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Kristian Handberg
University of Copenhagen, handberg@hum.ku.dk

Yulia Karpova
University of Copenhagen, yukar@sdu.dk

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Exhibiting Across the Iron Curtain: The Forgotten Trail of Danish Artists Exhibiting in the Context of State Socialism, ca. 1955–1985

Kristian Handberg

University of Copenhagen

Yulia Karpova

University of Copenhagen

Abstract

The article presents the research project “Exhibiting across the Iron Curtain: The forgotten trail of Danish artists exhibiting in the context of state socialism, ca. 1955–1985” (The University of Copenhagen, 2021–24). Project researchers Kristian Handberg and Yulia Karpova introduce the project and its most important ambitions, especially those related to the theme of cross-border connectivity in the Nordic region through a few examples taken from their most recent work. These case studies illustrate how they approach this particular material and will tackle the questions and challenges that may rise.

Abstract

Artiklen præsenterer den aktuelle forskning fra projektet “Exhibiting across the Iron Curtain: The forgotten trail of Danish artists exhibiting in the context of state socialism, ca. 1955-1985” (Københavns Universitet 2021-24). Projektets tilknyttede forskere kunsthistoriker Kristian Handberg og designhistoriker Yulia Karpova introducerer projektets karakter og hovedformål, særligt i relation til transnationale forbindelser i den nordisk-baltiske region. Dette eksemplificeres igennem fremlæggelser af casestudier fra det aktuelle arbejde i projektet og hvordan disse rejser nye spørgsmål og udfordringer for udstillingsforskningen i både kunst- og designudstillinger.

Kristian Handberg, (Ph.D., the University of Copenhagen) is assistant professor at Department of Art and Culture at The University of Copenhagen. His research concerns exhibition histories of the postwar era and the different conceptions of modernism across the globe and their reception today, currently through the project Exhibiting across the Iron Curtain. Publications include New Histories of Art in the Global Postwar Era (eds. with Flavia Frigeri, Routledge 2020) and Conquering the present in the Long Sixties (Antipyrine 2019). Contact: handberg@hum.ku.dk, +45 20 65 11 58

Yulia Karpova (Ph.D., Central European University, Budapest) is design historian focusing on 20th century design in Eastern and Western Europe, exhibition exchange during the period of late socialism, and design in medicine and healthcare. She is author of the book Comradely objects: Design and material culture in Soviet Russia, 1960s-80s (Manchester University Press, 2020). She is a postdoc at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen. Contact: Yulia.karpova@hum.ku.dk +45 20 3520118

How did the actors of the Danish art world, from individual artists to public institutions, participate in exhibitions organized in the context of state socialism in the divided Europe, ca. 1955–1985? The project revolves around this initial question to research the significance of art exhibitions during the Cold War and approach Danish art through a new international perspective in the meeting with the socialist art worlds. The Danish case of this hitherto underexposed aspect of the post-1945 art world shows the contours of extensive contacts across the normally perceived closed barrier between Europe’s East and West with art exhibitions as an important (grey) zone of official policy and subversive exchange. This is evident in cases such as the “Baltic” art festival being presented in the only modern art museum of the GDR with the *Biennale der Ostseeländer* in Rostock (1965–1989); a municipal sculpture project with some of the most experimental artists of Poland with the *Danish-Polish Sculpture Festival* in Aalborg (1967); the Danish participation at the influential *Graficni Bienale* in Ljubljana (founded in 1955); and the extensive presentation of ‘Danish Modern’ furniture and design at the *Exhibition of Danish Design* in Moscow (1969–70). The aim of the project is to scrutinize the exhibition histories of these events and connect them to the interregional research on exhibition cultures across the Iron Curtain currently unfolding in art history.¹ The studies and dialogues of the project will hopefully enhance our understanding of the ways in which Danish art was part of the “Cold War” systems of policy and organization, but also had an agency in itself with exhibitions as its primary medium, as a zone of contact, circulation and exchange, working in both official and unofficial ways.² One could even propose the hypothesis that the global contemporary art world recognized

¹ Among many recent projects we can cite: *Exhibiting Art in a European Periphery: International Art in Sweden during the Cold War* (Södertörn University Stockholm 2018–2022), *Mission Finland: Cold War Cultural Diplomacy at the Crossroads of East and West* (University of Turku, 2021–), and *Resonances: Regional and Transregional Cultural Transfer in the Art of the 1970s* (Bratislava, Prague, Budapest and Poznań).

