A call for papers, issued for the “Socialist Realism and World Literary History” panel at the recent Annual Conference of the American Comparative Literature Association, held in Vancouver in April 2011, claimed boldly:

Our goal is to argue for socialist realism as a global culturo-aesthetic phenomenon by extending it beyond its original geographic base in Eastern Europe and away from its historically proscribed reputation as a propaganda machine. . . . Socialist realism is not dead, even if it long ago ceased to be dominant in Eastern Europe. Its principles and aesthetic norms continue to be exercised in various ways today, just as they were long before the term “socialist realism” was coined. . . . We are looking for art and aesthetic theory from unexpected times and places that complicate our definitions of “political” or “committed” art and that challenge us—precisely from a world-literary stance—to renegotiate the relationships between art and propaganda, between artistic and political practice, and among Left-cultural movements alive globally in the past and today.

1 The panel was organized by Sarah E. Pickle and Ryan Culpepper, http://www.acla.org/acla2011/?p=628 (accessed 30 December 2010).
Part II · Moving Objects

The agency in the process of rethinking socialist realism as a global occurrence of politically engaged art, set against its usual reduction to a “red contagion” spread from Moscow, and as such doomed to oblivion, has been taken over here by literary scholars. From a world-art stance, however, significant new steps toward the critical reappraisal of socialist realism and its geography had already been proposed by a number of scholars, including Boris Groys, David Craven, and Julia Andrews, focusing on the former Soviet Union, as well as Mexico and China.  

For my own part, I was arguing for wider recognition to be given to the cultural hybridization between East and West during the period of the Cold War, and especially to the role played by the Western left in the process of the legitimization of socialist realism in East-Central Europe. Socialist realism, I claimed, might have been imposed onto the European People’s Democracies by Moscow, but it was validated, at least in Warsaw, via Paris, Rome and Mexico. This assertion was prompted by my “discovery” of a group of paintings by Western communist artists, which had been buried in the storage of the Warsaw National Museum since the 1950s. It included works by the most prominent warriors of the left, active in Italy and France, such as Renato Guttuso, Gabriele Mucchi, Giuseppe Zigaina, and Armando Pizzinato, as well as by André Fougeron and Boris Tiszlitsky.  

While forgotten and ignored in Poland, the same artists were attracting considerable attention from scholars and curators in the West, and were exhibited in major art galleries, such as Whitechapel or Tate Modern in London.  

Clearly, there were two separate narratives of realist art in the service of the Communist Party: a “heroic” one and a “criminal” one. The first had been developing within a stream of radical art history in the West, stressing social

---


4 This group also included paintings by Giuseppe Santomaso, Massimo Campigli, Barbaro Saverio, Bernard Lorjou, Paul Rebevyrolle, the Croatian Franjo Likar, the Serbian Stojan Ćelić, the Mexicans Ignazio Aquirre, Jeronimo Mateo and Naya Marquez, the Cuban Carmelo González, and the Indian artists Maqbool Fida Husain, Badri Narayan, Kattingeri Krishna Hebbar, and Vishnu Chinchalkar.

5 Cf. Guttuso (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1996) and the Art of Commitment room, with labels and texts by Matthew Gale, set up c. 2000 within the display theme History/Memory/Society at Tate Modern.
and political concern, antifascism and the anti-imperialist stance of Western communist art. The second, no doubt informed by the East-Central European experience of political captivity, denied all “artness” to socialist realist productions, and either condemned or mocked their social and political commitment as nothing but a sign of subjugation to the totalitarian reign.

