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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/67982>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.67982

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Translation(s):

Un Langage cosmico-rythmique : l'art folklorique comme ressource globale - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/67962> [fr]

Publisher

Groupe d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 November 2020

Number of pages: 23-31

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Marina Dmitrieva, "A Rhythmic-Cosmic Language: Folk Art as a Global Resource", *Critique d'art* [Online], 55 | Automne/hiver, Online since 30 November 2021, connection on 15 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/67982> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.67982>

This text was automatically generated on 15 September 2022.

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- 1 For Walter Benjamin, the trip to Moscow in the winter of 1926-1927 was a disappointment not only for his love aspirations, but also in terms of his belief in a socialist future. Consequently, on this occasion he ignored signs of modernity, such as avant-garde art or constructivist architecture. Instead he was fascinated, even obsessed, with folk art. He spent hours in the Toy museum; his Moscow Diary is full of descriptions of the colourful range of lacquered caskets, stacked eggs, paper flowers – carnations, roses and lilies that were laid out by peasant women on the white snow-covered Moscow pavements. Their “glowing colors” revealed to him an “originally Russian *ductus*”. “The arbitrary impulses of the individual encounter with uncanny inevitability always and everywhere using cosmic-rhythmic forms [...]”¹
- 2 Since the 18th century, generations of artists have been inspired by folk tradition and cherished it as a potential for renewal. Despite this, folklore has also been banalised and misused by global tourism; folk culture was instrumentalized by dictatorial regimes, such as that of Nazi Germany or Stalin-era Russia, which discredited folklore in the minds of many modern artists. “Fascism’s reconciliation of Primitive racial myth with aggressive science and technology presented a challenge of the most disturbing art”, Kirk Varnedoe aptly stated in the catalogue of the first exhibition devoted to the problem of “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art.² Taking these complex relationships into account, what impact might folk art have on Modern art?
- 3 Two exhibitions – *Folklore & Avant-garde: The Reception of Popular Traditions in the Age of Modernism* (curated by Katia Baudin and Elina Knorpp) and *Folklore : artistes et folkloristes, une histoire croisée* (curated by Marie-Charlotte Calafat and Jean-Marie Gallais) were put together at the same time in Germany and France. Both are dedicated to the relationship between folk culture and modern art. It seems nothing short of a miracle that, despite the coronavirus pandemic, they were presented not only virtually but also live. Both exhibitions are supplemented by accompanying publications which are worth closer analysis.

- 4 In addition, the *Handbook of International Futurism*, a presentation of current research on futurism worldwide, recognizes that the future-oriented avant-garde movement, despite all its enthusiasm for technology and progress, was deeply indebted to popular traditions and art forms.
- 5 Does the new interest in the footprints left by folk traditions in Modernism support an *ethnographic turn* in art historical research, identified by Hal Foster as a “quasi anthropological paradigm” in contemporary art?³ As Katia Baudin points out, the exhibition at the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum in Krefeld focuses on the preoccupation of the leading figures of the 20th century’s avant-garde with folk art and vernacular handicraft traditions as well as on their impact on the development of modernism. 37 artists and two architects from Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Suede, Switzerland, Russia, and the USA are exhibited.
- 6 One of the points of the exhibition is the reference to the role of the city of Krefeld in the modernist discourse. From the end of the 19th century to the 1920s, the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum in Krefeld included folk and exotic art in its programme. In 1931, the former Bauhaus master Johannes Itten became head of the newly founded Higher Technical school for Textile Art in Krefeld and influenced textile design; Krefeld also had a vivid tradition of ceramic production.
- 7 What makes folklore a resource for modern artists?, ask the curators and authors of both projects. Their answers are quite different. The curators of the Krefeld exhibition see folklore as a reaction to nation-building and the industrial revolution of the 19th century and as a Modernist phenomenon. They focus on the close interrelationship between art, architecture, folk traditions and national identity which climaxed at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900. Primitivism, arising from an interest in exotic and folk art, is considered as an artistic liberation. Examples of the reception of African and Oceanian tribal art as an inspiration for Pablo Picasso or German Expressionists are displayed, as well as Russian *lubki* (folk prints) and folk toys as an orientation for the Russian neo-primitivists, and Mexican “Pátzkuaro old idols” for Bauhaus artists Anni and Josef Albers. One point of emphasis is labelled “The Avant-Garde Collects Folk Art”. The collections of Mikhail Larionov, Vassily Kandinsky, Ludwig Kirchner, Pablo Picasso, Josef and Anni Albers, and Elie Nadelman are discussed and excellently presented in dialogue with the artists’ works.
- 8 The exhibition “takes a new look at the historical perspective that also shapes contemporary practice [...] One hundred years after the avant-garde, we are once again experiencing times of crisis and uncertainty, where, in the age of globalization, borders are being closed, nationalism is on the rise, and fears of a loss of identity are spreading” (p. 12). Hence, folklore appears as a factor of stability and a kind of anchor for restless modernity here.
- 9 By contrast, the French project at the Centre Pompidou-Metz and the Mucem in Marseille creates an “*histoire croisée des artistes et folkloristes*”, i.e. is dedicated to the mutual influences of folklore and modern art from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day, underlining the controversial and even disturbing character of their relationship. Two perspectives determine this mutual influence: “*Portrait de l’artiste en folkloriste*” (Jean-Marie Gallais) displays the engagement of modern and contemporary art with folk tradition, from Nikolai Roerich to Joseph Beuys and Marina Abramović, as well as Peter Fischli and David Weiss. This strand also includes art historical discourses and scholarship from Aby Warburg to Hal Foster. There are examples of staging

