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**BEYOND IDEOLOGIES: UNITED STATES EXHIBITION STRATEGIES
AT THE VENICE BIENNALE FROM 1948 TO 1958**

Summary:

In this text the participation of the United States at the Venice Biennale from 1948 to 1958 will be analyzed. The analysis is based in reading of the anti-American oriented literature that created numerous misunderstandings about the role and the importance of the American Secret Services (USIS) in managing the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale and in creating the Abstract Expressionist art movement. Starting from a critical reconsideration of the archival sources, I will demonstrate that the United States considered both abstract and realist art as representatives of their national culture until 1956.

Keywords:

Cold War, Abstract Expressionism, Realism, USSR, Venice Biennale, USA

In this work I would like to elaborate on the United States participation at the Venice Biennale during the first period of Cold War from 1948 to 1958. This theme has been frequently presented under a unique point of view of the so-called „Cultural Cold War.“¹ The term was used in the late 1990s by Frances Stonor Saunders, who argued that each kind of cultural expression produced in the United States after the Second World War had been deployed as a mere instrument of propaganda against Communism. Even if the term has only been used in recent years, the concept was very common since the 1970s when some critics started to investigate on Abstract Expressionism as the first genuine art style created in the United States and exported all over the world. The „Cultural Cold War“ theory suggests that Abstract Expressionism was created by Clement Greenberg in cooperation with curators of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and above all by the United States Information Service – a secret service bureau founded to promote the filo-American consensus as a contrast to Soviet Socialist Realism.² Even if Abstract Expressionism was different from Socialist Realism in terms of aesthetics, it's not possible to affirm that it had been invented for political purposes only. Clement Greenberg wrote on Jackson Pollock and composed his theory on the *American Type of Painting* in 1955³ after Pollock and De Kooning had already exhibited at the Venice Biennale. It is true, however, that after 1956⁴ Abstract Expressionism became a political weapon against Communism as it represented freedom of expression in the US, which was prohibited in the USSR. During the period immediately following the Second World War and prior to 1956, the United States tried to present themselves in Venice as an equilibrate culture instead, in which both, abstraction and realism were encouraged and promoted. In the following text I will try to explain this affirmation by using impartial data, which were ignored by critics, and can be found in the catalogues of the Venice Biennale, as well as the Biennale Archives.

After the Second World War, the United States felt the necessity to present themselves in Europe not only as a military super power, but also as a country in which art and culture had a preeminent role as a response to severe criticism made by the Europeans. In fact, during the first years after the war had ended, European intelligentsia was very severe in criticizing any form of art coming from the United States, which was considered as unrefined and naïve. In an essay written in 1950 even Greenberg spoke about this prejudice: „It seems to be assumed that since America has not yet produced anything very important in the way of art, there is little likelihood that it ever will.“⁵ For this reason, while presenting themselves at the Venice Biennale – the most important art exhibition at that time – the United States were very concerned to show the most progressive art they had, carefully thinking about styles and forms, and strengthening the idea of a talented and creative nation.

In order to understand how the United States administrated their Pavilion in Venice and how these actions were partly mystified by the anti-American critique in the last forty years, it is necessary to briefly summarize what happened in regards to the diplomatic relations between the United States and the Venice Biennale during the decade of 1948–1958.

The United States first participated at the Venice Biennale in 1929 with the construction of the Pavilion⁶, which was financed by the Grand Central Art Galleries, a private corporation of galleries based in New York. The status of the „private property“ of the US Pavilion is a unique case in the *Giardini* area since all other Pavilions are owned by the state which erected it, and the owner state is obliged to provide restoration and other related preparational works for each exhibition at the Biennale. Private institutions always had a central role in managing the American Pavilion and the exhibitions organized there biennially – MoMA became the owner of the US Pavilion building in 1954 and managed several private funds to organize the participation of the United States at the Venice Biennale.

Because of this unusual „privatized“ position of the United States Pavilion, Rodolfo Pallucchini, the General Secretary of the *Ente Autonomo Biennale*, asked the US government to buy the Pavilion in 1948, when the first Biennale took place after the Second World War. In a letter dated April 14, 1948 Erwin Barrie, the chief of Grand Central Art Galleries, wrote to Pallucchini: „I’m considering selling the building to the United States Government [...] I’m sure you will agree with me that it would be much better, from your point of view as well as ours, if our Pavilion was owned by our government instead of any art organization such as ours.“⁷ In this letter Barrie also referred to the political instability in Italy that could affect the United States’ chance to install an exhibition in their Pavilion. Because of the political situation and a possible victory of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) at the elections, which followed on April 18, the United States Government was very careful to send its artists abroad, even if the owner of the space was a private company as the Grand Central Art Galleries. Due to the victory of the Democratic Christian Party (DC) at the elections in Italy, the United States had agreed to participate in the Biennale of 1948. Nevertheless they opened the Pavilion only two months later, in August 8, and the question of its ownership was partially left behind.