Since the publication of my article, some of those works forgotten in the storage of the National Museum in Warsaw were carefully restored and included in a quasi-permanent display of art post-1945, set up in 2007. By accompanying Polish iconic images of the era, the paintings by Fougeron, Guttuso and Mucchi were now given a chance to testify to their role in the formation of the socialist realist art world in Poland. In this text, I want to return to this topic, focusing now less on the works themselves, and more on the mechanisms of artistic exchange, on the ways in which the networks of politically committed artists were manufactured in Europe at the end of the 1940s. Clearly, the most prominent role in the process of the cultural rapprochement between the Cold War political and cultural camps was played by Pablo Picasso, and the instrumentalization of his persona by the communist propaganda machine has recently generated considerable scholarly interest. At the same time, the impact made by other artists of the Western left in Eastern Europe remains relatively unexplored. If my first article paid special attention to André Fougeron, the leading artist of the French Communist Party, this text takes a closer look at Renato Guttuso, called by Theodor Adorno “the major representative of Italian socialist realism,” and the author of two paintings in the collections of the National Museum in Warsaw. Interestingly, neither of them had been widely accessible to the public before 2007, and, as I want to argue, it was Guttuso’s other forms of presence in the art world of communist Poland that proved more significant for the legitimation of socialist realism.

---


Part II · Moving Objects

Renato Guttuso holds a privileged status in Italy—with his art not only being discussed by art historians and critics, who keep comparing him to Michelangelo, Caravaggio and Picasso, but also widely written about by Italian intellectuals, including Alberto Moravia, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Andrea Camilleri. A founder of the Fronte nuovo delle arti, and a member of the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party from 1951, Guttuso was held to be the true model of the artist-activist, passionately believing in his function and mission, in society. For him, realism—unpolished, impatient and uncompromised—was the only form of artistic expression offering the alternative for the illegibility of modernism. In the words of Guttuso’s first Western monographer John Berger: “Sustained by a binding faith in his fellow men, he . . . has understood that the artist’s responsibility is not only for what his brush does to his canvas, but also for what his canvas does to those who gaze at it.”

If Guttuso’s reputation in Western Europe and America in the 1950s was limited because of his deliberate incompatibility with fashionable forms of modernism, and because of reservations toward his politics, his career in People’s Democracies flourished. Seized by the machinery of the propaganda and listed, next to Fougeron, Leopoldo Mendez, Willi Gropper, and Rockwell Kent, as one of the “progressive artists of the capitalist countries,” who were unmasking the true face of imperialism and the decadence of modernism as its tool, Guttuso became the bearer of the gaze of the Western communist, facilitating the approval of socialist realism’s political aims and its realist idiom. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the total number of exhibitions, catalogs, and monographs of Guttuso, published in Moscow, Leipzig, Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Bucharest and Warsaw outweighed the attention given to him in the West, and almost competed with the publicity he received in his native Italy. He was also awarded several state honors within the Com-

---

9 A selection of literature on Guttuso is given by the website Archivi Guttuso, http://www.guttuso.com/en/main_old.htm (accessed 30 December 2010). Guttuso’s Battle of the Ponte dell’Ammiraglio was recently acquired by the Uffizi for €750,000. See Antonio Natali, Guttuso agli Uffizi (Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa, 2005).
munist Bloc, including membership of the Deutsche Akademie der Künste in Berlin (from 1955), several state prizes, and the most prominent of all of them, the International Lenin Peace Prize, given to him during his grand retrospective in Moscow in 1972. And yet, Guttuso’s ubiquitous presence in Eastern Europe has not attracted scholarly attention so far, remaining a blind spot in the literature on the artist.14

Guttuso’s eventful career behind the Iron Curtain began with his participation in the International Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace. Held in Wrocław in 1948, it was a seminal event in the process of establishing an international network of politically committed artists, writers, scientists, and academics from all over the globe. Although it is said to have fixed the Cold War binaries, aligning modernism and freedom with the West, and mindless submission to Stalinist realism and totalitarian oppression with the East, yet, it is precisely the Wrocław Congress, with a range of accompanying events, and its long-standing repercussions for the Cold War cultures, which calls into question the established narratives of art post-1945.15 It assembled almost 500 intellectuals and luminaries in the sciences and politics, including Irène Joliot-Curie, Julian Huxley, J. P. Bernal, A. J. P. Taylor, and George Lukács; the poets and novelists Paul Eluard, Ilya Ehrenburg, Jorge Amado, Aimé Césaire, Max Frisch, and Anna Seghers; and artists such as Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, Leopoldo Mendez, and Feliks Topolski. Guttuso was appointed one of the four presidents of the congress. He did not give an official paper, but made himself known as an ardent promoter of realism, as expressed in a conversation with the French journalist Dominique Desanti, during which he pinned down Picasso, while praising the congress enthusiastically for opening contacts with the “democratic forces of the world.”16