² Existing literature on Danish art in the Cold War era has focused on exhibitions and responses to the Cold War conflict inside of Denmark: e.g. Liza Burmeister Kaaring: *Mennesket i tiden: Menneskeskildrerne i dansk grafik i 1950’ernes anden halvdel* (PhD Dissertation, The University of Copenhagen 2015), Karen Westphal Eriksen: *Grus i maskineriet: abstrakt og figurative kunst i Danmark efter Anden Verdenskrig*, (PhD Dissertation, The University of Copenhagen 2015), and Jens Tang Kristensen: *På frontlinjen: En socialkunsthistorisk beskrivelse af Linien II* (Copenhagen: Spring 2019).

as predominant since 1989³ was formed through *exhibiting across the Iron Curtain* and that the Danish case provides an excellent perspective for this.

Housed at the Art History Department of the University of Copenhagen, “Denmark, Exhibiting across the Iron Curtain”⁴ is coordinated by art historian Kristian Handberg, who researches art exhibitions through a survey of examples from Denmark, GDR, Poland and Yugoslavia, informed by recent research in Exhibition Histories and global modernism. Post-doc Yulia Karpova, a design historian, focuses on Danish design exhibitions in Moscow and Budapest.

This article introduces the project and its ambitions. As example, we present two case studies taken from our most recent work, show how we work with this particular material and explore the questions and challenges that may rise. We do this from the perspective of being only one year into the work of the project, during which, despite the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and recently the Russian invasion in Ukraine, we have started to access our source material, to process our findings, and to dialogue with other, related projects.

Historical Framework

The project has a specific historical and geographical framing concerning exhibitions of Danish art in the later phases of the Cold War. We focus on the *Détente* phase, ca. 1965–1985, where the Bloc-system and its art worlds had reached a certain level of stabilization, even if was still in a changing climate, oscillating between conflicts and increasing contacts. After Denmark had joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, the Socialist States of the Eastern Bloc was the main priority of Danish foreign policy. In the first phase during the “hotter” Cold War years in the late 1940s and the 1950s, artistic exchanges with the

³ As stated in Hans Belting; Andrea Buddensieg; and Peter Weibel, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013), and Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso 2013).

⁴ The project is funded by the Novo Nordisk Foundation Investigator Grant in Art History 2020. For more information see: <https://artsandculturalstudies.ku.dk/research/exhibiting-across-the-iron-curtain/>

Eastern bloc were limited, but a heated climate of Cold War politics characterized the cultural scene on the “home front.” Several exhibitions were organized by communist affiliated organizations like the Danish newspaper *Land og Folk* and in the cultural debate, communists and fellow-travelers were prominent and support for the Soviet Union was widespread until 1956. The distance towards modernist art forms declared at the cultural conference of the Danish Communist Party (DKP) in 1948 did however alienate many Danish artists from the alliance with organized communist commitment, which had been strong since the days of anti-fascist “kulturradikalisme” in the 1930s.⁵

Around 1960 new diplomatic initiatives were taken towards contacts and exchanges. Here Denmark was remarkably proactive, establishing a cultural exchange agreement with the USSR in 1962, following a communiqué on collaboration made in 1956 during the state visit of the Danish Prime Minister H.C. Hansen (1906–1960) to USSR, a first among Western leaders. Cultural exchange agreements were also made with Poland (1960), Czechoslovakia (1964), Romania (1967), Yugoslavia (1970), Hungary (1971), and Albania (1972). One outcome of these cultural exchange agreements was the first exhibition abroad of the annual national exhibition of the Artist’s Union of the USSR, exhibited in 1962 at Charlottenborg in Copenhagen as *Sovjetisk Kunst*. Exhibitions of Danish arts and crafts and industrial design were later carried out in the Soviet Union, most notably *Contemporary Danish Design* in Moscow (1969–70).

