

4. Internal and External Enemies

The Cold War

The Cold War was a struggle between two great powers that wanted to mold the world according to their principles. Although a direct military confrontation was avoided, both camps were heavily engaged in a symbolic competition. Accomplishments in the fields of production and consumption, social security, technology, scientific discoveries, sports and culture were celebrated as proof of ideological superiority. The visual arts were part of this rivalry, and they caused a lot of confusion.

At first, the artistic borders between East and West were as rigorously defined as in the Third Reich. Socialist Realism, aimed at convincing the viewer of the blessings of Socialism and the eternal wisdom of the communist party, defined the visual culture of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, beginning during Stalin's times. In the 1950s, modernism became the dominant art form in the West, mostly defined in strictly aesthetic, non-political terms. Paradoxically, this 'pure' art was confronted with the propagandistic realism of both the Eastern bloc and the Third Reich as a sign of political freedom in the Western world. On the other hand, precisely the lack of recognizable political and social engagement in modern art became a target for communist critics, who rejected this art as nothing but noncommittal decoration, a typical expression of a bourgeois-decadent society.

Nonetheless, once again, reality was less straightforward than it might seem. During the years directly following the October Revolution, modern art was very successful

in communist Russia, while in the United States it did not make much headway until the 1930s. Moreover, the officially sanctioned campaign against modern art after 1945 did not hinder the Soviet authorities from publicly honoring communist modern artists from Western Europe, such as Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger and Renato Guttuso, at international conferences and festivals organized by the Soviet bloc. In the United States, on the other hand, modern art was hotly contested among those who honored it as a symbol of American freedom and those who fought it as an anti-American cultural conspiracy.

How did the canonization of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union and of modern art in the United States come about? Why was modern art celebrated *and* hotly contested by both superpowers? In spite of all the ideological differences: what were the parallels between the Cold War art worlds in the East and West? And why have the visual arts largely lost their appeal as a means of cultural diplomacy – or cultural propaganda – since the 1960s?

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Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the propagandistic value of visual culture was quickly recognized by the new political leaders. People's Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoli Lunacharsky appealed to all artists throughout the country to support the new government through artistic means. With few exceptions, only members of the avant-garde responded to this open invitation.⁷⁶ In the course of the 1910s, Russian Futurists, Suprematists and Constructivists, partly under the influence of European movements like Futurism, Cubism and Expressionism, had broken away from academic norms. Initially, their formal experiments

did not have a clear political component, nor did they achieve a wide resonance. But all that would change in 1917, when Kasimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin and others started to present themselves as artistic forerunners and prophets of the political revolution.⁷⁷ Thanks to Lunacharsky, Russian avant-garde artists were involved in designing public monuments and stage settings for revolutionary celebrations in public space. They were also invited to reform the principles of art education in accordance with their revolutionary views, and to establish new museums for modern and contemporary art – the first of their kind worldwide.⁷⁸

But soon enough, it became clear that communist politicians and avant-garde artists were not exactly on the same page. While the politicians focused on seizing and securing power, and sketching out the exclusive path to the shining socialist future as defined by Marxist-Leninist ideology, the artists were primarily interested in a liberation from tradition and a *carte blanche* for creative freedom.⁷⁹ The discrepancy was clearly expressed by Lenin himself in an interview with the German socialist Clara Zetkin. Lenin stated that he did not understand modern art and did not enjoy it. The socialist artist should make art for the working people, in a style accessible to all, that would inspire the realization of socialist society.⁸⁰

That does not mean, however, that modern art was completely marginalized after the founding of the Soviet Union in 1922. Several art movements pleaded for a new connection between art and the working people without giving up the idea of artistic autonomy and quality. The group *October* (1928-32) with artists like El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko, Gustav Klutssis, Alexander Deineka and Hannes Meyer, the second director of the Bauhaus in Germany, envisioned a proletarian art that stood apart from

both nineteenth-century academic realism and from the inaccessible abstractions of the avant-garde.⁸¹ As mentioned earlier (chapter 2), this artistic vision appealed to Diego Rivera, who joined the group in 1928 during his visit to the Soviet Union, before his expulsion.

Lenin died in January 1924, and it was only a few years later that his successor Stalin secured absolute power. Henceforth, all political and cultural organizations were strictly controlled. During the mid and late 1930s, Stalin launched a series of merciless campaigns and show trials against so-called opponents of the regime and the bourgeois-feudal class enemy, which was defined in ever broader terms. During these campaigns, millions of people were executed or sent to the gulags, disciplinary concentration camps, where many of them disappeared.

