Ernst, the CEO of Channel One Russia. The ceremony remixed the unavoidable "Natasha's Dance" with incorporated motifs borrowed from suprematist and

paradoxes as the virtual absence of revolutionary art exhibitions in Russia in 2017. These attempts to insulate Russian modernism from its historical context demand serious analysis. The political “castration of the avant-garde” coincided with the rehabilitation of Socialist Realism, which was also stripped off its historical context.

The onset of the Russian aggression against Ukraine ignited a true *Kulturkampf*. Ukrainian intellectuals began a campaign for the “nationalization” of artists traditionally represented as rooted in Russian culture. This campaign, developed under the slogans of “decolonization,” has been clumsy and methodologically weak. While the emotional attitudes of Ukrainians are understandable given the endless Russian military crimes, including the random destruction of cultural heritage, the Russian position on the issue (including some “liberal” art historians) has demonstrated stubborn resistance to the introduction of any elements of post-colonial discourse.

Today, there is an urgent need for different methodological approaches to the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and a better understanding of Soviet “affirmative action” colonialism. Research into Imperial Russian/Soviet modernism requires the rejection of outdated definitions such as the “Russian avant-garde,” the return of radical modernism reclaimed from Putin’s ideologists to its historical context, and a serious critical historiographical study of the interpretation of Imperial Russian/Soviet art from the 1960s to today; necessitating, not least the cleansing of the Augean stables of Russian art from the thousands of fakes incorporated into the museum and private collections and featured in art history books and exhibition catalogs.

Panel I: **IMPERIAL IMAGINARIES**

Chair: Julia Secklehner

Intersections of Empires, Intersections of Cultures: On Traces of Occident and Orient in the Russian Empire's Visual Culture

Kacper Radny, Justus Liebig University, Giessen

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Hegel offered a categorical distinction between Western and Eastern cultures, saying that "Asia is [...] the *Orient* quarter of the globe and [...] is absolutely the East." In contrast, "Europe [...] is absolutely the West." (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, New York: The Colonial Press, 1899, 99.) Since then, a plethora of contributions, especially in the field of post-colonialism, have offered more insightful and nuanced perspectives on this subject. Despite that, the elusive character of Russian culture is still challenging to determine. Already in Hegel's understanding, Russia, Poland, as well as other Slavic Kingdoms had formed a third entity which, although belonging somewhat to Europe, "form and perpetuate the connection with Asia." (Hegel, 102) A similar sentiment has been expressed more recently by Larry Wolf, who sees Eastern Europe as a product of the West, invented for the latter to distance itself from the East. (Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, 356-74.) Drawing inspiration from those and similar statements, my paper will analyze visual art from the Russian territories of the late nineteenth century that was exposed to a multi-national European context and discuss the clash of "Western" and "Eastern" elements.

Russian Empire = Russian Culture? A Transcultural Approach to Artists of a Multinational Empire

Mira Kozhanova, University of Bamberg

The paper offers a forward-looking perspective on artists from the Russian Empire who left their homeland at the turn of the twentieth century to pursue an artistic career in Paris. Case studies of selected representatives will illuminate the diverse ethnic, national, cultural, and religious backgrounds of the artists. On this basis, the paper will critically address the oversimplified label “Russian artists,” arguing for a more precise usage of terminology to prevent potential misconceptions of the artists as *solely* Russian. It will furthermore acknowledge the formation of a collective identity tied to an imagined heritage among migrant artists, who faced certain stereotypes associated with their Imperial Russian origins. They could in turn have strategically employed such labels to gain a more noticeable presence within the French art scene. In this context, it is essential to differentiate between artists’ self-identification and self-representation while also considering the impact of the broader reception of Imperial Russian art in this interplay. The concept of transculturality is considered to be fundamental to these considerations. As conceptualized by Monica Juneja, transcultural identity is a complex and dynamic construct comprising heterogeneous ethnocultural elements that engage in ongoing negotiation processes within themselves. While recognizing the entangled histories of artists from the Russian/Soviet empires, the transcultural approach also challenges prevailing Russo-centric narratives. Instead of providing definitive answers, the paper aims to stimulate reflections on how art historians can acknowledge the multifaceted nature of artists’ transcultural identities across various fields of work, as well as broader methodological questions.