Researching Art Exhibitions Between Artist Activism and Institutional Diplomacy

Many types of exhibitions are included in our research, including exhibitions organized under the auspices of the Danish cultural diplomacy (and thus officially representing the art of the West on the

other side of the Curtain), individual Danish artists participating in exhibitions organized by the socialist states at their own initiative (outside the framework of Danish official policy) artists contributing to an art festival in the GDR, and an artist group exhibiting in the Soviet Union on the invitation of a Danish-Soviet Friendship Society.⁶

From the early 1960s, the Danish state organized several exhibitions of Danish art and design in collaboration with museums and artists for showing in the socialist countries. As a whole, they can be seen as a campaign of cultural diplomacy to present Danish modern art as an attractive image of non-socialist art that could be sanctioned by the communist authorities. We may ask if, compared to the leading Western countries, Denmark was in position to take up a large number of exhibition activities, considering its small size and location at the border of the East-West divide, supported by an active cultural policy marked by one of the first Ministries of Culture founded in 1961. These activities are further developed in Kristian Handberg’s article on the exhibition of Cobra across the Iron Curtain as a tool of cultural diplomacy published in this issue of the *Artl@s Bulletin*, and Yulia Karpova’s text on the exhibition of Danish arts and crafts in the Soviet Union, especially the 1969 exhibition in Moscow.⁷

At the same time as these official exhibition activities were carried out by the Danish state, Danish artists also participated in exhibitions organized by the socialist states. These included the *Biennale der Ostseeländer* [Biennial of the Baltic Countries], a bi-annual exhibition organized in Rostock from 1965 in connection to the *Ostseewoche*: a city festival founded in 1958 as a strategic initiative by the GDR to shape public opinion in the Nordic countries under the slogan “Die Ostsee muss ein Meer des Friedens sein.” [The Baltic must be a sea of peace].⁸ To understate the significance of the exhibition, a

⁵ For details on communism and culture in the Danish context until 1960, see: Morten Thing, *Kommunismens kultur: DKP og de intellektuelle 1916-1960* (Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter 1993).

⁶ The exhibition of Danish artists association Corner in Leningrad and Riga 1979.

⁷ See: Kristian Handberg, “Exhibiting Cobra across the Iron Curtain: Exhibition Diplomacy and Modernism as Ostpolitik in Northern Europe during the Cold War”, *Artl@s Bulletin* vol. 11, 2 (Fall 2022), tbd, and Yulia Karpova, “Contested Modern: Exhibition of Danish design in Moscow, 1969–70”, *Artl@s Bulletin* vol. 11, 2 (Fall 2022), tbd.

⁸ For the political role of Ostseewochen, see: Astrid Carlsen; Thomas Wegener Friis, Julian Dunz, Przemysław Gasztold, “Østersjøkene: Politisk turisme i strandkanten

new building was erected to house the biennale, the Kunsthalle Rostock, which was inaugurated in 1969 as the only new-built art museum in the GDR. Biennale der Ostseeländer was based on national sections selected by invited committee-members of communists and fellow-travellers (for Denmark these were artists Victor Brockdorff (1911–92) and Herluf Bidstrup (1912–88)). Initially, the exhibition was aimed at “Realist art” and was tied to the official system of the GDR state. However, the exhibited art differed from any strict definition of “Socialist Realism” and under the leadership of renowned art historian Horst Zimmermann the Biennale also served as an international meeting place in the North with participation from Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, the GDR, the FDR, Poland, and the Soviet Union.⁹ It is a goal of the project to examine the Danish participation at the Biennale and how GDR realism met contemporary Danish art. In his forthcoming research, Handberg will specifically analyze the involvement of three artists at the Ostseebiennale:

- 1) Victor Brockdorff (1911–1992) as co-organizer and prominent socialist realist painter who also had several solo exhibitions in the GDR,
- 2) Dea Trier Mørch (1941–2001) and the artist/activist collective Røde Mor [Red Mother] as exponents of the political activism of the 1970s, who participated with their graphic works on several occasions, also at the Intergrafik Biennale in East Berlin.
- 3) Sculptor Erik Poulsen (1928–1999), whose concrete sculpture “Bellevue” (1979) still stands in front of the Kunsthalle Rostock.