In spite of the ideological differences, the 1930s Soviet art world strongly resembled that of the Third Reich with its Reichs Chamber of Culture (see chapter 3). All previously existing art movements were dissolved, including *October* in 1932. Visual artists had to join the artists' union, an umbrella organization with regional sections. Membership was a strict requirement to work officially as an artist. Artists who were not accepted by the union were not allowed to exhibit their work, rent a studio or even buy painting materials.⁸²

Around the same time, Socialist Realism became the universal artistic norm. The concept was introduced in May 1932 in the literary magazine *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, and one year later it was officially attributed to Stalin personally.⁸³ What is Socialist Realism? From the theoretical publications in the course of the 1930s, two ideas stand out. In the first place, socialist art had to be dialectic; it should not depict the world as it is, in all its contingency and imperfection, but as it would reveal itself in all its splendor when the socialist

utopia had been realized. Artists had to isolate and depict those elements of everyday reality that foreshadow this socialist future, and had to avoid all elements that belonged to the 'old order,' which had to be overcome. In the second place, the artist had to be an 'engineer of the soul,' as Stalin told a gathering of Soviet writers at the dacha of Maxim Gorki.⁸⁴ He had to invest the reader, listener or viewer with the ideal values of socialist society, consequently contributing to the creation of the New Socialist Man and Woman.

What this meant for the visual arts in practical terms became clear all too soon. Artistic experiments were no longer accepted. For inspiration, artists had to look to the Wanderers (Peredvizhniki), a group of artists around Ilya Repin who, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, had broken free from the tsarist art academy to work in close contact with Russian nature and the Russian people.⁸⁵

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After a brief period of relative relaxation and artistic freedom during and shortly after the Second World War, a vicious publicity campaign introduced a new reign of terror in the Soviet art world. Andrei Zhdanov, Party Secretary of the city of Leningrad, member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and since 1946 responsible for cultural affairs, played a decisive role in this process. Between 1946 and 1948 he published a series of four decrees, attacking, among other things, a lack of ideology in Soviet literature, bourgeois decadent influences in Soviet theater, false originality in Soviet music and degenerate characters in Soviet film. In his decrees he specifically swept aside international celebrities like the poet Anna Akhmatova, film

director Sergei Eisenstein and composers Sergei Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich to make his point.⁸⁶

Although Zhdanov did not specifically address the visual arts in his decrees, their impact was immediately felt. The tsarist art academy, closed down by Lunacharsky in 1918 in order to reform art education, was reinstalled. Paintings from the years 1947-53 typically avoid any social conflict. Lenin and Stalin figure prominently, sometimes with an almost religious aura. Artists could get in trouble for depicting a drinking pause during work, or for a slightly impressionist rendering of a sun-lit wall in the view of a hair-splitting critic.⁸⁷

Until 1953, the year of Stalin's death, Soviet art critics associated modern art with bourgeois decadence, capitalism or even, following National Socialist rhetoric, degeneration.⁸⁸ One of the most notorious black sheep in Soviet art criticism was Pablo Picasso, whose 'formalism' (empty play of artistic forms) was considered a typical expression of the decadence of late capitalism.⁸⁹ But Picasso was a complex case. In 1937, after exhibiting his *Guernica* at the Paris World Fair, protesting the German bombings on the Basque city of the same name, Picasso had presented himself as a politically engaged artist. Becoming a member of the French communist party (PCF) in 1944, he would politically express himself in much more explicit terms. In 1951, for instance, he painted his *Slaughter in Korea*, which shows American soldiers as armored robots, killing a group of unarmed and defenseless women and children. The composition follows Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid* from 1814, a painted indictment against the cruelties of Napoleon's occupation army in Spain.⁹⁰

At the very time Zhdanov tightened his grip on the art world, the Soviet Union launched an international



13. Boris Spornikov, *Spring*, 1976, oil on canvas, 54.3 x 46.5 inches (138 x 118 cm), The Wendt Museum, Culver City



14. Sergei Alexeevich Grigoriev (copy), *Candidate for the KomSoMol (Soviet youth movement)*, c. 1950, oil on canvas, 74 x 61 inches (188 x 155 cm), The Wendt Museum, Culver City

propaganda campaign to win people all over the world for the communist cause. In March 1949, New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel featured the Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace, with among its prominent American participants the composers Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, the writers Arthur Miller and Normal Mailer, and the visual artist Anton Refregier. Shostakovich was part of the Soviet delegation, in spite of the fact that he had been viciously attacked by Zhdanov only one year before because of the 'false originality' of his compositions.⁹¹ At this occasion, he discussed the bitter struggle between capitalist and communist art, sweeping aside his 'reactionary' compatriot Igor Stravinsky.⁹² Moreover, instigated by Moscow, a series of international festivals was organized to connect progressive youth and students from all over the world. For one of these festivals, the Paris Peace Conference in 1949, Picasso designed his famous peace dove, for which he was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize one year later.⁹³ In the international arena, the very symbol of Western cultural decadence was celebrated as an exemplary communist artist.

