Reassessing International Art Exhibitions in Finland

A New Perspective into Exhibition History of the Second Half of the 20th Century

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Cold War politics accelerated artistic exchange and the transnational circulation of art. Within state-run cultural diplomacy, hundreds of art exhibitions traveled to Finland opening a rich and varied perspective on international art. Only a few of them have though made their way into the canon of exhibitions and consequently, into the Finnish history of art.

Using a few Cold War art exhibitions as an example, the article challenges the established Finnish art historical canon of significant exhibitions. It demonstrates that many interesting exhibitions have been ignored or marginalized without a good reason due to prejudices or because they have been considered awkward, for instance, for political reasons. The formation of the art canon and exhibition histories are interrelated. Thus, the article suggests that Finnish art history of the second half of the 1900s would look different if more attention had been paid to a greater variety of art exhibitions. It argues that a more profound and detailed knowledge of exhibition histories would provide new perspectives into the transnational circulation of artistic influences and the impact of international art on Finnish art, artists, and the art scene.

Keywords: *exhibition history, exhibition canon, cultural diplomacy, Cold War, Finland*

In the introduction to the book *Harald Szeemann: Individual Methodology* (2007), Florence Derieux stated: "It is now widely accepted that the art history of the second half of the twentieth century is no longer a history of artworks, but a history of exhibitions".[1] Indeed, today art history is shaped by exhibitions. Since the 1990s, the focus has shifted from art and artists to exhibitions and curating.[2] The profession of curating, curatorial studies, academic programs on curatorial practice, journals and publications on exhibitions and curating, as well as the expansion of global art worlds, have contributed to this paradigm shift.[3] This means that exhibitions are written into art history not only through artists, artist groups, artistic breakthroughs, or episodes of turning points within more expansive art historical narratives: an exhibition is now also a subject of its own, and the history of exhibitions is a discourse within art history.[4] However, in Finnish (academic) art history, exhibitions only began to gain more attention in the 2000s.[5] Encouragingly, new Finnish research is underway on exhibitions and their histories, and a research-based non-fiction book about exhibitions as a medium will come out shortly.[6]

Why should we be interested in the history of exhibitions? What can exhibitions tell us? An exhibition combines different agents, objects, and institutions as well as economic, political, and social conditions with the system of artistic practices. In the 'nodes' of this network can be found the interlocking elements of art, power and politics, individual positions, histories, geographies, and spaces. An exhibition is also a medium; it can reveal interesting, hidden aspects, map art historical blind spots, or over-emphasized events in specific histories.[7] As a contextual element, an exhibition can provide a useful framework to construct explanatory accounts and structures of a more general art historical understanding. Exhibitions are also crucial spaces where ruling canons and narratives of art history can be diversified and questioned. Considering these perspectives, an exhibition is not just a subject, but a methodological package.[8]

1 Florence Derieux, "Introduction," in *Harald Szeemann: Individual Methodology* (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2007), 8.

2 A classic in exhibition history/studies is the multi-disciplinary anthology, Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg & Sandy Nairne, eds. *Thinking About Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996), of writings on contemporary exhibition practices by curators, critics, artists, sociologists, and historians.

3 The number of publications about curating and exhibitions has grown exponentially since 2007: Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennal: Exhibitions That Made Art History* (London: Phaidon, 2008); Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Geneva: JRP|Ringier/ECART Publications, 2010); Glenn Adamson et al., *What Makes a Great Exhibition* (Philadelphia: Reaktion Books, 2007); Paul O'Neill, *Curating Subjects* (Amsterdam: De Appel, 2007); Solveig Øvstebø, Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal, eds. *The Biennial Reader* (Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall & Hatje Gantz, 2010), et cetera.

4 Maria-Kristiina Soomre, "Art, Politics and Exhibitions: (Re)writing the History of (Re)presentations," *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies on Art and Architecture*, 21 (2012): 107–108; Julian Myers & Joanna Szupinska, "The Prehistory of Exhibition History: An Annotated Bibliography," *Art Journal*, Vol. 76, No. 1, (2017): 206; Julian Myers, "On the Value of History of Exhibitions," *The Exhibitionist* 4 (2011): 24–25.

5 Maria Hirvi-Ijäs, *"Den framställande gesten: Om konstverkets presentation i den moderna konstutställningen"* (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2007); Hanna-Leena Paloposki, *"Taidenäyttelyt Suomen ja Italian julkisissa kuvataidesuhteissa 1920-luvulta toisen maailmansodan loppuun"* (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2012); Maija Koskinen, *"Taiteellisesti elvyttävää ja poliittisesti ajankohtaista: Helsingin Taidehallin näyttelyt 1928–1968"* (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2018).

6 *The Culture of Display: History of Modern Exhibition Media*, forthcoming 2025 (Helsinki: Gaudeamus). My article in the book deals with art exhibitions and their histories outside the museum context.

7 Soomre, "Art, Politics and Exhibitions," 108.

8 Bruce Altshuler, "A Canon of Exhibitions," *Manifesta Journal* 11 (2010): 5–12; Saloni Mathur, "Why Exhibition Histories? Conversation Piece," *British Art Studies* 13 (2019). https://britishartstudies.ac.uk/index/article-index/why-exhibition-histories/search/keywords:why-exhibition-histories-24986

In this article, I discuss the possibilities that exhibition research can offer, especially for writing the history of Finnish art in the second half of the 20th century. The case studies I deal with here are international art exhibitions shown in Finland during the Cold War. As indicated by my previous research, most of these exhibitions were organised in the context of cultural diplomacy and connected to the ideological East-West cultural conflict.[9] At the time, many of these 'Cold War art exhibitions' attracted a lot of attention and interest from the public and artists, considerably internationalising the Finnish post-war art scene. However, only a small fraction of them have become part of the canon of Finnish art history of the late 20th century. Most of these exhibitions have been forgotten, ignored, or marginalized for various reasons. Consequently, the number of 'significant international exhibitions' – i.e. exhibitions that have been referred to and discussed in general surveys of Finnish art history and are considered relevant for the development of Finnish art and the art scene – has remained almost unchanged.[10] Using as examples two lesser-known or forgotten and one over-exposed art exhibition from the East and West, I challenge this established art historical canon of important exhibitions. By expanding and diversifying the canon, which has had a strong Western emphasis, I aim to update the prevailing perceptions of the influence of international art on Finnish art and artists in the second half of the 20th century. Finally, I call for a more comprehensive and diversified inclusion of exhibition history into Finnish art historiography.