---


16 “Je ne crois pas que Picasso doive continuer dans sa voie. Il ne semble pas le désirer d’ailleurs d’après ce qu’il nous disait l’autre soir. … Il m’a fallu venir à Wrocław pour voir clair en moi. Pour moi, ce Congrès a quelque chose de magique. C’est une révélation. Mon premier contact avec les forces démocratiques du monde. J’ai rencontré des artistes étrangers en Italie depuis la Libération, mai pas 500 intellectuels de 45 pays, pas Picasso et Fernand Léger. Et puis, je ne connaissais les Soviétiques que par oui-dire. Maintenant je peux par-
The contacts made by Guttuso in Wrocław turned out to be very fruitful indeed for establishing his fame in the Communist Bloc, including Poland, but it is difficult to ascertain today whether he visited this country at all again. Guttuso’s presence in Poland—before his large retrospective in 1954—was mostly expressed through his written statements, translations of his texts, as well as reproductions rather than through his paintings or further personal encounters. Unlike fellow communist Picasso—who was not in the habit of writing articles on art policies, nor was he inclined to vilify formalism—Guttuso was the artist-activist, as capable with his brush as with a pen. His radical declarations, delivered in a sharp rhetoric of militant Communism, aptly served the task of defining the vices of “antiformalism” and the virtues of “realism.” Often quoted or paraphrased in *Przegląd Artystyczny* (The arts review), the major doctrinaire art periodical in Poland, Guttuso’s statements, turned into slogans, were heavily instrumentalized in a wide-ranging campaign for a wholesale conversion of all Polish arts into socialist realism.

A typical example was an anonymous piece introducing Guttuso as an exemplary “Artist as the Peace Fighter” published in the autumn of 1950 in a special issue of *Przegląd Artystyczny* produced just in time for the Second World Peace Congress in Warsaw, in a section devoted to “progressive artists” in capitalist countries. It all began from Guttuso’s own declaration, quoted without references, equating art, in a truly avant-garde way, with the task of rebuilding the world: “I am an artist and a communist. In my mind, both of those terms are inseparable. I deeply believe that art is one of the tools for the transformation of contemporary reality and serves the struggle for a better future of humankind.”¹⁷ What followed was a blunt profile of Guttuso as a “Peace Warrior,” fully committed to the struggle against “abstraction and other versions of formalist movements of bourgeois art, including the decadent tendencies in his own work.” To complete this characteristic of a paradigmatic communist artist, it also included the assertion of Guttuso’s debt to Soviet art, the claim that was to be subsequently vigorously denied by the...
11. Remapping Socialist Realism

artist himself.¹⁸ This brief text of half a page must have served as the recommendation of Guttuso to the Peace Prize, which he was to receive during the Warsaw Peace Congress.¹⁹ It was illustrated with a reproduction of one of his largest paintings, the Occupation of Uncultivated Lands in Sicily (1949–50), acquired by the Deutsche Akademie der Künste in Berlin. It is likely that an oil sketch to this composition, with a peasant waving a red flag, in the collections of the National Museum in Warsaw, was presented as a gift from the artist to the Polish authorities on the occasion of his first World Peace Prize award.²⁰ The sketch, broadly painted and bearing all the features of violent expressionism, could not possibly have been classified as keeping within the antiformalist frame of socialist realism and, apparently, was kept away from the public until the 1960s.