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The idea that modern art would become the international sign-board of the United States in the 1950s would have been hard to predict twenty years earlier, just like the fact that Socialist Realism would eventually become the 'house style' of Soviet art could hardly have been foreseen during the Russian Revolution. The Great Depression following the collapse of the stock market in 1929 had an enormous impact on the American art world. The crisis became a prominent topic among American artists on the left. Some of them painted the social misery of workers and the unemployed,

others used their work to speak out visually against capitalism and its devastating consequences.

American artists got the opportunity to present their critical works to a broader public partly thanks to the New Deal, the package of support programs launched by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in order to moderate the consequences of the crisis. The Roosevelt Administration did not immediately envision that the visual arts would benefit from these programs. But in 1933, George Biddle, an artist and former classmate of Roosevelt's, wrote the President a letter, advising him to support visual artists in the form of government commissions. Biddle, who had visited Rivera in Mexico, emphasized that the respective Mexican governments since Obregón had very effectively spread their ideas by means of mural paintings and suggested American artists could have a comparable role in the United States, spreading Roosevelt's ideas and securing his legacy.⁹⁴ The president responded appreciatively and in December 1933 the Public Works of Art Project was inaugurated, initiating a general support program for visual artists in financial need and a series of special commissions on the basis of a competition for sketch designs, including commissions for mural paintings in public buildings.⁹⁵ Most artists who joined the program had no experience whatsoever with painting murals. For inspiration they looked to Mexico, especially the work of Rivera.

In the 1930s, modern art only played a secondary role in the United States. During the 1910s and 1920s, Lyonel Feininger, Marsden Hartley, Stuart Davis and others were inspired by the European avant-garde movements, but until the late 1930s they were a small minority. In the early 1930s, many left-wing artists had watched the Soviet communist experiment with admiration and joined one of the new

leftist art organizations that popped up like mushrooms. However, by the mid-1930s the atmosphere had changed. Roosevelt came under attack for his 'socialist' measures to fight the crisis. The Federal Art Project, which in 1935 succeeded the Public Works of Art Program, no longer allowed political statements in works commissioned by the government. It stipulated that artists first had to submit a design before they got permission to execute their work.⁹⁶

Around the same time, rumors about show trials, gulags and the repression of free art and culture in the Soviet Union started to trickle in. These stories made it increasingly hard for left-leaning art organizations to stay loyal to the Soviet example. In this regard, the trial and expulsion of Leo Trotsky, Lenin's brother-in-arms during the revolution, who was quite popular among American left-wing artists and intellectuals, had an enormous impact. In *Partisan Review*, a leftist albeit anti-Stalinist magazine in the United States, Trotsky had published an article rejecting Stalin's cultural views, claiming that it is the artist's responsibility to give form to his political engagement.⁹⁷ The non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin of August 1939 (the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) would alienate many left-wing Americans from the Soviet Union permanently. A number of artists now distanced themselves from their social realist style, which could easily be associated with Socialist Realism, and started searching for new forms of artistic expression. They found inspiration in contemporary European art forms, especially Surrealism and abstract art.

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The influences on American modern art were manifold. Jackson Pollock was inspired, among other things, by

the concept of 'archetypes,' universal primordial forms embedded in the collective unconscious, developed by the Austrian psychotherapist Carl Gustav Jung, and by Native American rituals. Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman mentioned a spiritual layer in their work, while Ad Reinhardt principally rejected all metaphysical and political interpretation of his paintings, although he was quite frank about his communist sympathies in everyday life.⁹⁸ Some of the modern artists were influenced by the French Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. From this philosophical movement they took the idea that an authentic person must make his own choices and an authentic artist must create his own visual language in a world of imposed structures, systems and meanings. Non-figurative art seemed a promising path in this respect. As mentioned in the Introduction, Barnett Newman conceived of his work as a radical rejection of both state capitalism and totalitarianism, that is to say, of both political systems defining the bipolar world order of the Cold War.⁹⁹ American painters who in the second half of the 1940s turned to non-figurative art were later categorized as Abstract Expressionists, although this was by no means a closely-knit group with shared ideas.