Cold War Politics as a Catalyst for International Art Exchange

During the Cold War, Finland was geopolitically located in the grey zone between East and West. As a west-facing liberal democracy, neutral Finland aimed to have good relations with both East and West and to stay outside the disputes of the superpowers. However, Finland's leeway in international relations was limited by the Finno-Soviet Treaty of 1948, which tied Finland under the influence of the Soviet Union.[11] This meant, among other things, that the Soviet cultural presence in Finland was strong, especially in the 1970s.[12] As a countermeasure, the United States and Western countries extensively invested in cultural operations in Finland as part of their cultural diplomacy efforts.[13] Boosted by this competition, hundreds of art exhibitions made their way to Finland, the northeastern corner

9 In *The Mission Finland – Cold War Cultural Diplomacy at the Crossroads of East and West 1945–1991* project, focusing on Finland as a target of cultural diplomacy, I have studied international art exhibitions in Finland during the Cold War (University of Turku/ Research Council of Finland, 2021–2024). https://missionfinland.utu.fi/

10 For instance, Salme Sarajas-Korte, ed. *Ars: Suomen taide 6* (Espoo: Weilin+Göös, 1990); Helena Sederholm et al., eds. *Pinx: Maalaustaide Suomessa. Sivel-timen vetoja* (Espoo: Weilin + Göös, 2003); Helena Sederholm et al., eds. *Pinx: Maalaustaide Suomessa. Tarninankertojia* (Helsinki: Weilin + Göös, 2003). The Pinx book series focuses on the most significant painters and their work in various periods' artistic and social contexts. Outside general surveys, the most researched exhibitions are the ARS exhibitions of current international contemporary art organised by the State Art Museum (the National Gallery) since 1961. See Helena Erkkilä & Maritta Mellais, *ARS 50 vuotta: muistoja, historiaa, näkökulmia 1961–2011* (Helsinki: Valtion taidemuseo, 2010); Heikki Kastemaa, *Nykyaikojen kampanjat: Ars-näyttelyt ja niiden vastaanotto 1961–2006* (Helsinki: Valtion taidemuseo, kuvataiteen keskusarkisto, 2009).

11 Johanna Rainio-Niemi, *The Ideological Cold War: The Politics of Neutrality in Austria and Finland* (New York: Routledge, 2014). The Treaty of 1948 is also known as the "Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance of 1948".

12 I am writing an article *Art Mattered: Art Exhibition Diplomacy of the Cold War Superpowers in Finland in the 1970s* in which I discuss in detail the 1970s Soviet art exhibitions in Finland (London: Palgrave 2026). See also Simo Mikkonen, *"Te olette valloittaneet meidät!" Taide Suomen ja Neuvostoliiton suhteissa 1944–1960.* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuen Seura, 2009). Mikkonen does not write about art exhibitions.

13 Marek Fields, *Defending Democracy in Cold War Finland. British and American Propaganda and Cultural Diplomacy in Finland 1944–1970* (Brill, 2020).

of Europe, opening an unexpectedly versatile perspective into international art. The cultural rivalry between the blocs was not only reflected in Finland's lively international art exchange.[14] The Cold War politics fostered the circulation of art exhibitions globally.

In the frame of Cold War cultural diplomacy, cultural products, such as art exhibitions, were used to distribute geopolitical and symbolic power. Art exhibitions were a soft power resource in the service of state-run political-ideological influencing.[15] The general idea behind these exhibitions was to promote a positive image of the country, emphasise its values and demonstrate the superiority of its culture and social system in the inter-bloc competition.[16] However, the art exhibitions are first and foremost important places for transmitting artistic exchanges and influences. In addition to the political-propagandist value of art, it has an innate artistic-aesthetic value. The intertwining of these values made art an elusive and complex political tool at the service of Cold War cultural diplomacy. The art exhibited may have contributed to the objectives of the organising state, but paradoxically it may have also pursued its own artistic agenda – as the reception of art was not in the hands of politicians.[17]

In the following, I have chosen three Cold War exhibition cases from the early 1950s to 1970s to give an idea of the diversity of international art and its reception in Finland. The exhibitions presenting visual art from the USA (1950), socialist Poland (1967) and the Soviet Union (1974) received a lot of attention in the Finnish media, sparked a debate about art making as well as the relationship between art and society, and transmitted diverse influences on the local art scene. I question why the first two exhibitions have been marginalized and excluded from Finnish art history and argue that they deserve a place in the Finnish canon of significant exhibitions. Respectively, I examine why the Soviet exhibition of 1974 has often been considered important without a thorough analysis of its content or impact. I also discuss how these exhibitions are related to the official art canon of their respective countries. After all, the state-run diplomatic art exhibitions epitomised the official national art canons.

A New 'American' Technique to Finnish Graphic Art

The first case is the *American Serigraphy* exhibition in 1950. The exhibition was the first ever to present American visual art in Finland. It was shown at Galerie Hörhammer, one of the main private galleries in Helsinki, the Turku Art

14 Finland also actively participated in international art exchanges by sending Finnish exhibitions to other countries, often on a reciprocal basis.