In spite of the obvious gap between Guttuso’s verbal definitions of realism and his own use of the idiom, or, in other words, between Guttuso as constructed by Przegląd Artystyczny and Guttuso as defined by his paintings, he was soon commissioned to illustrate a novel by the Polish author Julian Stryjkowski, Running to Fragalà, which described the post-WWII revolutionary revolts in Sicily. The standards of the socialist realist fini expected from its painting were much more relaxed for lesser media, including also book illustrations, thus Guttuso’s drawings, executed in much the same abrupt manner, must have been accepted without any major reservations. The novel, first issued in 1951, was republished twice, each time in a new graphic layout, earning the artist another Polish prize, awarded by the state in 1952.²¹ On this particular occasion, Przegląd Artystyczny included Guttuso’s article, “On the Way to Realism” (1952), which had first appeared in the Italian communist journal Società.²² It argued strongly, even if in a circular fashion, for the unconditional demise of formalism for the sake of the courageous ges-

---

¹⁸ “How and how much I have tried to work from reality and how different was and is my search from the flat and illustrative mannerism of the Soviets and of the so-called French realists, should have been obvious to everyone,” said Guttuso in conversation with the American critic James Thrall Soby, in Guttuso (New York: ACA Gallery—Heller Gallery, 1958): 3–4.


²⁰ In Calabria, 72.5 x 96 cm, signed “Guttuso ’50” and described on the reverse: “Guttuso Studio per un quadro sull’occupazione di terre in Calabria”; Crispolti, Catalogo ragionato, vol. 1, cat. no. 50/67.


ture of realism. “Realism is not a school, not a period in the history of art, ... but a permanent factor in all its periods of enhancing the vitality of art after the period of stylization, ossification, decadence,” claimed Guttuso, moving onto a merciless vivisection of the modernist search for the autonomy of art, which—even if first motivated by the rejection of nineteenth-century academicism—soon established its own academic repertory of motifs, “releasing a rotten smell and the dust of plaster among guitars and plates with fruit.”

The major charge against modernism was that it “cut itself off from the public, the ordinary viewer, the man from the street, be it a bourgeois or a proletarian.” In contrast, “the artists moving along the path of realism believe that a work of art should be understandable for all, at least partly. . . . This aspect of the work commonly accessible is its contents.”

Guttuso’s arguments, metaphors and judgments kept influencing Polish art criticism until the end of the socialist realist hegemony in Poland. For instance, the phrases from his review of the 1954 Venice Biennale—in which he unmasked surrealism as a “glorification of low pornography of a certain Delvaux,” as well as condemning Mirò for “giving up to a refined and cheap price”—were almost mirrored in another report on the Biennale in the same issue, written by Juliusz Starzyński, the chief “ideologue” of art politics of the time. He also complained about a “distasteful pornography” of Delvaux, as well as the “frivolity and coquettishness” of Mirò. Interestingly, Guttuso’s review opened from the reproduction of his own Boogie-woogie, shown at the Biennale, a composition that must have been devised by him to prove the superiority of the immediacy of realism over abstraction. It represented an animated group of young people (in fact his fellow artists) enjoying the pleasures of the American dance, while a lifeless image of Mondrian’s abstract interpretation of boogie-woogie hangs neglected on a wall at the back. It is hardly possible to assess today whether the wit of Guttuso’s visual argument was grasped by the Przegląd Artystyczny’s readers, but its power seems to have been undermined by reproductions of the very paintings he mocked in his re-

---

24 Ibid., 58.
11. Remapping Socialist Realism

Figure 11.1.
view, by Mirò, Delvaux, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, Magritte, and others. As it happened, by summer 1954, orthodox socialist realism was already losing its hegemony in Poland, and the reproductions of those castigated works of art were offering a chance to spy on the forbidden, and much tempting, fruit of Western modernism.