Each following year Pallucchini inquired the United States Ambassador in Italy if the US Government would buy the Pavilion and consider it a place of the official national representation, but each year this proposal was strongly refused. The underlining point here was the United States’ refusal to declare a single place like the American Pavilion in Venice as a vehicle for national representation in art because a single event couldn’t stand for the entire complexity of the country. A possible answer to this behavior could come from the sociologist Michael Walzer, who sustained that the real American essence was in trying to flatten the differences as the Grand Seals motto „E Pluribus Unum“ explains.⁸ For this reason the US Government didn’t agree to buy the Pavilion and therefore didn’t allow the owner of the Pavilion to speak for the „United States official national representation.“

So, if there was no possibility for the United States Government to claim a certain „type“ of art as „officially American“ at the time, for that same reason the theses of Abstract Expressionism as the exclusive art expression created to symbolize American freedom of thought in Europe is suddenly proven incorrect. The best example in this sense is the case of Ben Shahn. Shahn has been a realist

painter and an anarchist who sided with workers and fought for civil rights. He participated in the Biennale of 1954 with a solo show. In the Catholic-democratic Italy he had an enormous success in contrast to the abstract expressionist Wilhelm de Kooning who was chosen to represent the US with him ⁹.

The *International Program*, which was established in 1952 by the MoMA Board to promote American art abroad was not activated to finance the United States participation at the Venice Biennale, but MoMA used it to organize the US exhibition at the Biennale in 1954. This MoMA program was conducted by Porter McCray, a former secret services agent who worked in France during the first stage of the Marshall Plan. During the 1970s, when the first presumptions regarding the United States Information Services (USIS) engagement in the organization of the national Pavilion started to circulate, it seemed clear that the involvement of the secret services was an unquestionable and a suspicious fact. Some things are however left unclear in this approach. It is a fact that USIS – partially connected with the United States Government – organized the communication with the artists who exhibited in the Pavilion, but it is a fact as well that USIS was directly dependent on the State Department which legally didn't depend on the US Government. One of the most famous articles in this sense, and perhaps the first one to introduce the topic of misunderstandings regarding the art-historical narration of the presence of the United States in Venice, is „Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War“, written by Eva Cockcroft in 1974. This text appears as the first to refer directly to the role that MoMA had in managing the US Pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* and its supposed links with the US Secret Services: „The US Government's difficulties in handling the delicate issues of free speech and free artistic expression, generated by McCarthyist hysteria of the early 50, made it necessary and convenient for MoMA to assume this role of international responsibility for the US representation at the *Venice Biennale*, perhaps the most important international– cultural – political art events, where all the European Countries including Soviet Union competed for cultural honors. MoMA bought the US Pavilion in Venice and took sole responsibility for the exhibitions from 1954 to 1962.“¹⁰

When Cockcroft speaks about this matter, she refers to the links between MoMA and the United States Information Services (USIS). She particularly pointed out a probable connection between Porter McCray and the USIS foreign offices in France and Italy (United States Information Agency – USIA), as well as between Alfred Barr and the Congress for Cultural Freedom founded in France and Italy by the USIA itself. Cockcroft suggested an analogy between CIA's undercover operations (e.g. Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris) and the entire MoMA's International Program.¹¹ The Biennale became a part of these political relations thanks to its prestigious role in the art world. Since the very beginning of the history of the Venice Biennale, which started in 1895, being a part of the glamorous mechanism of this art fair with a Pavilion located in the *Giardini*'s area was a point of honor for each nation. The United States weren't an exception in this respect, and they curated the presence and the communications related to the exhibitions organized in their Pavilion with a forward-looking attitude.

After the Second World War the USIS superintended the communications related to the participation of United States at the Venice Biennale to supervise and control the information about artists chosen by the curators engaged by MoMA. I would like to underline that USIS worked only in the distribution of press releases and had no role in selecting the artists. The Information Service worked for the Pavilion creating consensus with an efficient press office program providing detailed description of artists presented in the Pavilion.