15 David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); John J. Curley, *Global Art and the Cold War* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2018); Myroslava Halushka, *"Trojan Horses in a Cold War. Art Exhibitions as an Instrument of Cultural Diplomacy, 1945–1985"* (MPhil, University of Oxford, 2014).

16 Motivations for cultural activities in smaller and non-aligned countries often differed from those of the superpowers and other leading countries. Sari Autio-Sarasmo & Katalin Miklóssy, "Introduction: The Cold War from a New Perspective," in *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, eds. Sari Autio-Sarasmo & Katalin Miklóssy (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 1–15.; Kristian Handberg & Yulia Karpova, "Exhibiting Across the Iron Curtain. The Forgotten Trail of Danish Artists Exhibiting in the Context of State Socialism, ca. 1955–1985," *Artl@s Bulletin* 11, no. 2 (2022): Article 11.

17 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London, New York: Verso, 2012); Boris Groys, *The Power of Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008); Grant H. Kester, *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023); Mitchell, W. J. T. *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Image*s (Chicago (Ill.): University of Chicago Press, 2005); Joes Segal, *Art and Politics: Between Purity and Propaganda* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

Image 1. Robert Gwathmey, *Watching the Parade*, 1947. Colour serigraph on paper, 60,5 x 50,5 cm. Donation to the Turku Art Museum from the US Legation 1950. The *American Serigraphy* Exhibition in 1950. Photo: Turku Art Museum / Vesa Aaltonen, all rights reserved.

Museum, and later in four other Finnish towns.[18] The exhibition, organized by the US Information Service and the Finnish American Society, was a typical circulating Cold War art exhibition that the US produced for the needs of cultural influencing as part of its foreign policy. An exhibition presenting graphic art using serigraphy was most suitable for this purpose because the technique was considered particularly American and distinct from European art graphics.[19] It presented *the* American art canon abroad. From the political perspective of the US, which had renewed its interest in Finland after the Second World War, the objective of the exhibition was to introduce Finns to American culture beyond Hollywood films and to strengthen the Western orientation of the Finnish cultural field as a countermeasure to extensive exposure to Soviet culture in Finland after the war.[20] As part of the exhibition's concept, the US Embassy donated some of the exhibited serigraphs to local art museums that hosted the exhibition. For example, In Finland, the Turku Art Museum received a donation of five prints, and the Moderna Museet in Sweden received a few prints as well.[21]

In Finland, *American Serigraphy* with its 50 colourful prints from 19 artists was received with enthusiasm and astonishment but also with a slight suspicion because it introduced a new art-making technique to Finland. The serigraphy technique had only been used to a negligible extent for commercial use in Finland, whereas in the US it had been adopted as a tool for making art graphics already in the early 1930s. There it was intentionally named "serigraphy"

18 The exhibition also circulated in Jyväskylä, Lappeenranta, Hämeenlinna and Lahti by the subdivisions of the Finnish American Society. This enabled the new technique to reach artists working outside the capital. Koskinen, *"Taiteellisesti elvyttävää ja poliittisesti ajankohtaista,"* 300.

19 In the 1940s and early 1950s, the US government organized in collaboration with the National Serigraphic Society (est. 1940 in New York) several art serigraphy exhibitions that circulated internationally. Ari Latvi, "Serigrafian eli silkkipainon historiaa," in *Monipuolinen serigrafia: työvaiheet, välineet, materiaali*, eds. Jukka Lehtinen, Reijo Mörö, & Olli Reijonen. (Helsinki: Taideteollinen korkeakoulu, 2002), 17.

20 Koskinen, *"Taiteellisesti elvyttävää ja poliittisesti ajankohtaista,"* 263–271, 293–315.

21 In 1951, Moderna Museet received at least works by Robert Gwathmey and Edvard Landon. The donation by the US Embassy was linked to Edvard Landon's Fulbright Research Fellowship to Norway and Sweden (1950–1951). During his fellowship, Landon taught serigraphy to Norwegian and Swedish artists. Landon was the president of the National Serigraph Society (US). "Moderna Museet: Search the Collection", accessed April 3, 2024, https://sis.modernamuseet.se/en/objects/18036/nonfiction?ctx=dcadef9253942f43459f55c27b821deea615316d&idx=0; "Edvard Landon", accessed April 3, 2024, https://www.edwardlandon.com/about-the-artist

Image 2. Tuomas von Boehm, *Lippuja*, woodcut, 1951. *Viiva ja väri*, Exhibition catalogue 1951. Photo: Maija Koskinen, all rights reserved.

to make a clear distinction from comparable printing techniques used in advertising.[22] The new word "serigrafia" was also appropriated into the Finnish language along with the exhibition, and soon after, the technique began to spread among Finnish artists.

The Finnish reviewers of the exhibition gave a detailed account of the new American technique comparing it with other techniques in graphic art. The painterly artworks with bright, juicy colours and unconventional colour combinations opened the Finnish eyes wide. Some reviewers even considered the artworks to be paintings or drawings instead of printed graphics.[23] Serigraphy, enabling painterly, colour-rich expression, was alien to Finnish (graphic) artists and it divided opinions. Among the sympathizers were young artists Lars-Gunnar Nordström (1924–2014) and Tuomas von Boehm (1916–2000). In 1951, a year after the *American Serigraphy* exhibition, they exhibited the very first serigraphic artworks by Finnish artists in the *Viiva ja väri (Line and Colour)* exhibition in Kunsthalle Helsinki. In addition to the serigraphs on display, the artists printed the entire exhibition catalogue using the new technique.[24] It is most likely that both Nordström and von Boehm attended the American exhibition. Nordström adopted serigraphy as one of his main techniques,[25] and von Boehm, in addition to the new technique, was also influenced by the form, composition, and motif of Edward Landon's serigraphy "*Regatta*" which can be seen in von Boehm's woodcut "*Lippuja*" (1951). Gradually, the serigraph technique spread among Finnish artists. On the initiative of graphic artist Tuulikki Pietilä, it was taught at the Academy of Fine Arts from 1957 onwards. By the end of the 1960s serigraphy had established its position in the Finnish art graphic.[26]