folklore through stereotyping, such as Switzerland and the landscape of folklore – (*My Life in Switzerland, Ongoingly*, 2009), in the work of Israeli artist Anat Elberg, and, in other cases, through mystical performances (*Women Massaging Breasts, Serie Balkan Erotic Epic*, Belgrade, 2005, by Marina Abramović) or by using it as a universal vehicle for navigating between cultures (artistic collective Tatars and Slavs). The project *Folk Archive, Free for All* by Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane (from 2005 onwards) created a museum as a vivid organism rather than a collection of dead objects. The second approach displays a “*Portrait du folkloriste en artiste*” (Marie-Charlotte Calafat) and regards folklorists as “*chevaliers servants d’une discipline essentiellement humaine*”, “*oscillants entre savants et créateurs*” (p. 42). They were principally concerned with the revelation of the “*beauté populaire*” (p. 38), which included landscape, nature, spiritual and material culture of the people, as well as museums and collections.

- 10 Both exhibition projects, in Germany and in France, are preoccupied with searching for roots. As such, they cover partly overlapping material – from Paul Gauguin and Paul Sérusier to Vassily Kandinsky and Constantin Brâncuși. They look at the relationship between abstraction and textile art and place emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of art, examining mysticism and shamanism as sources of inspiration for artists. The examples range from *Le Sacre du Printemps* by Igor Stravinsky and *Ballets Russes*, with a pre-historic design by Nikolai Roerich, to the surrealists and the nomadic mysticism of Joseph Beuys. As Jean-Marie Gallais points out, the exhibitions shown in Metz and Marseille focus on the European usage of folklore.

11 **The Uncanny Zone of Periphery**

- 12 The 22nd Biennale in Sydney, *NIRIN*, directed by the Australian artist and curator Brook Andrew, presented 298 artists from the southern hemisphere – mostly Australia, New Zealand, Africa and South America. As Brook Andrew says, it is a “First Nations-led conversation on art” by those who create, curate and write about it. *NIRIN* means “edge” in Wiradjuri, one of the Aboriginal languages, which happens to be the curator’s mother’s tongue. The concept of the Biennale is to break with the “colonial legacies” of traditional biennales and the “northern hemisphere trajectory” (p. 324). Many of the powerful installations, suggestive video projects and paintings connect back to the ancient cultures of indigenous peoples. A sensitivity to environmental problems, social traumata and stigmatised communities are thematised. As Mostaff Muchawaya, a Zimbabwean artist, stressed, the focus is on the memory of individual or national trauma – “the uncanny zone where the forms are clearer from the corner of your eyes and disappear when you look at them directly” (p. 1). Diaspora, periphery, borders, sovereignty, decolonial, restitution, repatriation, trauma of race power – these are key words for the show and the discussion. The pantheistic world view of indigenous philosophy represents an ideological counterpoint to European modernity.
- 13 The exhibition and book projects discussed above open a new transnational perspective on the potential of folk culture in the global village of the world today. It is, as Le Corbusier poignantly put it, a universal matrix of mankind. The projects made visible that folklore is multifaced and still alive. Banalised or ridiculed, folk culture reveals its ubiquitous, archaic, and even uncanny character. Retrospectively, it helps to understand what Walter Benjamin meant in the 1920s when he saw in the art of the “Primitives” (folk art, the art of the “insane”) a way of using, “always and everywhere”, a “rhythmic-cosmic language” which was an alternative to the “rational Occident”.

NOTES

1. Benjamin, Walter. "Spielzeug und Spielen", *Gesammelte Schriften* III, Berlin: Suhrkamp/Insel Verlag 1991, p. 127-132, here 131.
 2. Varnedoe, Kirk. "Abstract expressionism", *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, vol. 2, New York: MoMA, 1984, p. 652. To the new evaluation of the exhibition concept under the aspect of colonial issues see: Hay, Jonathan. "Primitivism reconsidered (Part 1): A question of attitude", *Res*, vol. 67-68, 2016/2017, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/693994> (accessed on 1 October 2020)
 3. Foster, Hal. "The Artist as Ethnographer?", *The Traffic in Culture. Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, ed. by George A. Marcus a. Fred R. Myers, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press 1995, p. 302-309
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Marina Dmitrieva is an art historian who focuses on cultural transfer in the visual culture of Central and Eastern Europe and the historiography of art. Since 1994, she has worked as a senior researcher in Art History at the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO) in Leipzig, Germany. Before joining the Leipzig Centre, she was a researcher at the Institute of Art History in Moscow and taught at the universities of Freiburg i. Br., Basel, Hamburg and Bremen in Germany. Selected recent publications: "The Riddle of Modernism in the Art Historical Discourse of the Thaw", in: *A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades* (ed. by Krista Kodres, Kristina Joekalda, Michaela Marek, 2019); "Saint-Pétersbourg – Fenêtre sur l'Europe", in *Europa, notre histoire* (ed. by Etienne François, Thomas Serrier, 2017); *Community and Utopia: Artists' Colonies in Eastern Europe from the Fin-de-Siècle to Socialist Period* (ed. with Laima Lauckaite, 2017); *Italy in Sarmatia: The Ways of the Renaissance in Eastern Europe* (2015); *Zwischen Stadt und Steppe: Künstlerische Texte der ukrainischen Moderne aus den 1910er bis 1930er Jahren* (2012).