Ruscism as Artistic Geo-Imagination and the Challenges to Its Hegemony

Nikolay Smirnov, documenta Institut, Kassel

The paper aims to inquire into Ruscism, a combination of Russian exceptionalism, patriotism, imperialism, resentment, and xenophobia, as a specific mindset foregrounding racial and imperial thinking and closely connected with art and culture. Namely, as a geo-imagination that has been represented, articulated, authorized, and spatialized in and through contemporary Russian art and culture. The research explores Ruscism's genealogy, its representatives in art and culture today, and other geo-imaginations that challenge it, such as internationalist and decolonial ones. The paper applies the optics and methods of cultural geography, philosophy, and art critique to the study of Russian art and its socio-political implications. It posits that art can function as a geographical and social practice, while social and geographical matters inform art, with geo-imaginations as intermediary components between them. The key question is how the work of geo-imaginations in art and culture corresponds to geopolitical ambitions, ensuring and manifesting their implementation in shaping and reshaping the world, thereby supporting or challenging the power of various regimes. All geo-imaginations are situated in dialectical relationships and the struggle for hegemony: while Ruscism co-opts transgressive and emancipatory rhetoric, oppositional geo-imaginations encounter contradictions and a totalizing logic that can undermine their critical and progressive stances.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION: WHAT IS "RUSSIAN" ART AND CULTURE?

Moderation: Georg Sokolov

STATEMENTS

Konstantin Akinsha, independent scholar, Ferrara

The contemporary political situation and the collapse of the official Russian cultural model, provoked by Putin's invasion of Ukraine, necessitate a serious revision of the history of Russian modernism, which is still colored by sentiments from the Cold War and the fall of communism. It is time to stop publishing books with titles like "Celebrating Suprematism" and to critically examine the very term "Russian avant-garde" as an artificial construct. During the Cold War, the so-called "Russian avant-garde" became a favored argument in the anti-Soviet struggle. In Putin's Russia, it has been transformed into yet another proof of the greatness of Russian statehood. This transformation of the legacy of Russian modernism into just another tool in the propaganda toolbox is sometimes overlooked by researchers who, perhaps subconsciously, serve the state narrative. The contribution will raise questions about the application of different types of narratives to the research of Russian/Soviet art of the first half of the twentieth century and will advocate for reasonable revisionism, which is becoming necessary to dispel the smog of political speculation.

Louise Hardiman, Kingston University London

The problem of how to decolonize imperial histories, including those of the Russian Empire, has received much recent attention, and this process has accelerated since the Russian invasion of spring 2022. My personal response to the Russo-Ukrainian War for my practice as a historian was both tactical and ethically necessary. Accepting the urgent need to expand my own knowledge, I chose in my own work on the art of the nineteenth-century Russian Empire to focus my teaching specifically on Ukraine,

knowing that the necessary decoupling (or extraction) of Ukrainian history from that of Russia required me to invest my energies into learning a new approach. Simple steps included the renaming of artists and phenomena, as many others have urged, and re-examining the basics—biographies, relationships and influences, content, and so on. What we had overlooked was often hidden in plain sight. I immediately renamed myself, too, as a historian of Ukrainian art as well as Russian, even though my publications to date have not focused on Ukraine. This was, however, both a recognition of the concealed presence of Ukraine within Russo-centric histories and a declaration of intention. Focusing as much on processes as on content, my paper will share some of the debates, challenges, and questions with which I have grappled in my ongoing journey of rethinking my approach—and engage with the question “What does it mean to be a historian of imperial ‘Russian’ art, now?”