22 Latvi, "Serigrafian eli silkkipainon historiaa," 15–17, 21.

23 "Tammikuun taidenäyttelyt," *Suomen Kuvalehti* 4, 28.1.1950, 20–21; Osmo Laine, "Taidemuseon Serigrafian näyttely," *Turun Sanomat* 12.2.1950; T.S., "Amerikansk serigrafi i Konstmuseet," Åbo Underrättelser 18.2.1950; Joanna, "Amerikkalaista serigrafiaa," *Iltasanomat* 14.1.1950; K. N., "Amerikkalaista serigrafiaa," *Uusi Suomi* 15.1.1950; V. A-nen, "Amerikkalainen serigrafianäyttely," *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* 26.10.1950.

24 The exhibition presented prints and drawings of a younger Finnish generation of artists. Latvi, "Serigrafian eli silkkipainon historiaa," 23–25; "Viiva ja väri/Konst på papper," Helsingin Taidehalli, exhibition catalogue, 1951.

25 L-G Nordström exhibited a series of constructivist serigraphs in Galerie Artek in 1952. He was awarded a Henry Ford grant in 1954, and his works were shown at the Serigraphic Society, New York in 1958. He made his first study trip to the USA in 1960. "L-G Nordström foundation", accessed April 10, 2024, https://lgn.fi/en/home/

26 Latvi, "Silkkipainon eli serigrafian historiaa," 25–31.

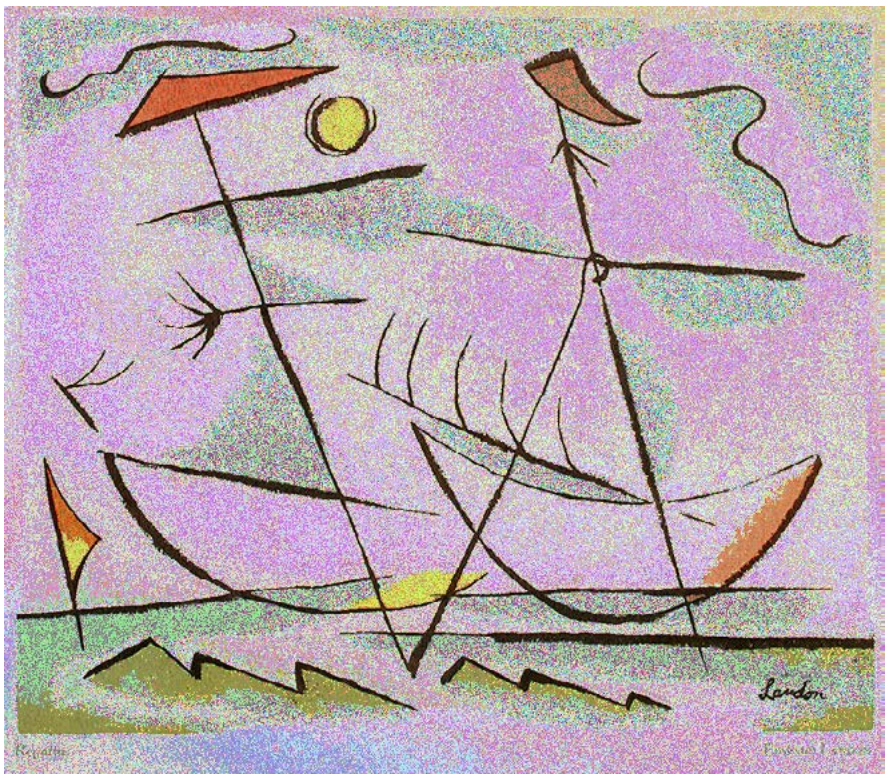

Image 3. Edward Landon, *Regatta*, 1940s. Colour serigraph on paper, 22,5 x 30 cm. Donation to the Turku Art Museum from the US Legation 1950. The *American Serigraphy* Exhibition in 1950. Photo: Turku Art Museum / Vesa Aaltonen, all rights reserved.

Despite the inspirational impact of *American Serigraphy*, it has not been included in the history of Finnish (graphic) art. Leena Peltola who wrote about postwar Finnish graphic art in the *Ars*, the multi-volume work of Finnish art history, mentions the *British Graphic Art* from 1945 as the only influential international graphic art exhibition of the era. Indeed, the British exhibition presenting prewar graphics with traditional techniques in a detailed realistic style offered a great lesson in high-quality printing. Erkki Anttonen, a specialist in the history of Finnish graphic art, also omits to mention the American exhibition in his research.[27] Instead, he highlights the Nordic Art Association's exhibition, organised in Helsinki two months after the *American Serigraphy*, as an inspiration to the Finnish colour art graphics in the early 1950s – as was no doubt the case.[28] I have found only two brief references to the American exhibition. Ari Latvi briefly mentions the exhibition when writing about the history of serigraphy in Finland.[29] Ulla Vihanta refers to it in an article about "the Americanness" in Finnish visual art from 1945 to 1965. Although Vihanta had not studied *American Serigraphy* and its reception in-depth, she thought it was encouraging and anticipated the development of Finnish art in the 1950s. According to her, the experiments in art graphics, the role of which significantly strengthened in the 1950s, played their part in the transition of Finnish visual art towards greater freedom of expression.[30]

27 Erkki Anttonen, e-mail to the author, October 28, 2023.

28 Erkki Anttonen, "Taidegrafiikka 1950-luvulla," in *1950s – The Time of Liberation*, eds. Pirkko Tuukkanen & Timo Valjakka (Helsinki: Suomen Taideyhdistys, 2001), 124–128.

