

The New York Times

September 25, 2013

Pinpricks, but No Dagger in Putinland

By STEVEN LEE MYERS



The Irish artist Tom Molloy's assemblage of images from protests around the world, including Russia, at the main exhibition site of the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art.

MOSCOW — There were some complications when the Conceptual artist John Baldessari brought his latest works to Russia as part of the fifth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. First, the title of his project, “Double Take,” did not translate easily into Russian.

“We decided it was kind of crazy to come up with a title that makes no sense,” said the curator of the Baldessari show, Kate Fowle, who settled on a new one: “1+1=1.”

More troubling, two collectors refused to lend works by Mr. Baldessari for the show. They cited concerns about the political environment in Russia, like the granting of asylum to the security-file leaker Edward J. Snowden, the adoption of a law against gay “propaganda” and the prosecution of Pussy Riot, the punk performance act.

“I’ve had no problems at all personally,” Mr. Baldessari, 82, said in an interview at Garage, a gallery here in Gorky Park that is considered the city’s premier center of contemporary art. “But I know the climate is there.”

lora reynolds gallery

The biennale, which opened last week and runs through Oct. 20, encapsulates that climate. It is modern and energetic, flush with corporate sponsorship and eagerly attended, yet seemingly wary of political and bureaucratic land mines that can attract the wrath of the authorities in Vladimir V. Putin's Russia.

From its start in 2005, the biennale has gingerly steered a course between the organizers' ambition to make this city an international center of contemporary art and the reflexive conservatism of a country where the line between what is acceptable and unacceptable can be a fine one.

Only a month before the biennale opened, officials in St. Petersburg seized four paintings from a gallery on the eve of the annual meeting of the Group of 20 nations. One depicted Mr. Putin in a woman's pink nightie, styling the hair of his onetime protégé, Prime Minister Dmitri A. Medvedev, who was shown in a bra and panties. The artist, Konstantin Altunin, promptly fled to France. By contrast, none of the artists chosen to exhibit in the biennale have used the opportunity to confront the issues of the day directly.

In unusually frank remarks, Ivan I. Demidov, a deputy minister of culture, described the ministry's sponsorship of the biennale as both an honor and a burden. "It seems to me that when the government, a conservative structure by definition, supports the pursuit, especially in such sensitive societal topics of culture and art, especially modern art, there is a certain degree of risk," he said last week at a preview. "Perhaps even for both sides."

The curator of this year's event, Catherine de Zegher, is no stranger to collisions between the art world and politics. She served for nine years as the director of the Drawing Center in New York before resigning in 2006 after officials scuttled plans for the center to relocate to the former World Trade Center site. A furor had arisen over the content of some of the Drawing Center's exhibitions, with critics arguing that the center was antipatriotic and did not belong at ground zero.

"I know how important it is not to jeopardize a project," Ms. de Zegher, a curator and writer now based in Belgium, said in an interview.

The biennale's budget is just over \$3 million, 55 percent of which was provided by the federal ministry of culture. The Moscow city government chipped in about 10 percent, though it plans to recoup part of that through ticket sales. Corporate sponsors, including Alfa Bank, the Russian telecommunications company Beeline, Hyundai and Samsung, covered the rest.

In the biennale's first five days, more than 18,000 people streamed into the main exhibition site at Manezh, a historic riding academy a few hundred yards from the Kremlin that became a museum in the 1950s. Dozens of tandem exhibitions are also under way in galleries across Moscow, including Mr. Baldessari's at Garage, which features 44 of his paintings.

For the main exhibition, Ms. de Zegher assembled works by 72 artists from around the world. The Manezh building's central hall has been turned into a maze of galleries with views through the south windows of the Kremlin's towers.

The biennale's theme is "Bolshe Sveta," or "More Light," which Ms. de Zegher described as a reconsideration of time and space in a world where both seem increasingly encroached upon by technology and exploitation.

Mr. Demidov, who banned the screening of a Serbian film titled “Clip” last year because of its depictions of drug use and sex, has endorsed the theme, saying that it “especially warms our bureaucratic souls.”

At a time when Russian prohibitions on free expression have drawn international criticism, including calls for protests or boycotts of the Olympic Games in Sochi next February, Ms. de Zegher said she avoided any overtly confrontational topics. “There’s nothing they stopped me from doing,” she said, “but some things took negotiation. I think there is more self-censoring than censoring.”

At its Web site, the state television channel, Kultura, has praised the biennale for what it called “family values, positive mood, unlimited fantasy.” Its review said, “Nothing negative, provocative, sensational — everything that one expects from actual art.”

Others, though, complained that the event sacrificed artistic potency for the sake of expediency. Dmitri Pilikin, a curator and art critic from St. Petersburg, has sharply questioned the organizers’ choices, which he considers anodyne.

“Contemporary art is occupied namely with negation,” he said. “To do a project which makes such a positive conclusion is a risk, because the question begs itself: How authentic is it? Is it not an attempt to recreate some sort of Stalinist glamour kitsch for us?”

Ms. de Zegher disputed that, although she acknowledged that she prefers subtlety over outright aggression. “I don’t like provocation, actually, because it stops everything,” she said. She pointed out that the exhibition examined crucial issues of the day, from environmentalism to feminism, personal freedom to political freedom.

Some politically themed works are so low key that they conceivably could be overlooked. The Irish artist Tom Molloy, for example, has mounted tiny photographic cutouts of protests from around the world on a long shelf in what looks like a massive protest march in miniature. An observant visitor will find an image in the piece of a woman wearing a mask saying “No vote” and signs declaring “Free Pussy Riot” and “Putin Must Die” from protests in 2011-12.

“If you look carefully, you can see a lot of questioning and critique going on,” Ms. de Zegher said. “It’s for the people who look.”

Mr. Baldessari’s works have no direct connection to the political controversies here, but he found himself addressing the issue of an artist’s place in an authoritarian society at a forum organized by Garage, where he was joined by the artist Ilya Kabakov.

In their hourlong debate, Mr. Kabakov recalled the desperate urgency of young artists in the Soviet Union, where he lived and worked until he emigrated in 1987, eventually settling in the United States. He recalled visiting Soviet museums that, despite stifling conformity and censorship, forged a collective ideal for artists.

“They were tiny islands of culture and civilization that still managed to survive behind the Iron Curtain,” Mr. Kabakov said. “You should never forget the atmosphere of fear, or tribalism. It was the essence of our life.”

Mr. Baldessari said he was struck by the description of fear: “I think what artists fear in the U.S. is not being noticed, and nobody caring.”