Maria Silina, Ruhr University Bochum

I will address the ways museums, as institutions that produce and display art historical narratives, have been historically interwoven with military and ideological punitive campaigns led by the Russian Empire and its successors, the USSR and Russia, throughout the long twentieth century. First, I will examine the museum infrastructure that had been created under tight Russian control by the Second World War (1939–45). Secondly, I will discuss how Russian scholars used alienated and displaced objects to build a universalist Soviet art historical narrative. Finally, I will analyze how Russian authorities have misused Soviet museum infrastructure as a tool of warfare in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2014–present).

Book Presentation: *What Is to Be Done? Art Practice, Theory, and Promotion in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia* (Berlin: Logos, 2024)

Ludmila Piters-Hofmann (editor), independent scholar, Bonn

Panel II: **CHALLENGING IMPERIAL HISTORIES**

Chair: Sebastian Borkhardt

Russian Imperial History of the Nineteenth Century: The Territory of Others

Marat Ismagilov, Ruhr University Bochum

Since 2009, I have been exploring the art and culture of Russia during the imperial period, focusing particularly on the history of collecting, art institutions, and exhibitions. I am currently writing my dissertation on the Society for the Encouragement of Artists, the first voluntary organization supporting art in Tsarist Russia. In my paper, I aim to summarize my research experiences and propose an approach to the study of Russian imperial history that has become increasingly vital to me following the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine. I have termed this approach “Russian history of the period of empire—the territory of others.” The primary goal of this approach is to challenge the notion of the unity and continuity of what is often termed “Russian” culture. In my presentation, I will provide detailed examples and discuss the areas that, in my opinion, most urgently require this re-evaluation. Specifically, I will address the problematic nature of the public sphere of art in the nineteenth century, the diverse types of publics often overlooked in historical accounts, art beyond the capitals, and the contentious concept of a “national school of painting.”

What Is to Be Done at the Crossroads?

Ludmila Piters-Hofmann, independent scholar, Bonn

Iconically Russian, the three *bogatyrs* gaze into the distance in search of worthy foes. But the real foe is misinformation. Viktor Vasnetsov’s *Bogatyrs* of the eponymous painting, the archetype of the “Russian” warrior ready to overcome any obstacle in Mother Russia’s defense, are—at a closer

look—of Ukrainian origin. This is only one example of a Russo-centric interpretation that pushes aside ideas of multi-ethnicity. This misconstrued cultural heritage would become part of the collective narrative. Not only such extreme cases should be questioned and re-evaluated. Based on the example of Vasnetsov's work, this paper presents how artists contributed to the official narrative still prevalent today. The genesis of such paintings and the background of their creators require re-examination. Where did the source material come from? How did artists and the public interpret these works? When did the "legend" of the official narrative start? While re-evaluating such questions, care must be taken not to fall to the other extreme and claim ill intentions where there may have been none.

Panel III: **AVANT-GARDE ARTISTS IN A TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXT**
Chair: Irina Riznychok

Navigating Boundaries: Varvara Bubnova's Artistic Journey through Russian Revolution, Constructivism, and Pre-War Japan
Olga Isaeva, University of Bonn

By decentering research perspectives and actively adopting a transcultural framework, this paper aims to challenge the Russo-centric and Euro-centric narratives that still dominate the art historiography of the "avant-garde." Transcultural art history provides a methodological approach beyond merely broadening art history. It considers transformational processes based on cultural encounters and the relationship between the global and the local. As a case study, this paper examines Varvara Bubnova's artistic development in Japan during the Taishō period and asks to what extent Bubnova's migration experiences impacted her artistic activities. During the 1920s and 1930s, the artist attempted to "translate" the principles of Constructivism and the ideals of the Russian Revolution into the new context of the Japanese avant-gardes. She faced challenges and rejections that made this attempt largely

unsuccessful. It was at this point that she made a radical decision. She shifted her focus away from oil painting and instead embraced lithography, a printmaking technique barely known in Japan. As an immigrant, Bubnova had to respond to her new environment and construct her own position. In doing so, she turned to printmaking, which met her need to create affordable, accessible, and democratic art.