29 Latvi, "Serigrafian eli silkkipainon historiaa," 23.

30 Vihanta's article was published in connection to the exhibition *Happy Days Are Here Again: American Phenomena in Lahti 1945–1965* organised by the City Museum of Lahti in 1990. Ulla Vihanta, "Amerikkalaisuudesta suomalaisessa kuvataiteessa 1945–1965," in *Happy Days Are Here Again: Amerikan ilmiöitä ja ajankuvaa Lahdessa 1945–1965*, ed. Päivi Siikaniemi (Lahti: Lahden kaupunginmuseo, 1990), 39.

Why then has the *American Serigraphy* not found its place in Finnish art history? American art was new and almost unknown in Finland in the early 1950s. The art scene at the time was still strongly French-oriented, although new influences, for instance from Italy, were beginning to be received after the isolation of the war years. From the Finnish perspective, the 'awkward looking' American art, which had begun to grow out of European influences and developed a language of its own, was not easy to receive. It took a long time for American art to absorb, and this unfamiliarity was one of the reasons why the first American art exhibitions have gone unnoticed in Finnish art history writing.[31] Another reason is that, even though Finnish art history has focused on Western art influences, art historians have often forgotten to look across the Atlantic before the influences of American pop art.

As I have shown, *American Serigraphy* should be included in the canon of significant exhibitions as it contributed to the development of Finnish (graphic) art. The exhibition both introduced a new artistic technique and inspired the use of colour in art graphics. In addition, the shapes and subjects of American serigraphs offered an opportunity to break free from rigid conceptions of art and the greyness of the war years.

Surprisingly modern! *Polish Contemporary Painting* in 1967

A whole group of art exhibitions that have mainly gone unnoticed or partly been rejected, are the exhibitions from the former Central and Eastern European countries with 'a socialist shadow'. Art from the Eastern bloc faced prejudices – at least among those who did not take a positive stance towards the Soviet type of socialism and its reflections in art. Art from the Eastern bloc was thought to follow the method of socialist realism and was presumed to be propaganda. It was assumed to be disconnected from the Western discourse of art; therefore, it was seldom considered worthy in the West. This attitude was evident in the reception of the 1967 *Polish Contemporary Painting* exhibition organised in one of the main exhibition venues of the Finnish capital, the Kunsthalle Helsinki. It was the first extensive exhibition presenting contemporary Polish art in Finland. The exhibition, showcasing 95 artworks from the last few years by 28 artists, took Finns by surprise.[32] The exhibited artworks did not represent socialist realism as had been the norm during the Stalin era. As the commissar of the exhibition, art historian, art critic, and director of the Museum Sztuki in Łódź, Ryszard Stanisławski emphasized, contemporary Polish art had strong connections to modernism and the latest international art as well as to individualism and freedom, attributes essentially related to Western art. According to him, the two main trends in Polish painting were emotional and intellectual. He also underlined that Polish contemporary art had not lost touch with its roots in the Polish art tradition.[33]

The Polish exhibition gained exceptionally wide media coverage and it interested representatives

31 In detail about the reception of American visual art in Finland in the 1950s and 1960s, see Koskinen, "*Taiteellisesti elvyttävää ja poliittisesti ajankohtaista*," 293–315, 324–327.

32 The exhibition was a counter-visit to an official Finnish art exhibition that was recently shown in Poland. Its Finnish organizer was the Artists' Association of Finland. Polish film, music, theatre, and graphic art were known in Finland, while contemporary painting had remained unknown. Stimulerande polskt, *Hufvudstadsbladet* 15.4.1967.

33 Ryszard Stanisławski, "Puolan nykymaalaus," in *Puolan nykymaalausta* (Helsinki: Helsingin Taidehalli, 1967), 5–6. Among the 28 exhibition artists were: Władysław Hasior, Tadeusz Brzozowski, Zdzislaw Glowacki, Tadeusz Kantor, Aleksander Kobzdej, Zbigniew Makowski, and Teresa Rudowicz.

Image 4. Tadeusz Kantor, *Emballage humaine*, assemblage, canvas, oil paint, fabric, leather, 1965, 97 x 260 cm. Polish Contemporary Painting in Kunsthalle Helsinki 1967. Tadeusz Kantor © Dorota Krakowska & Lech Stangret / Tadeusz Kantor Foundation.

of the Finnish art scene especially.[34] The newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* stated that those waiting for stereotypic socialist realism because the exhibition came from a socialist country, "were most likely going to be 100 % disappointed". The reviewers found all the international trends in the Polish artworks: tachisme, informalism, surrealism, American and French neorealism, neo-materialism, abstractism, constructivism, dada, pop, op and kinetic art, but also something distinctively 'Polish'. Instead of an Eastern European tone, political subjects, or socialist realism, the reviewers were confronted with a romantic attitude and a wild desire for experimenting. Material painting and assemblages were considered especially intriguing. For instance, the assemblages of Władysław Hasior were compared to the works by Juhani Harri, a Finnish pioneer in the art of assemblage. Some critics thought that the number of exhibited styles was too much, or that Polish art was not very refined, and was still seeking its goals. A dissenting opinion about the exhibition was given by a leftist artist Kari Jylhä, whose overall impression of it was messy, oppressive and alien in spirit. He found, for instance, the colour palette in many of the collage works to be stale and described how they were made as "cobbled together". He considered the constructivist works to be the best part of the exhibition.[35]

While the *American Serigraphy* exhibition in Finland represented a new dimension in Western art, Polish art was perceived as astonishingly Western. Its reception appeared to be more influenced by ideological geopolitics than by the nature of the art exhibited. Since the *Polish Contemporary Painting* was an official exhibition within diplomacy, it presented the authorized Polish art canon of its time which – contrary to Finnish expectations – was not coloured by socialist realism. The Polish exhibition raises concerns about the impact of 'Westsplaining'

34 Number of visitors to the exhibition was 2 072 (16 days), slightly below the average rate. The Annual Report of Kunsthalle Helsinki 1967. The archive of Kunsthalle Helsinki. The archive collections of the Finnish National Gallery.