This survey of painting, graphic art, and sculpture by different artists will provide various perspectives on the Danish participation in exhibitions in the context of the GDR system. It has been possible

to gain access to archival material and the memories of personal contacts for all these artists, which will provide insight into the processes of invitation for the exhibitions, the experiences of participation and reflections on the political and cultural situation around the exhibition. This artist-focused perspective will be combined with research on the context of the exhibition and the GDR art system based on the archives of the Biennale in Rostock (Stadtarchiv Rostock) and national archives in Berlin and Copenhagen. It is essential to provide an understanding of exhibitions in the (outside of Germany) little-known art world of the GDR. The analysis of exhibitions in the GDR will draw upon the analysis of art and politics provided by Eckardt Gillen in *Das Kunstkombinat DDR*¹⁰ and of the production of culture in the GDR.¹¹ The aim is to show how an exhibition like the Biennale der Ostseeländer worked at different levels—as a strategic art-political initiative by the GDR state “from above”, but also as a meeting place for artists with some agency “from below.” It is also important to approach the Ostseebiennale in the context of the history of art exhibitions and to connect it to the emergence of new exhibition formats so characteristic of the postwar era, for instance the influential West-German documenta exhibitions from 1955.¹² Was the Ostseebiennale an attempt to counteract documenta or did it respond to some of the same trends and institutional developments mirrored across the Iron Curtain? This complex status of the exhibition in that period is central to the project and can also provide new insights to the history of exhibitions, which has been intensely studied in recent years.

The significance of the “Ost-Biennale” will also be the topic of further case studies within the project. These include the *Intergrafik* biennial organized in Berlin from 1965 to 1989. This exhibition of graphic art and posters appeared as decidedly international with more than 50 participating

og etterretningstjenestenes søkelys,” *Arbejderhistorie*, (March 2018):157 – 177, 23, <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2387-5879-2018-01-10>.

⁹ Due to the presence of Norway and Iceland, the exhibition was sometimes called *Biennale der Ostseeländer, Norwegen und Island*. Elke Neumann: “Kunst am Meer des Friedens,” 8-31, in *1965/2015 Die Biennale der Ostseeländer. Der Ursprung des Kunsthalle Rostock* (Rostock: Kunsthalle Rostock, 2015).

¹⁰ Eckhardt Gillen, *Das Kunstkombinat DDR* (Cologne: Dumont, 2005).

¹¹ Gerd Dietrich, *Kulturgeschichte der DDR I-III* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019) and Christian Saehrendt: *Kunst als Botschafter einer künstlichen Nation: Studien zur Rolle der bildenden Kunst in der Auswärtigen Kulturpolitik der DDR*, (Stuttgart: Hans Steiner Verlag 2009).

¹² Kristian Handberg, *Conquering the Present in the Long Sixties: The Curatorial Birth of Contemporary Art*, (Aarhus: Antipyrine 2019).