MoMA certainly played a role in the so-called Cultural Cold War, and Alfred Barr, who was the Director of Collections of MoMA from 1952 onwards, undoubtedly had a preeminent role in the Congress of Cultural Freedom established by USIS in Europe, as mentioned before. Barr was deeply convinced that Communism was the worst thing that happened to Russia because it brought a lack of cultural freedom in arts and literature. Some letters from the Barr Files at AAA – Smithsonian Archives of American Art in New York – demonstrate how the United States Government was involved in this sense, but also show how all the American art, and not only Abstract Expressionism, was supported by the Secret Services during the Cold War. Historian Max Kozloff referred to this matter as well: „Congress for Cultural Freedom and its affiliate Committee for Cultural Freedom [...] The record of these organizations both of them devoted to the proposition that a respect for cultural freedom continues to be one of the distinguishing features of Western Society.“¹² In this passage Kozloff referred to the ideal concept of Cultural Freedom only, which was basically not related to any kind of artistic style. Moreover, a small but influential group of Republicans from the United States was against Abstract Art, and they tried to pressure the Biennale commissioner into avoiding the presence of Abstract Expressionist in Venice. Senator Dondero, for example, created a strong campaign against abstract art, which was considered a possible vehicle for the Communist ideas.¹³ To answer this opposition Barr wrote *Is Modern Art Communist?* – a short pamphlet in which he noted: „It is obvious that those who equate modern art with totalitarianism are ignorant of the facts. To call modern art communistic is bizarre as well as very damaging to modern artist (...) those who assert or imply that modern art is a subversive instrument of the Kremlin are guilty of fantastic falsehood.“¹⁴

Most of the literature about the Secret Services' involvement in managing art and the *Biennale* affairs was based on a provocative article written by Thomas Braden, a former CIA agent who worked during the first years of the Cold War. In 1967 he published the article „I'm Glad that CIA is Immoral“ in the *National Post*, sustaining that: „For the Cold War was and is a war. Fought with ideas instead of bombs. And our country has had a clear-cut choice. Either we win this war or lose it. This war is still going on, and I do not mean to imply that we have won it. But we have no lost it either.“¹⁵ This type of assertion made by a person who wanted to provoke the political climate which was already tumultuous, obviously supported articles and books, like the well-known *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* by Serge Guilbaut.

Guilbaut's book is significantly based on an anti-American stereotype which led the author to propose his position in a disoriented and partially inaccurate way. For example Guilbaut affirms that the American Pavilion was owned by the MoMA in 1948. This claim is untrue because in 1948 – as many documents in Biennale Archives (ASAC) clearly demonstrate – the Pavilion was owned by the Grand Central Art Galleries.¹⁶ Guilbaut's critique is directed toward the idea that a private institution like MoMA couldn't organize a national participation in an international art fair like the Biennale was.¹⁷ But, as we have seen before, the Biennale wasn't an official representation of the United States. Furthermore Guilbaut claimed that MoMA had a direct link with USIS through its support to the Conference for Cultural Freedom, which was one of the agents of the anti-Communist propaganda, and that for this reason it chose to exhibit only abstract art in Europe as a demonstration of the United States' democratic orientation. As the chart below explains, there was a balance between abstract and realist art showcased in the US Pavilion at the *Venice Biennale* until 1956.¹⁸

Year	Ownership	Sponsors	Commissioner	Curator	Exhibition
1948					
	Grand Central Art Galleries, NY	Art Foundation, NY	Alfred Frankfurter	Isabelle Roberts	<i>Art from US</i>
		Whitney Museum, NY			
		MoMA, NY			
		Brooklyn Museum, NY			
		Artists Equity Association			
		American Federation of Arts, NY			
		Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston			
		Metropolitan Museum, NY			
		Grand Central Art Galleries NY			
1950					
	Grand Central Art Galleries, NY	MoMA, NY	Alfred Frankfurter	Alfred H. Barr Jr.	<i>Gorky-Pollock-de Kooning</i>
		Grand Central Art Galleries		Duncan Philips	<i>John Marin</i>
				Alfred Frankfurter	<i>Bloom-Gatch-Lebrun</i>
1952					
	Grand Central Art Galleries, NY	MoMA, NY	David Finley	Eloise Lucien Spaeth	
		National Gallery of Arts di Washington		Andrew Carnduff Ritchie	Stuart Davis
		American Federation of Arts		Hermon More	<i>Edward Hopper</i>
				John I.H.Baur <i>Jasuo Kuniyoshi</i>	<i>Jasuo Kuniyoshi</i>
				James Johnson Sweeney Alexandr <i>Calder</i>	<i>Alexander Calder</i>

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Year	Ownership	Sponsors	Commissioner	Curator	Exhibition
1954					
	MoMA, NY	International Program MoMA, NY	Renè d'Harnoncourt	Porter McCray	
				James Thrall Soby	Ben Shahn
				Andrew Carnduff Ritchie	<i>Willem de Kooning Tre Scultori: Lachaise, Lassau, Smith</i>
1956					
	MoMA, NY	Art Institute, Chicago	Daniel Catton Rich	Katharine Kuh	<i>American Painters paint the City</i>
1958					
	MoMA, NY	International Council at the Museum of Modern Art, NY	Porter McCray	Frank O'Hara	<i>Seymour Lipton Mark Tobey</i>
				Sam Hunter	<i>Mark Rothko David Smith</i>

Archival sources allowed the United States participation at the Venice Biennale to be reconsidered, taking into account the presence of Abstract Expressionism as only one aspect of American art. The sudden change of behavior in 1958 with the exhibition of four abstract artists needs to be read as a reaction to the presence of USSR at the Venice Biennale after 1956 in a climate of real fear of Communism. It was only in 1958 that for the very first time after the Second World War, the United States offered a single view on American art at the Venice Biennale that could strengthen its position within the international cultural chessboard and – only in this sense and after 1958 – could Abstract Expressionism be considered as a guardian of freedom and democracy in strong opposition to the policies made by anti-democratic regimes.