What Is to Be Done with Kandinsky?

Sebastian Borkhardt, documenta archiv, Kassel

What significance did Wassily Kandinsky's Russian origins have for his contemporary reception in Germany? This is the central question I examine in my dissertation *"Der Russe Kandinsky"* ["The Russian Kandinsky"], which was published in 2021. In Kandinsky's time, the engagement with his art was largely shaped by nationalistic thinking. My study aims to shed light on and contextualize the various references to Kandinsky's descent, including the intentions and ideas underlying them. Although Kandinsky's identity can be described as complex, and he transcended national borders in his life and work, he often was (and still is) simply labeled as "Russian." Of course, Kandinsky himself contributed to this perception. How does or should the Russian Federation's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine change the way we write or speak about the "Russian" Kandinsky? In order to approach an answer to this question—and this paper is no more than a tentative attempt—I will first report on my own learning process, which began in February 2022, and illustrate how it has influenced my work. Against this background, I will then discuss recent approaches by other scholars or institutions in dealing with Kandinsky.

Panel IV: **DECENTRALIZING "RUSSIAN" TWENTIETH-CENTURY ART**

Chair: Ludmila Piters-Hofmann

The Denial of Artists' Self-Determination:

Causes and Consequences

Olga Olkheft, University of Bielefeld

The way we perceive the legacy of the "Russian avant-garde" today is intricately tied to its rediscovery in the 1950s-60s, when the term was coined, and further conceptualization in the 1970s-80s, when it gained international recognition. This legacy was constantly politicized and instrumentalized within the context of the cultural Cold War. During this time, there were attempts to suggest other terms, such as "East-European modernism," "Revolutionary Art," or "Soviet avant-garde." Despite sporadic criticism and debates within the academic community, the term "Russian avant-garde" was accepted as a useful umbrella term and became the most widespread, universal, and commonly used. At the same time, its use was constantly accompanied by caveats that the artists commonly identified as belonging to the Russian avant-garde never referred to themselves as such. Instead, they employed different categories, such as Futurism, Cubism, Rayonism, Suprematism, and Constructivism, which often stood in artistic opposition to one another. The question of the national self-determination of artists remained entirely on the periphery of scholarship. Today, in light of Russia's barbaric invasion of Ukraine, Russia's national claims to this cultural heritage are undergoing significant re-evaluation. Major museums worldwide are now renaming and clarifying the origins and national identities of these artists. In my presentation, I suggest discussing the consequences of not re-assessing Cold War narratives and the need to critically re-read the historiography of the no longer "Russian" and probably no longer "avant-garde."

On the Margins(?): Soviet Art Outside Moscow

Irina Riznychok, Constructor University Bremen

The paper explores the artistic avant-garde practices of the Uktus School (Sverdlovsk, 1964-74), the starting point for all discussions of nonconformist art in the Ural region. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Uktus School had its "Sturm und Drang" period, experimenting with conceptual visual art and poetry, artistic theory, and samizdat publications. In their conceptual poetry, they focused primarily on the legacy of Russian cubo-futurism. At the same time, the core members of the group were aware of Western modernism, familiarizing themselves with it bit by bit through Eastern European journal publications and Western art books that were scarcely distributed within Sverdlovsk, an industrial megapolis that was practically closed to foreigners. Despite the publications of recent decades, the Uktus School has never been included in the canon of Soviet unofficial visual art. Remaining on the margins of major exhibitions and books on post-war Soviet culture, the Ural's version of conceptualism is still considered as a peripheral, very specific case. Not only does this fact confirm the established hierarchy topped by Moscow romantic conceptualism, but it also demonstrates unequal access to representation that still exists in Russian culture and requires reconsideration.