And yet, despite the vanishing power of socialist realist verbal rhetoric, when Guttuso’s works were finally brought to Poland and seen, the energy and immediacy of his visual language were not lost on the viewers. His exhibition—which toured at least six Eastern European cities, and included several of his large compositions, such as the *Battle for the Ponte Ammiraglio*—was staged to huge acclaim at the Central Exhibition Office Zachęta in Warsaw and later in Katowice (known as Stalinogród at the time). Comparing him with his Polish contemporaries, the young art historian Ryszard Stanisławski, who curated the show, wrote in *Przegląd Artystyczny*: “Guttuso is undoubtedly more colorful, more dynamic, more passionate and courageous in his painterly choices.” Even thirty years later, Guttuso’s art was remembered by the critics as a much more agreeable alternative to the Soviet formula of artistic correctness, and mentioned among the remarks on the impact of French figuralists and the vitality of Mexicans.

Considering this success, it comes as a surprise that one of Guttuso’s largest compositions, the seductively colorful *Calabrians at the Piazza di Spagna* (1952), which was shown in Warsaw and acquired by the Polish Ministry of Art and Culture after its long tour through Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, and Sofia, has remained a little-known piece in the artist’s œuvre (Plate 11.1). In the catalogue raisonné of Guttuso’s paintings by Enrico Crispolti, it is labeled as the *Immigrati a Roma*, a title that emphasizes the work’s critical edge, and is classified as one of the most mature accomplishments of “‘il realismo socialista’ guttusiano,” paying attention to the drama of contemporary people. In Crispolti’s words, this stage, revealing some tangential points with the Zhdanovian formulas of socialist realism, was characterized by the precision of

---

29 *Calabresi a Piazza di Spagna*, 1952, 233.5 x 144 cm, signed and dated ‘Guttuso 52.’
the detail, descriptiveness, a certain emotionalism, and above all, by the documentary drive, the imperative to record the events of the artist’s time in the visual language, simple and unadorned, and immediately communicative. As he adds, this particular phase was marked by the debates about the presence of Italian realism at the 1952 Venice Biennale, and corresponded closely with views expressed by Guttuso in his article on realism, which, as I mentioned above, was republished in Poland. And indeed, the painting strikes one as the most paradigmatic “socialist realist” work by Guttuso, the closest to his profile constructed by Przegląd Artystyczny, representing “the reality of the poorly dressed,” whose life-size bodies occupy almost the whole canvas. In fact, the painting derives its message from the contrast between the plain and worn out clothes of the working-class family from the Italian south, arriving in search of work in the center of Rome—and the affluent lifestyles promoted by the capital, where young people, fashionably dressed, have apparently nothing else to do but sit and converse on the Spanish steps. The empathy with, and the elevation of, the underprivileged, the scorn for the “chattering classes,” as well as the expressiveness of the bodies and bold colors show similarities to the ways in which the Soviet formula of socialist realism was at the same time “personalized” by the Polish artist Andrzej Wróblewski. Like Guttuso, he believed in the social function of art and in the imperative of its legibility, while not renouncing the expressive potential of the modernist flatness and of form itself. Although the links between the artists have been recently made into a topic worthy of investigation by Polish curators, the importance of the Calabrians at the Piazza di Spagna for the international socialist realist movement is still to be discussed.

A separate study of Guttuso’s career in the Communist Bloc as a whole, forming an interesting example of the porosity of the Cold War boundaries in Europe and confirming the transnationality of socialist realism, is clearly needed. That, in turn, engenders the project to remap socialist realism, acknowledging its presence, its legacy and its persistence in various countries,

Part II · Moving Objects

various regimes and at various times, all over the globe. So far, attempts have been made to map out, as well as to write about, the avant-garde in Eastern Europe. The East.Art.Map project by Irwin, as well as Piotr Piotrowski’s seminal book on the Eastern European avant-garde, are significant achievements in this field.\(^{33}\) What has not been done yet is to rewrite and remap the other side of the avant-garde, the major and most effective artistic idiom for this geographical area, the movement that contributed just as much to the construction of Eastern Europe as a region.