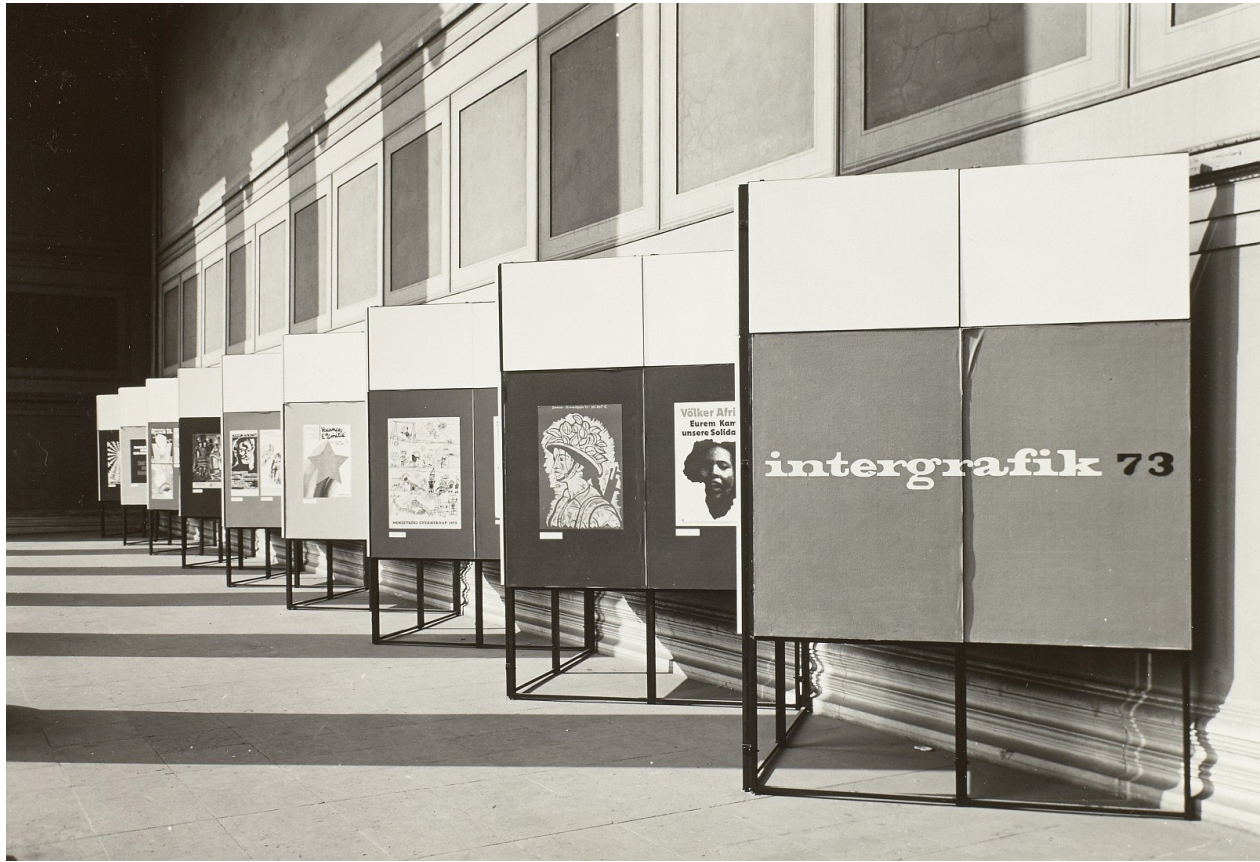


Figure 1. *Intergrafik 1973*, Altes Museum, East Berlin 1973 with works by Dea Trier Mørch. Photo: Hans-Jürgen May. Deutsche Fotothek/Europeana

countries including many from the Global South.¹³ Danish artists were presented there from the beginning, including Dea Trier Mørch and Røde Mor as well as less-obviously political artists. Arguably, *Intergrafik* gained its greatest prominence as part of the *Weltjugendfestival* in 1973—a youth festival combining political and cultural events which gathered several thousand participants, both from the GDR and abroad. The event, called the “Red Woodstock” due to its festive character and presence of rock music, has been described by historian Gerd Dietrich in his recent cultural history of the GDR as characterized by a great ambivalence, being both a political propaganda show *and*, on the individual level, a meeting with others and a moment of new cultural impulses pointing towards a new cultural identity.¹⁴ This is a similar observation to the different layers of significance in the exhibitions. A

central and intriguing issue here is also the internationality of the socialist state exhibitions, especially the art festivals, which appear as politicized and instrumental in the Global Cold War, but also as paving ways for a more global art world. This relates to the discussion of Biennials in the forming of the contemporary art world,¹⁵ where the role of the international art exhibitions of the socialist states and their impact in the Nordic-Baltic region can form a new strand of discussion. Another case study here will be the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Art (*Graficni Biennale*) organized since 1955 and recognized as a major meeting point between East and West. Many Danish artists also participated to it, including Asger Jorn (1914–1973), Henry Heerup, and Svend Wiig Hansen (1922–1997), but their presence have not been analyzed in Danish art history or in the reception of the artists.

¹³ *Intergrafik 76*. Ausstellungskatalog (East Berlin: Verband Bildende Künstler der DDR 1976). 60 nations are here listed as participants.

¹⁴ Dietrich, *Kulturgeschichte der DDR I-III*, 1393.

¹⁵ Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

Design Exhibitions

For a decade and a half, in response to the ‘global turn’ in historical research, design historians have been calling for a global or transnational perspective for the discipline. For example, in 2011, the editors of *Global Design History* criticized the long-predominant Eurocentric vision of design genealogy. They proposed a methodology that “recognizes the importance of writing histories that introduce the multi-sited and various design practices.”¹⁶ Rather than rejecting national and local histories of design, the advocates of global and transnational approaches suggest reframing them in multiple contexts.¹⁷ More recently, design appeared as a subject in the studies of diplomacy. The view of design as an object of diplomacy has been advanced by those design historians who choose to look beyond the familiar narrative of design as ‘soft power’ used by governments during the Cold War, and to examine the role of non-governmental actors in transnational design networks. Among these non-governmental actors were, for example, critics, curators, pedagogues, journalists, business representatives, and, of course, designers.¹⁸ One of the pioneering works in this area is an article by Katharina Serulus about design exhibition exchange between Belgium and the USSR, where political implications, professional ambitions and personal sympathies produced an intricate web of factors generating material structures and aesthetic messages.¹⁹