35 Eila Pajastie, "Utställningsrond: Förtvivlan, glädje, romantik," *Nya Pressen* 25.4.1967; "Stimulerande polskt," *Hufvudstadsbladet* 15.4.1967; "Nykytaidetta Puolasta," *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* 15.4.1967; H. A–c, "Tunnelmoiva Puola," *Kansan Uutiset* 19.4.1967; Tuuli Reijonen, "Puolan nykytaiteen näyttely," *Helsingin Sanomat*, 23.4.1967; E. J. Vehmas, "Puolan ja Amerikan taidetta," *Uusi Suomi* 23.4.1967; Kari Jylhä, "Amerikan collageja ja Puolan nykytaidetta," *Keskisuomalainen* 29.4.1967; Soile Sinisalo, "Puolalaista ja amerikkalaista," *Aamulehti* 3.5.1967.

on art history writing in Finland and more broadly. The "Western gaze" has influenced the reception and valuation of European art as well as the formulation of European art history and its canon during the Cold War. Since the 1990s the situation has gradually changed when Central and Eastern European art histories after 1950 have been integrated into comparative regional narratives and have found their place as part of global art histories.[36] As an additional to this re-assessment, I propose a thorough re-evaluation of art and art exhibitions from the former Eastern bloc countries in Finland and their impact on Finnish art and the art scene as part of the transnational exchange of artistic ideas. Was it the case that Finnish art was only inspired by art that came from the West?

Is a flower still life socialist realism? *Soviet Art* in Helsinki in 1974

Since not all art from the Eastern Bloc turned out to be socialist realism, what kind of reception was given to an exhibition of Soviet art that specifically presented socialist realism? I address this question through my third case: an extensive exhibition of *Soviet Visual Art* in Kunsthalle Helsinki in 1974. Before it, only two comprehensive presentations of Soviet art had been seen in Finland (1950 and 1958).[37] Thus, the exhibition was of great interest to artists, art critics and the public alike – especially because at the same time the *ARS 74*, a large survey of international (Western, also Finnish) realistic contemporary art, was on display at the Ateneum Art Museum, only a few hundred meters from the Kunsthalle.[38] This provided an exceptional opportunity to compare the realism of the East and the West, provoking much debate about the mission of art and reflecting the tension between the different realisms and worldviews.

The exhibition *Soviet Visual Art* surprised the Finns. They were expecting the kind of hard-core socialist realism that was common during the Stalin era. Instead, the exhibition was found to be "delightfully people-oriented, gently narrative rather than aggressively declarative", as A. I. Routio wrote in *Uusi Suomi*, a right-wing newspaper.[39] With a power of 200 artworks from the 1920s to 1970s – depicting landscapes, still lifes, portraits and people at work and leisure – the exhibition updated Finns' perceptions of Soviet socialist realism. The artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds represented the various socialist republics of the Soviet Union along with their national characteristics.[40] Most of them were members of the Soviet Academy of Arts, had studied at its art school and had been awarded state prizes, i.e. the exhibition

36 See, for instance, Piotr Pietrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe 1945–1989*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2009); Christian Nae, "A Porous Iron Curtain: Artistic Contacts and Exchanges across the Eastern European Bloc during the Cold War (1960–1980)," in *Art History in a Global Context: Methods, Themes, and Approaches*, eds. Ann Albritton & Gwen Farrelly (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 13–26.

37 Unlike music, literature, films and theatre, visual art was not central to Soviet cultural diplomacy in Finland before the 1970s. Before that, mainly small-scale exhibitions of graphic art had been sent to Finland. This information is based on an extensive database that I have collected regarding exhibitions of Soviet art organised in Finland.

38 *ARS 74* was originally intended to be a meeting place for both Western and Eastern realistic expressions including works from the Soviet Union and the GDR. However, both countries withdrew from the exhibition: the GDR in the summer of 1973 and the Soviet Union as late as January 1974, one month before the opening. Kastemaa, *Nykyaikojen kampanjat, 2009*, 41–44. The Ateneum Art Museum is a state-owned art museum, now called the National Gallery.

39 A. I. Routio, "Ateneumin ja Taidehallin julistajat, Tarzan-huutoja, kylmää mieltä," *Uusi Suomi* 10.3.1974.

40 There were artists, for instance, from the Republics of Russia, Latvia, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan. From 1956 until its dissolution in 1991, the Soviet Union comprised 15 Socialist Republics.

represented the official Soviet canon of art.[41] It was curated by Tatjana Rottert, the head of the Department of Exhibitions at the Academy of Arts, and it largely followed the idea of socialist realism as defined by the art historian G. A. Nedoshivin.[42] The Finnish organiser of the exhibition, the Artists' Association of Finland, wished to develop cooperation in the exchange of exhibitions between the countries now that it had finally been launched.[43]

In the 1970s, the Finnish art scene, much like the entire cultural field, was heavily influenced by left-leaning ideologies (partly far left). This was reflected in the exhibition's reception and the positive attitude towards socialist realism. The more politically left-wing the reviewer, the more significant and exemplary he/she considered the exhibition to be, while the more 'neutral' reviewers sought to interpret the art on display from its Soviet origins, but from a Western perspective. The reviewers focused on the nature of socialist realism and its relevance to society and discussed what kind of art could be produced through its method. The discussion on the relationship between art and reality arose when comparing Eastern and Western realism. The general view seemed to be that Soviet art was more humane, warm and optimistic (forcibly maintained, according to some evaluators) but stylistically old-fashioned, for better or worse. In contrast, Western hyperrealism shown in the *ARS 74* was seen as cold, superficial, commercial, and pessimistic, but also experimental and technically superior.[44]

The two exhibitions presenting different interpretations of realism in art were the most important international exhibitions of the year attracting tens of thousands of visitors.[45] Both exhibitions were expected to influence Finnish art and artists, as had often happened following the major international art exhibitions in

41 Artists in the exhibition, for instance, P. P. Konsthalovski, A. Deineka, J. P. Kugatshin, J. I. Pimenov, R. I. Jaushev, I. M. Simonov, V. V. Tokarev, F. D. Konstantinov, D. H. Motchalski, O. G. Vereisky, P. D. Korin, L. J. Kerbel, L. F. Lankinen.