Neither Center nor Periphery: How to Decolonize the Study of Leningrad Nonconformist Art

Georg Sokolov, Constructor University Bremen

Leningrad was once called "a great city with regional fate." This eloquent account not only provides a concise summary of the city's dramatic trajectory in the twentieth century but also elucidates the peculiar ambiguity of its experience and self-understanding. Leningrad was always situated in a liminal space, oscillating between the roles of capital and region. This duality became an integral part of Leningrad's identity,

exerting a significant influence on the city's culture, particularly its unofficial part. The legacy of the empire, along with the enduring cultural infrastructure, stimulated cultural development. However, this was counterbalanced by the impact of Stalinist purges, the constant undermining by Moscow authorities, and the subsequent imposition of stringent censorship by the authorities of Leningrad. These factors rendered the cultural conditions in the "northern capital" considerably more challenging than those in the actual capital. The study of Leningrad art follows a similarly ambiguous approach. It is not sufficiently aligned with the established canon of modern and contemporary art in the West to be included in the "traditional" art historical volumes (Art Since 1900), nor is it sufficiently peripheral to gain additional scholarly interest from the "decolonial turn." In my paper, I will demonstrate that Leningrad nonconformist art's position in the shadows of the periphery (or of the center) and a task of situating it within the current art historical discourse could serve as a case study for developing a new understanding of the history of art. This would entail continuing the processes of rethinking and horizontalizing that history.

Panel V: **ARTISTIC POLITICS AND RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE**

Chair: Georg Sokolov

Living Dead: Artistic Crafts in the Context of Soviet and Russian Necropolitics

Elizaveta Berezina, University of Leipzig

In April 2024, photos of a black lacquered coffin, richly ornamented and decorated with a firebird motif on its lid, circulated on social media, accompanied by ironic comments referring to it as the "biggest lacquer box" in the history of Kholui's traditional artistic craft-miniature lacquer painting. The kitsch coffin was commissioned by Oleg Shelyagov, a businessman and owner of one of the largest Russian ritual service

companies, whose wife Victoria, a socialite and media personality, positions herself as the patroness and promoter of Russian folk artistic crafts. I suggest considering her endeavors to bring the dying crafts back to life in the context of contemporary Russian necropolitics, which use power to dictate “who may live and who must die.” (Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1, January 2003: 11.) This case offers a starting point for discussing how necrocriticism, a critique of ideologies and institutions centered on death and violence, offers an alternative perspective on Soviet and “Russian” culture and art. This critical approach is actively explored by anti-war projects and artistic groups, notably the “Party of the Dead.” I will demonstrate how this critique operates on historical and contemporary examples and why it emerges as one of the few viable approaches to discussing “Russian”/Soviet art and culture.

Recontextualizing Unofficial Soviet Art in the Wake of Russia’s War on Ukraine: The Case of Vadim Sidur’s *Death by Bombs* in Dnipro

Charlotte Adèle Murphy, University of Freiburg

Russia’s war on Ukraine has not only had an impact on the geopolitical landscape but has also influenced perceptions of Soviet art in Ukraine. This paper explores the recontextualization of Soviet artists against the backdrop of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, focusing on the unofficial Soviet sculptor and artist Vadim Sidur and his sculpture *Death by Bombs*. Having been created during Soviet times, in 1960s Moscow, the sculpture reflected the horrors of war experienced by Sidur during the Second World War and the current tensions of the Cold War that he witnessed. However, in the context of Russia’s war on Ukraine, Sidur’s sculpture takes on new layers of meaning and interpretation. Plans to install *Death by Bombs* at the site of a rocket attack in Dnipro—Sidur’s city of origin, where 46 lives were lost and 80 were injured on January 14, 2023, demonstrate attempts at recontextualizing Sidur’s art in the light of

the war. However, in contemporary Ukraine, Sidur's legacy as a "Soviet artist" is a subject of contention, with some advocating for the removal of his name from an art institute named after him. This prompts reflection on art's role in conflict and the complexity of navigating Soviet art amidst Russia's war on Ukraine. The paper emphasizes the need for nuanced approaches to understanding these dynamics and highlights art's enduring relevance in times of war.