The role of design shows in the “Cold war on the home front” has been explored by many studies, focusing not only on international expos, but also on travelling exhibitions.²⁰ Studies of exhibitions

of Western consumer goods in the socialist bloc countries initially focused on the notions of Western “success” and the admitted “failure” of socialist governments to satisfy the populations’ consumer demands.²¹ More recent studies demonstrated the diversity of responses to the showcases of ‘consumer paradise’: for example, Susan Emily Reid argues that quite many Soviet viewers of the famous American exhibition in Moscow in 1959 could be sincere in their disappointment that the U. S. did not demonstrate enough achievements in science and technology and in their reassurance that USSR would soon leave the U. S. behind in the progress in these spheres.²² Moving in the same direction, Karpova will explore the complexity of the organization and reception of Danish exhibitions in the Soviet bloc—specifically in Moscow and Budapest. The exhibition “Contemporary Danish design,” shown in December–January 1969/70 at the Polytechnic Museum in Moscow, is a particularly good example of “design diplomacy” beyond the standard understanding of cultural diplomacy. Its organizers included both governmental bodies—Danish and Soviet Ministries of culture—and non-governmental professional organization, the Danish National Society of Applied Art. This exhibition aimed at professional cooperation as much as, if not more than, ideological message about the achievements of liberal market economy. In her two articles - one in this journal issue and another planned for *Journal of Design History*, Karpova will demonstrate how this and other exhibitions of Danish design in the USSR and Hungary highlighted tendencies and tensions in European understanding of modernism and modern built environment.

Forthcoming Activities

Our planned activities for the future will be focused on establishing a research environment around the

¹⁶ Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello, and Sarah Teasley, “Introduction: Towards Global Design”, in Adamson, Riello and Teasley, eds., *Global Design History* (London: Routledge, 2011), 3.

¹⁷ D. J. Huppertz, “Globalizing Design History and Global Design History,” *Journal of Design History* 28, no. 2 (May 1, 2015): 182–202, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epv002>.

¹⁸ Harriet Atkinson and Verity Clarkson, “Editors’ Introduction,” *Design and Culture* 9, no. 2 (May 4, 2017): 117–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2017.1331686>.

¹⁹ Katarina Serulus: “Well-Designed Relations: Cold War Design Exchanges between Brussels and Moscow in the Early 1970s,” *Design and Culture* 9, no. 2 (May 4, 2017): 147–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2017.1326231>.

²⁰ Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1997); David Cate, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds., *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970*

(London: V&A Pub, 2008); Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

²¹ Oksana Nagornaia, “Vitriny sovetskikh dostizhenii: SSSR na mezhdunarodnykh vystavkakh tovarov narodnogo potrebleniia”, in *Sovetskaia kulturnaia diplomatia v usloviakh kholodnoi voiny*, ed. by Oksana Nagornaia (Moscow: Rosspen, 2018), 86–95.

²² Susan Reid: “Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959” *Kritika* 9, no. 4 (2008), <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/kritika/v009/9.4.reid.html>.



Figure 2. Soviet Minister of Culture Yekaterina Furtseva in chair by Hans Wegner at the exhibition *Contemporary Danish Design*, 1969. Archive photo: Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 3068, op. 3, d. 776, l. 17.

project's subject and bringing this into contact with various disciplinary contexts. In March 2022, we organized in Copenhagen the workshop "Cultural Diplomacy and Exhibitions," for which we invited art and design historians and historians from Denmark and the Nordic Countries to reflect on the role of recent research on cultural diplomacy in relation to exhibitions of art and design. Building on contacts and experiences from these events, we will organize events (including a Ph.D-workshop in Copenhagen) on the role of exhibitions and how to access exhibitions as research objects and a conference on exhibitions across the Iron Curtain in the

Baltic region (planned for 2023). A collaboration with art historians and institutions in Germany on new transcultural perspectives on art and exhibitions in the GDR will also be goal in the forthcoming project research.

Besides academic articles on selected cases study of the project, Kristian Handberg will work on a monograph providing an overview of Danish art and exhibition activities during the Cold War. Possibilities for a curatorial presentation of the project's material will also be taken into consideration.