42 German Nedosivin, "Sisällön ja muodon etsintää Neuvostoliiton kuvataiteessa," in *Neuvostoliiton kuvataidetta*, (Helsinki: Artists' Association of Finland, 1974), 10–25. As a concept, multinational Soviet art is multifaceted and complex. The official canon of Soviet art varied over the years depending on societal changes and political currents. Outside this canon, there was also "unofficial" or "dissent" art (as was the case in many of the Eastern Bloc countries). Art that was once considered dissent later might have become accepted into the official canon. As David Crowly and Katalin Cseh-Varga have demonstrated, the synonymous concepts of unofficial/dissent/ alternative/ underground/ second public sphere/grey zone/counterculture/ non-conformist/ art are complicated and ambiguous and get different kinds of interpretations to varying times in different places, even inside one country. David Crowly, "*Art as Dissent*". *Official and Non-official in the Late Soviet Epoch*, Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte, Rom, Online, March 18, 2024, https://arthist.net/archive/41432; Katalin Cseh-Varga, "The Troubled Public Sphere: Understanding the Art Scene in Socialist Hungary," in *New Narratives of Russian and East European Art*, eds. Galina Mardilovich & Maria Taroutina, (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), 166–179.

43 The plan was to organise a similar exhibition of Finnish art in the Soviet Union and establish an exchange of artists between the two countries. Jussi Rusko, "Neuvostotaiteen monimuotoinen kuva," *Kansan Uutiset* 3.3.1974; I. L., "Neuvostoliiton kuvataidetta Helsingin Taidehallissa," Satakunnan Työ 2/1974.

44 Naturally, there were differences (sometimes very substantial) in the evaluations' interpretations based on the evaluator's political orientation. Dan Sundell, "Realismen som metod," *Hufvudstadsbladet* 10.3.1974; Liisa Tiirola, "Neuvostotaiteen katselmus," *Etelä-Saimaa* 13.3.1974; Ahti Susiluoto, "Neuvostotaiteen näyttely: Inhimillisen ilmaisun saavutuksia," *Kansan Uutiset* 10.3.1974; Ville Lindström, "Lännen ja idän kuvia," *Päivän Uutiset* 22.2.1974; "Taiteemme on humaanista – ihmisen kuvaamista ihmistä varten," *Tiedonantaja* 12.3.1974; Markku Valkonen, "Tärkeintä ei ole tyyli vaan periaate," *Helsingin Sanomat* 3.3.1974; "Työläiset ja taiteilijat keskustelevat Arsista ja neuvostotaiteen näyttelystä," *Tiedonantaja* 28.2.1974; "Toisenlaista realismia, Ihmisiä ja työn sankaruutta," *Demari* 2.3.1974; "Kahden realismin kohtaaminen," *Uusi Suomi* 3.3.1974.

45 The *Soviet Art Exhibition* had 40 102 (open for less than a month), and the *ARS 74* 120 000 visitors (longer opening time and shown also in Tampere which is included in the figure).

Image 5. Vyacheslav Tokarev, *Soldiers*, 1960s, oil, 160 x 183 cm. The Artists' Union of the USSR. Tokarev was a state-awarded Ukrainian-Russian Soviet artist and a member of the Republican Board of the Union of Artists of the Ukrainian SSR. Photo: Seppo Hilpo / The Artists' Association of Finland, all rights reserved.

Finland.[46] The impact of *ARS 74* on Finnish art has been studied in detail, and the *Soviet Visual Art* exhibition is often mentioned as *the* Soviet exhibition that influenced Finnish art in the 1970s. Could it be that its impact, though, has been overestimated? The influence of Soviet-led socialist realism on the realistic representation and socially conscious visual art of the 1970s is acknowledged in Finnish art history.[47] But what was it in the *Soviet Visual Art* exhibition that influenced Finnish artists in the mid-1970s when realistic imagery and the social role of art were already the focus of the Finnish art scene, considering that the exhibition was the first major Soviet art exhibition in Finland in sixteen years? The 1974 exhibition undoubtedly reinforced the trend of realistic imagery and strengthened artists working from social and political premises, especially among the younger generation. However, I consider the impact of the *Soviet Visual Art* exhibition to have been more ideological than 'stylistic'. Only a few works represented politically proclaiming socialist realism.[48] In Finland, the realistic tendencies of Western art – pop art, neorealism, and photorealism – have significantly influenced Finnish art, and there was no nostalgia for the kind of salon painting from the turn of the previous century, which was abundant in the Soviet exhibition.

46 Irma Puustinen, "Todellisuuden monet kasvot: Sosialistista realismia," *Savon Sanomat* 23.3.1974.

47 Leo Lindsten, *Realismin kasvot:, 18 taiteilijamuotokuvaa* (Helsinki: WSOY, 1976); Markku Valkonen, "Kuvataide vuoden 1970 jälkeen – kohti sitoutumista," in *Ars, Suomen taide 6*, eds. Salme Sarajas-Korte et al. (Helsinki: Otava, 1990), 220–233; Ulla-Maria Pallasmaa, "Poliittisuus maalaustaiteessa," in *Pinx 4: Maalaustaide Suomessa. Siveltimen vetoja*, eds. Helena Sederholm et al. (Espoo: Weilin + Göös, 2003), 148–155; Kimmo Sarje, *Realismi ja utopiat: Yhteiskunnallinen realismi Suomen 1970-luvun kuvataiteessa / Realism and utopias: Social realism in 1970s Finnish art,* [translation: Michael Garner], (Espoo: Harkonmäki Oy, 1991); Aimo Reitala, "Ystävyyttä politiikan varjossa: Johdatusta Venäjän/Neuvostoliiton ja Suomen kuvataidesuhteiden historiaan," paper presented at Suomen ja Neuvostoliiton historiantutkijoiden symposium, Helsinki, October 1979.