In the meantime, a completely new perspective was being developed in American public art debates after the Second World War. Art historian and critic Clement Greenberg, one of the most prominent advocates of modern art in post-war America, recognized in Abstract Expressionism nothing less than the ultimate realization of the aims of modern art history.¹⁰⁰ According to him, art had since the middle of the nineteenth century followed a path towards absolute artistic purity, as exemplified by an increasingly explicit focus on the very essence of painting: form and color applied



15. Consuelo Kanaga, *Portrait of Mark Rothko*, c. 1949, gelatin silver photograph, 10 x 8 inches (25 x 20 cm), Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn

to a flat surface. The modern artist had finally understood that painting is all about painting, and does not refer to any external reality. Painting presented its own reality.

Although Greenberg had called himself a follower of Trotsky in the late 1930s, his ideas on art had very little in common with orthodox communism. Whereas socialist art always serves a political goal, for Greenberg art with a message, political or otherwise, is not art but kitsch or propaganda. His idea became politically meaningful when Greenberg asserted that after the war New York had succeeded Paris as global center of the art world. According



16. Barnett Newman, *Broken obelisk*, 1963-67, bronze, University of Washington, Seattle

to Greenberg, the Abstract Expressionists were the living proof of this change.¹⁰¹

As a matter of fact, Greenberg's ideas corresponded with a series of cultural initiatives by the State Department. Shortly after the war, there was no great government interest in using art and culture to support American foreign policy. Admittedly, an exhibition of American art was sent to Mexico and Europe in 1946, supported by the State Department, but under conservative political pressure this exhibition was revoked after it arrived in Prague. Critics disagreed with the selection of artists, which they considered too left-wing and too modern. When confronted with Yasuo Kuniyoshi's work *Circus Girl Resting*, which was part of the exhibition, President Henry Truman, himself an amateur painter, reportedly spoke the memorable words: 'If this is art, I am a Hottentot.'¹⁰² Minister of State George

Marshall, responding to the public outcry, promised that American tax money would never again be used to support an exhibition of American art abroad.¹⁰³ However, in the late 1940s the State Department became increasingly alarmed by the Soviet Union's active and effective cultural diplomacy, such as the Waldorf Astoria conference in 1949. Moreover, it was recognized that many left-wing intellectuals in Europe disconcertingly associated the United States not so much with freedom and democracy as with imperialism, racism, base materialism and a serious lack of culture.¹⁰⁴

With the help of the CIA, the State Department tried to counteract this negative view. In a covert operation, European left-liberal newspapers and magazines like *Encounter* in Great-Britain, *Preuves* in France and *Der Monat* in Germany were financially supported, in the hope that a focus on freedom of speech and expression would open the readers' eyes to the totalitarian character of the Soviet regime. The American government, through the CIA, also secretly financed the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an organization of independent European artists and intellectuals in support of freedom of speech.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, with support from the State Department, American orchestras, dance companies and opera productions went on international tours to convince the world of the highest standards of American culture.¹⁰⁶

The State Department, supported by the United States Information Agency (USIA) beginning in 1953, also resumed traveling exhibitions of American art. These exhibitions typically showcased a variety of artistic styles, presenting artwork by modern artists and politically critical artists like Ben Shahn next to more traditional and conservative artwork.¹⁰⁷ In the late 1950s, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized two traveling exhibitions with support from the USIA that were exclusively dedicated to Abstract

Expressionism, one of them a solo exhibition of the work of Jackson Pollock, who had died in a car crash in 1955.¹⁰⁸ This politically inspired use of modern art in the cultural arena of the Cold War was extremely paradoxical. While some of the artists involved saw their work as an expression of personal integrity and creativity in times of suffocating political systems, it was now being used to celebrate cultural freedom and the values of modern liberal democracy in the United States. In 1952, Alfred Barr Jr., the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, expressed this thought in an article in the *New York Times*: "The modern artist's nonconformity and love of freedom cannot be tolerated within a monolithic tyranny, and modern art is useless for the dictator's propaganda."¹⁰⁹ He forgot to mention that evidently this art is not so useless for democratic propaganda.