BIOGRAPHIES

Konstantin Akinsha is an independent art historian, curator, and journalist. He received the George Polk Award for cultural reporting in 1991. His curatorial projects include *Silver Age: Russian Art in Vienna* (Galerie Belvedere, Vienna, 2014), *Russian Modernism: Cross-Currents of German and Russian Art, 1907-1917* (Neue Galerie, New York, 2015), *I Am a Drop in the Ocean: Art of Ukrainian Revolution* (Künstlerhaus, Vienna, 2014), *Permanent Revolution: Ukrainian Art Today* (Ludwig Museum, Budapest, 2018), *Between Fire and Fire: Ukrainian Art Now* (Semperdepot, Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna, 2019), *In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine 1900-1930s* (various venues in Madrid, Cologne, Brussels, Vienna, Bratislava, and London, 2022-24), and *The Juncture: Ukrainian Artists in Search of Modernity and Identity* (Mead Art Museum, Amherst, 2024). He is the founding director of the Avant-Garde Art Research Project (UK) and the author of several books, including *Beautiful Loot: The Soviet Plunder of Europe's Art Treasures* (1995). Since the beginning of the Russian aggression, he has documented the destruction of the cultural heritage of Ukraine by Russian occupiers in his personal blogs and numerous articles published in the *Wall Street Journal*, *FAZ*, and *NZZ*.

Elizaveta Berezina is currently finalizing her dissertation titled "Between Arts and Crafts: Soviet Modernization of the Art Industry, 1920s-1960s." Focusing on the activities of the Scientific Research Institute of the Art Industry, her research examines approaches to supervising artisanal workshops and strategies for using crafts as tools in cultural diplomacy to shape the image of the Soviet Union and its national republics. She is also engaged in the project "Zur Neubewertung der Naiven Kunst. Internationale Rezeption und theoretisch-methodische Erschließung" [On the Re-Evaluation of Naïve Art: International Reception and Theoretical-Methodological Development] at the Institute for Art History, University of Leipzig, where she explores exhibitions featuring various forms of non-professional art in Eastern European countries during the interwar period and the Cold War.

Sebastian Borkhardt is a research associate at the documenta archiv in Kassel. Previously, he held a position in the Department of Art History at Justus Liebig University Giessen. From 2018 to 2021, he worked on several exhibition projects at the Staatliche Kunsthalle (State Art Gallery) in Karlsruhe. His research interests include European modernism, reception history, human-

animal studies, and the history of *documenta*. His study *“Der Russe Kandinsky”* (“The Russian Kandinsky”; 2021) provides a systematic exposition of the different perceptions of Wassily Kandinsky in Germany from 1912 to 1945. Sebastian is a founding member of the Russian(?) Art & Culture Group.

Louise Hardiman specializes in the history of Russian, Soviet, and Ukrainian art and design. Her principal research interests are in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art and the rise of modernism, art and design by women, the international Arts and Crafts movement, and the history of British-Russian cultural exchange. Her publications include *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art* (2017; co-editor Nicola Kozicharow); *Courtly Gifts and Cultural Diplomacy: Art, Material Culture, and British-Russian Relations* (2023); and *The Story of Synko-Filipko and Other Russian Folk Tales* (2019). Her current monograph project concerns women artists in the Russian Empire. Following her PhD at the University of Cambridge (2013), Hardiman has worked as an independent consultant, writer, and lecturer. In 2024-25, she holds a Visiting Fellowship at Kingston University and is a Panel Tutor for the Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) at the University of Cambridge. Her new online course for ICE on Ukrainian Art will be launched in the summer of 2025.

Olga Isaeva studied art history, archaeology, German language, and literature at the University of Bonn. She completed research stays at Waseda University Tokyo and was also a Doctoral Fellow at the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science at the University of Tsukuba in Japan. She is currently a Fellow of the Hans Böckler Foundation pursuing her doctoral dissertation at the Institute of Art History of the University of Bonn. Her publications mainly focus on the pre-war avant-garde movements in Japan and explore artistic relations from the perspective of a transculturally framed art history.