48 For example, paintings by V. V. Tokarev: *Soldiers*, I. M. Simonov, *Blast Furnace*, 1961 and Vera Muhina's smaller bronze sculpture of the iconic *The Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* from the 1930s.

Image 6. Yuri Pimenov, *Lyrical Housewarming*, 1960s, oil, 90 x 70 cm. The Artists' Union of the USSR. Russian-Soviet Pimenov was an Academician of the Academy of Arts of the USSR, a People's Artist of the USSR, and a winner of the Lenin Prize and two Stalin Prizes. Photo: Seppo Hilpo / The Artists' Association of Finland, all rights reserved.

In addition to the few major Soviet exhibitions, only a few others presenting art from the Soviet Union have been mentioned or considered influential in Finnish art history. What has been overlooked is the staggering number of Soviet exhibitions of different arts in Finland: in the 1970s alone, the amount was close to 80.[49] What kind of dialogue did the Finnish art scene have with the hundreds of other Soviet exhibitions during the Cold War years? The stylistic and substantive diversity of Soviet art exhibitions has also been overshadowed. Soviet art was multinational. Within the framework enabled by the method of socialist realism, it could vary significantly based on its place of creation in the vast country. Although socialist realism was the primary art export of the Soviet Union, other artistic influences were also conveyed. For example, art from the Baltic Soviet Republics, often seen in Finland, was created from specific national premises and traditions. Moreover, in these countries, the relationship between visual art and modernism had not been disrupted as in Soviet Russia, although it did not disappear there either but lived underground.[50]

To summarise, my study shows that a comprehensive study and reassessment of various Soviet exhibitions and their influence on Finnish art is necessary to understand the international dynamics of the Finnish art scene. A thorough and detailed analysis of the history of Soviet exhibitions in Finland provides new insights and perspectives on Finnish art history in the latter part of the 20th century. This involves incorporating the political aspect of exhibition activities and uncovering the state-run mechanism behind them.

49 The extensive database collected by the author regarding exhibitions of Soviet art organised in Finland.

50 Part of the modernistic art lived underground in the Soviet Baltic countries too. Christine Linday, *Art in the Cold War. From Vladivostok to Kalamazoo, 1945–1962* (London: The Herbert Press), 140–171.

History of exhibitions: A blind spot in Finnish art history?

Regarding exhibition histories, the most seminal question is not only what was shown, but also what was excluded, and why. As art historian Maria-Kristiina Soomre has pointed out, it is still not our habit as art historians to look at exhibitions to see what else becomes visible in these complex and comprehensive contact zones.[51] (Re)Writing the history of art exhibitions not only in Finland but also globally, is still in its early stages. As Julian Myers has pointed out, the history of art and exhibitions are inextricably linked because exhibitions are something historical. They appeared at a particular moment designed to answer a certain set of specific historical conditions.[52] In my exhibition cases, Cold War politics strongly dictated the conditions that shaped exhibiting international art in Finland, as elsewhere. The vibrant international art exchange kept the Finnish art scene busy. As stated at the beginning of the article, most of the international art exhibitions during the era were organised in the frame of state-run cultural diplomacy. This challenges the idea of international art and its origins in Finland. The internationalisation of the Finnish art scene was not just a 'neutral' development. The Cold War dynamics accelerated the cultural exchange and circulation of international art.[53] Art, power, and politics met in the Cold War art exhibitions. This kind of strong relationship between art, the art scene and political power has, not always, but too often, been avoided in Finnish art history writing.

51 Soomre, "Art, Politics and Exhibitions," 121.

52 Myers, "On the Value of History of Exhibitions," 24–25, 27.

53 This did not mean that art institutions would not have exhibited and curated international art out of their initiative. Towards the end of the Cold War era, increasingly often international exhibitions were organized outside the state-run diplomatic framework. This meant that curatorial power shifted more into the hands of art institutions, art field professionals, and artists.

Western and Finnish art history has traditionally been written through artists, artworks, and artistic trends. This focus is undeniably essential, but I argue, that Finnish art history would look different if more attention had been paid to exhibitions beyond the most obvious Western ones when considering the impact of international art on Finnish art. Western Europe, including Finland, has forcefully told its own story while too often Central and Eastern Europe have been undeservedly left out of the scope of larger narratives.[54]

Although only scratching the surface, the exhibition cases described here have shed light on interesting exhibitions providing new interpretations of their influence and revealing art historical blind spots in the Finnish narrative. I have also discovered that Finnish art institutions do not know their exhibition history. Only a few have listed the exhibitions they have organised, but barely analyzed them. The history of exhibitions is interrelated with the formation of the art canon, an evolving and selective social process. If we only know and refer to the few already known exhibitions that, no doubt, have a well-deserved place in the Finnish canon of significant exhibitions, and ignore the hundreds of others, the canon stays unchanged. I argue that conducting deeper and more detailed research on the history of art exhibitions would allow us to craft a more diverse and nuanced narrative of Finnish art history of the second half of the 20th century. It would change the perception of how we see exhibitions as art history and highlight their agency as an elemental factor in shaping art. It would also change the idea of transnational circulation of art and artistic influences as well as the impact of international art on Finnish art, artists, and the art scene. This applies equally to other periods and art history writing both locally and globally.

54 Maja Foweks & Reuben Foweks, *Central and Eastern European Art Since 1950* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2020).

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