Notes:

¹ F. Stonor Saunders, *Who paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London 1999.

² See: S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, Chicago and London 1983.

³ See: C. Greenberg, „American Type of Painting“, in: *Partisan Review*, Spring 1955, collected in: J. O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg, The collected essays and criticism*, vol. 3, Chicago and London 1993, 234–236.

⁴ USSR stopped its exhibitions at the Biennale in 1917 due to Soviet Revolution and presented themselves again in 1956. For a complete analysis of USSR participation of 1956 see: M. Malbert, „Le retour de l'URSS à la Biennale de Venise en 1956“, in: *Histoire de l'Art – INHA Revue de recherche et d'information*, n°55, October 2004, 119–128.

⁵ C. Greenberg, *The European View of American Art*, „The Nation, 25 November 1950“ collected in J. O'Brian/ed, *Clement Greenberg, The collected essays and criticism*, vol. 3, Chicago – London, 1993, pp. 59–62.

⁶ Before 1929 United States had been invited to exhibit as guest in the Italian Pavilion.

⁷ Letter from the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee – ASAC.

⁸ M. Walzer, *What does it mean to be an American: essay on the American experience*, New York, 1992, 24–26.

⁹ See: F. Pohl, *Ben Shahn - new deal artist in a cold war climate 1947 -1954*, Austin TX, 1989.

¹⁰ E. Cockcroft, „Abstract Expressionism Weapon of Cold War“, *ARTFORUM*, vol. 15, no 10, June 1974, 39–41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² M. Kozloff, „American Painting during the Cold War“, *ARTFORUM*, May 1973, 43–54.

¹³ Dondero was close to McCarthyism. In 1952 Dondero went so far as to tell Congress that modern art was, a conspiracy by Moscow to spread Communism in the United States and organized a press campaign in defense of Realism, the only genuine American Art.

¹⁴ A. Barr, „Is Modern Art Communistic?“, *New York Sunday Times Magazine*, 14.12.1952.

¹⁵ T. Braden, „I’m Glad that CIA is Immoral“, *The Saturday Evening Post*, 20 May 1967, 10–14.

¹⁶ The ownership question has been reconstructed thanks to materials found in Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee – ASAC, Raccolta Documentaria Arti Visive, Serie Padiglioni atti 1938–1969, (serie cosiddetta Paesi) busta 26, Stati Uniti.

¹⁷ At the 1948 Biennial, Gorky, Stamos, Rotkha, and Tobey were represented among seventy-nine American Painters. In fact, it was the Museum of Modern Art which, for reasons of domestic politics following the difficulties of 1946, managed the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennial. Thus American culture was represented by private sector, as journalist Bernard Denvir pointed out: „At the (1954) Biennale at least, artistic conservatism and communism go hand in hand whilst free enterprise is linked to more adventurous forms of artistic explorations“, in: S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, London and Chicago, 1983, 248.

¹⁸ This chart has been obtained by the examination of Venice Biennale catalogues from 1948 to 1958 compared with ASAC and MoMA archival sources.

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**IZNAD IDEOLOGIJA: IZLAGAČKE STRATEGIJE
SJEDINJENIH AMERIČKIH DRŽAVA
NA BIJENALU U VENECIJI OD 1948. DO 1958. GODINE**

Apstrakt:

U tekstu se razmatra učešće Sjedinjenih američkih država na Bijenalu u Veneciji između 1948. i 1958. godine. Analiza se zasniva na čitanju anti-američki orjentisane literature koja je proizvela niz nerazumevanja u vezi sa ulogom i značajem Američke obavestajne službe (USIS) u upravljanju Paviljonom SAD-a na Bijenalu i stvaranju pokreta Apstraktnog ekspresionizma. Polazeći od kritičkog osvrta na arhivske izvore, biće prikazano da su Sjedinjene američke za reprezentaciju nacionalne kulture koristile i apstraktni i realistički umetnički jezik do 1956. godine.

Ključne reči:

Hladni rat, Apstraktni ekspresionizam,
realizam, SSSR, Bijenale u Veneciji, SAD