Barr published his article under the title 'Is Modern Art Communistic?', an indication that support for modern art was not unproblematic in the United States. On the one hand, the artists themselves might not have been too eager to use their work to fight the communist enemy; on the other, their work was not very popular among the American public at large. Indeed, some conservative politicians in the late 1940s and the 1950s viciously attacked modern art as a political danger. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) tried to come clean in Hollywood with a campaign against communist directors, actors and scriptwriters, while Senator Joseph McCarthy launched his witch-hunt against real and alleged communists in American society.¹¹⁰ Progressive artists, writers and intellectuals who had dared to say something positive about socialism or something negative about American society in public, were scrutinized, incriminated and sometimes subpoenaed by official Committees of Inquiry.

In regard to the visual arts, Congressman George Dondero (Rep., Michigan) was indefatigable in identifying modern trends as a communist threat. According to Dondero, the fact that modern art was 'ugly' was sufficient proof of its subversive communist content: 'Modern art is communistic [sic] because it is distorted and ugly, because it does not glorify our beautiful country. Art which does not glorify our beautiful country in plain and simple terms that everyone can understand breeds dissatisfaction. It is therefore opposed to our government, and those who create and promote it are our enemies.'¹¹¹ As a consequence, the State Department and the USIA, involved in traveling exhibitions including American modern art, had to be counted among the enemies of the United States. Sometimes Dondero was even more outspoken and compared modern art to vermin and contagious diseases, a vocabulary directly inspired by art criticism of the Third Reich.¹¹² Remarkably, Dondero's views on modern art closely resemble those of Zhdanov. Both of them identified modern art and culture as a subversive product of the ideological enemy.

Extreme though Dondero was in his views and vocabulary, he was far from unique. One of his colleagues in Congress exposed Pollock's drip paintings as a series of decoded maps of the United States in preparation of a Soviet missile attack.¹¹³ The FBI kept files on modern artists who, based on their (past) communist sympathies *and* on their modern painting style, were considered a national security threat. One of the larger files was dedicated to Pablo Picasso, in spite of the fact that the Spanish painter had never once visited the United States.¹¹⁴

Picasso's role in the early years of the Cold War neatly summarizes the schizophrenia in the art worlds of both superpowers. In the Soviet Union Picasso was identified

as a bourgeois decadent artist; at international festivals, on the other hand, he was honored with the Stalin Peace Prize and other tokens of recognition. In the United States Picasso was celebrated as one of the spiritual fathers of 'free' and 'democratic' modern art, but to conservative critics and the FBI he was a subversive communist.

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Obviously, the American and Soviet art scenes of the early Cold War years were very different. Apart from the domination of one or another style, the United States had a measure of artistic freedom that was inconceivable in the Soviet Union. McCarthy, Dondero and the FBI fought their battles against modern and progressive tendencies in American society, but this hardly ever resulted in effective censorship, let alone in the imprisonment or execution of people because of their political, intellectual or artistic convictions. That being said, there are some surprising parallels as well. Internationally, both countries presented themselves as open-minded, tolerant and progressive, and used modern art to prove the point. But the decrees, speeches and interviews by Zhdanov and Dondero tell another story. They incriminate modern art as a product of enemy ideology and as a form of spiritual treason.

There is yet another interesting paradox at play. The State Department and the USIA used modern art exactly because of its alleged non-political character to make a political statement. An elitist art form, during the 1950s understood and valued by a minority, was presented in Western Europe as the very symbol of American freedom and democracy. Dubious though that may sound, it seems to have been a clever move, because American modern

art did in fact impress the predominantly anti-American progressive artists and intellectuals in Europe.

The visual arts retained their relevance as 'soft power tool' during the Cold War, but during the 1960s their role became less prominent. This can be explained in part by the rise of film, television and other forms of mass culture that could reach a much broader public. Moreover, in international perspective, the focus on art and culture as benchmarks of political legitimacy gradually shifted towards science and technology, the space race, sports and mass consumption. The internal development of the art scene in the United States and in the Soviet Union undoubtedly contributed to the decreasing usability of art for cultural diplomacy as well. Jasper Johns' painted American flags, Roy Lichtenstein's blown-up comics and Andy Warhol's Coca-Cola bottles, Brillo soap boxes and silkscreen portraits of Mao Zedong no longer supported the narrative of 'pure art' that made the Abstract Expressionists such an attractive export product in the eyes of the State Department. In the Soviet Union, the process of destalinization, inaugurated by Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev, started a slow but unstoppable process of appropriation and subsequent erosion of Socialist Realism. The visual arts in the Soviet Union, though still severely repressed under Party Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, increasingly changed from ideological advertisement to self-willed artistic expression. No longer could the visual arts be viewed as a pure mirror of the competing ideologies of the Cold War.