Marat Ismagilov graduated with an MA in Art History from the European University at St. Petersburg in 2012. Afterwards, he worked as an independent curator at various museums in St. Petersburg. His most recent position was at the Youth Centre of the State Hermitage Museum, where he developed and conducted educational programs for exhibitions and also worked on museum partnership programs. In September 2022, he left Russia and relocated to Germany, where he is currently writing his doctoral thesis on the Society for the Encouragement of Artists at the Ruhr University Bochum.

Mira Kozhanova is completing her PhD project on migrant artists from the Russian Empire and their Parisian networks between 1900 and 1917 at the University of Bamberg. Her dissertation pays particular attention to the ethnocultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of these artists through their professional and private networks, exhibition practices, and publications. She received research fellowships from the German Center for Art History in Paris and the University of Bamberg. Most recently, she co-organized the conference “Artists on the Move: Transnational and Transcultural Perspectives on Migration from the (Former) Russian Empire,” held online in March 2024.

Charlotte Adèle Murphy holds a BA in History and Political Science from the University of Osnabrück and earned her MA in Culture and History of Central and Eastern Europe from the Viadrina University in Frankfurt (Oder), enriched by research and study periods in St. Petersburg and Moscow. She served as a research fellow at the Leibniz Institute for European History in Mainz and currently holds the position of research assistant in the Research Training Group (Graduiertenkolleg) 1956 “Cultural Transfer and ‘Cultural Identity’: German-Russian Contacts in a European Context” at the University of Freiburg. Currently pursuing her PhD in Eastern European History, her dissertation delves into the life and work of the Soviet “unofficial” sculptor Vadim Sidur and his transnational network across the “Nylon Curtain” during the 1970s and 1980s. Her research interests extend to the remembrance of war and violence in the twentieth century, as reflected in historiography, art, and social media.

Olga Olkheft (née Kaukhchan) holds a BA degree in Sociology (Pskov Volny Institute, 2006) and an MA degree in History of Arts (European University at St. Petersburg, 2014). From 2015 to 2017, she worked as a researcher on the “Ethnography of the Museum” project jointly organized by the EUSP and The State Hermitage Museum. Since 2019, she has been working on the PhD project “Inventing ‘Russian Avant-Garde’ in the Cold War.” The thesis delves into the intellectual history surrounding the creation and conceptualization of the “Russian avant-garde” within the backdrop of the Cultural Cold War. It aims to chart the evolution of the Russian avant-garde canon from its inception in the late 1950s through its complex connection with the art of the 1917 Revolution at international exhibitions in the 1980s and its subsequent re-evaluation in the 1990s.

Ludmila Piters-Hofmann defended her PhD dissertation “Enchanting Russia: National Identity and Cosmopolitan Cultural Transfer in the Work of Viktor Vasnetsov” at Constructor University Bremen in 2023. Her research focuses on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art, Russian nationalism, the international Arts and Crafts movement, and interdisciplinary junctions between art and literature. In 2019, she coedited special issues of the journals *Experiment: A Journal of Russian Culture* (with Louise Hardiman and Maria Taroutina) and *Russian History* (with Isabel Wünsche). Most recently, she edited the volume *What Is to Be Done? Art Practice, Theory, and Promotion in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia*. She is one of the early members of the Russian(?) Art & Culture Group and co-organizer of five graduate workshops.

Kacper Radny is an art historian and PhD candidate at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture in Giessen. Before coming to Germany, he completed his academic degrees in architecture and art history in Scotland. His PhD project explores the phenomena of “orientalization” and/or “exoticization” of nineteenth-century Eastern-European art in the West. He is also active in the fields of queer and feminist art, de-colonial activism, as well as ludology. Kacper also works as an editor for the magazine *On_Culture*.

Irina Riznychok is an adjunct researcher at Constructor University Bremen. She received her MA in History of Art from the Ural Federal University, Ekaterinburg, and worked as a curator at the Ekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts from 2010 to 2023. In 2023, she was awarded a Hans Koschnick Special Scholarship at the Research Centre for East European Studies (FSO) of Bremen University to complete her PhD thesis “The Third Wave of Russian Artistic Emigration to New York: Strategies, Exhibitions, and Reception” (submitted in February 2024). As a member of the joint research training group “Between Avant-Garde and Nonconformism: Soviet Artists and Their Alternative Practice between the Thaw and Stagnation,” she seeks to re-situate the legacy of artists from the Ural within the history of Russian/Soviet art and the histories of the transnational avant-garde.

Julia Secklehner is an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow (2024-25) at Constructor University Bremen with a project focusing on networks of leftist women photographers in interwar central Europe. Her broader research interests include intersections between high, popular, and folk art, minority representation in central European art and design, and socially engaged art practices. She is Co-Convenor of The Lausanne Project and an editorial board

member of *Art East Central* and the *Journal of Austrian-American History*. Her monograph, *Rethinking Modern Austrian Art Beyond the Metropolis* (Routledge), was published in 2024.

Maria Silina (they/them) is a Research Fellow at Ruhr University Bochum and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of History of Art at UQAM, Montreal. They are involved in several collaborations on communist culture and museum studies, particularly focusing on histories of museum collections and the circulation of objects in the Soviet Union. Recently, they organized two conferences on critical museum history: “Museums in Central Asia, Caucasus, and Eastern Europe: Rethinking Soviet Museum Management” (online, October 30, 2023) and “Ukrainian Museums at War: Conceptual, Historical, and Legal Perspectives” (Södertörn University, Stockholm, November 17, 2023). Currently, they are completing for publication the book *Art History on Display: Soviet Museum Between Two Wars (1920s-1930s)*.

Nikolay Smirnov is a geographer, curator, researcher, and artist whose work focuses on geographical imaginations, spatial practices, and representations of space and place in art, science, museum practices, and everyday life. His interdisciplinary interests span cultural geography, geo-humanities, political science, art studies, and curatorial practice. Currently, he is a research assistant at the documenta Institut in Kassel and a postgraduate student at the Sociology Department of the University of Kassel. He previously studied at the Geography Department of Moscow State University and the Rodchenko Art School in Moscow. Among his curatorial works is the project “Metageography.”

Georg Sokolov is a research associate and PhD candidate at Constructor University Bremen. Since 2023, he has been working on his doctoral thesis, “A Field of Tension: The Genesis of Leningrad Nonconformist Art,” as a member of the joint research training group “Between Avant-Garde and Non-conformism: Soviet Artists and Their Alternative Practice between the Thaw and Stagnation,” which includes researchers from Constructor University and Bremen University. He graduated from St. Petersburg State University with a specialist degree in 2013 and worked as a curator of the Russian drawing collection at the Hermitage Museum (2013–22). His publications include the books *Неофициальное искусство Ленинграда. Круг свободы* [The Unofficial Art of Leningrad: Circle of Freedom] (2021) and *Живописная коллекция Александра Андрущенко* [The Painterly Collection of Alexander

Andruschenko] (2022). He is organizing the independent research initiative "Soviet Art Seminar" (active since 2019) and is a member of the Russian(?) Art & Culture Group.

Isabel Wünsche is Professor of Art and Art History at Constructor University Bremen since 2001. She specializes in European modernism, the avant-garde movements, and abstract art. Her recent book publications include *Kunst & Leben. Michail Matjuschin und die russischen Avantgarde in St. Petersburg* (2012), *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory* (2012), *The Organic School of the Russian Avant-Garde: Nature's Creative Principles* (2015), *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in Her Circle* (2016), *Practices of Abstract Art: Between Anarchism and Appropriation* (2016), *The Routledge Companion to Expressionism in a Transnational Context* (2019), and *100 Years On: Revisiting the First Russian Art Exhibition of 1922* (2022).



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