

Fourth Moscow Biennale all about new media art – review round up

BIENNIAL CONTEMPORARY ART EVENTS RUSSIA

The Fourth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art gathered together an impressive selection of well-known and newer international artists with a distinct focus on new technology. *Art Radar* presents key ideas from commentators and critics.

Although [contemporary art is still seen to be struggling in Russia](#), the Fourth Moscow Biennale, themed “Rewriting Worlds”, sparked discussion as well as attracting large crowds. The fair featured artists from more than 33 countries and ran in various venues in and outside Moscow from 22 September to 30 October 2011. Special projects for the Biennale even extended as far as Kiev and London. Below are some of the key themes and topics shared by the critics and writers who attended the exhibitions.

[REMOTEWORDS](#) by Achim Mohné and Uta Kopp is a long-term art project that began in 2007. Messages are written on roofs and virtual programs like Google Earth give them a worldwide coverage. Watch a video of the display above, or [watch it on Youtube](#).

Interactive artworks a challenge for audiences

Curator [Peter Weibel](#) is a specialist in new media art, so it is not surprising that the 2011 edition of the Biennale had a strong focus on this medium. To make his curatorial stance clear to critics, Weibel stated in [a press release prior to the event](#),

We won't exclude any form of artistic expression. ... That is exactly what I wanted to talk about: 'technological fairness'. We do not reject painting, nor do we reject new media technology.

The Biennale will show painting, but in a rather uncommon form. Works created on a computer are just another artistic practice and have the right to exist, too. Therefore, the Biennale should be an exhibition where all techniques are given fair and equal treatment, new media as well as objects, sculptures and installations.

Work by Russian group Electroboutique. Courtesy of Stefan van Drake.

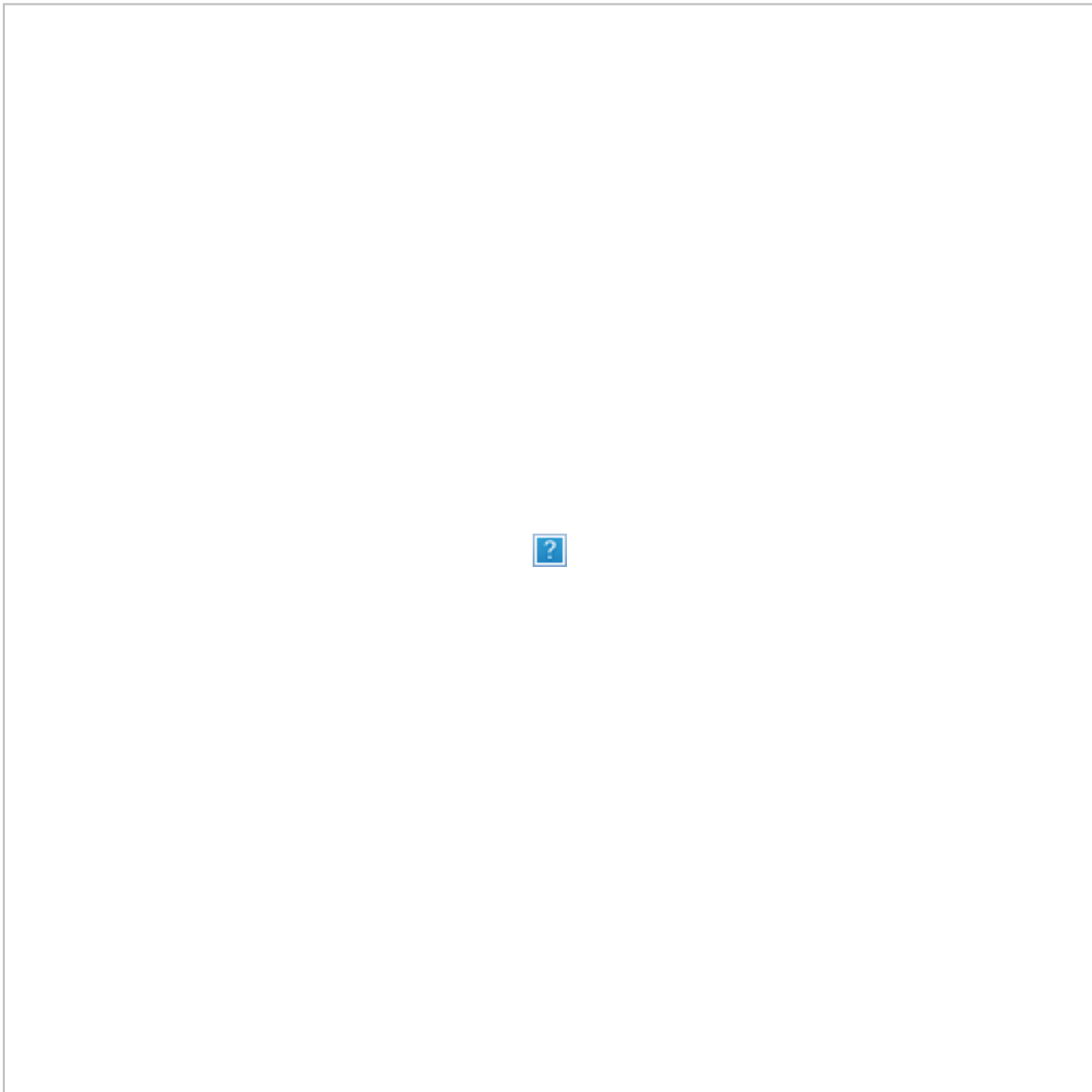


Work by Russian art group Electroboutique. Image credit: Stefan van Drake.

So what did the public think of the execution of this curatorial angle? According to online news site [Russia Beyond the Headlines](#):

The main principle of this biennale was interactivity. The works were not just for looking at: visitors had to touch them, talk to

them, jump in front of them, get inside them, step over them, tread on them and even stamp on them. For most museumgoers, this experience was both unfamiliar and uncomfortable.



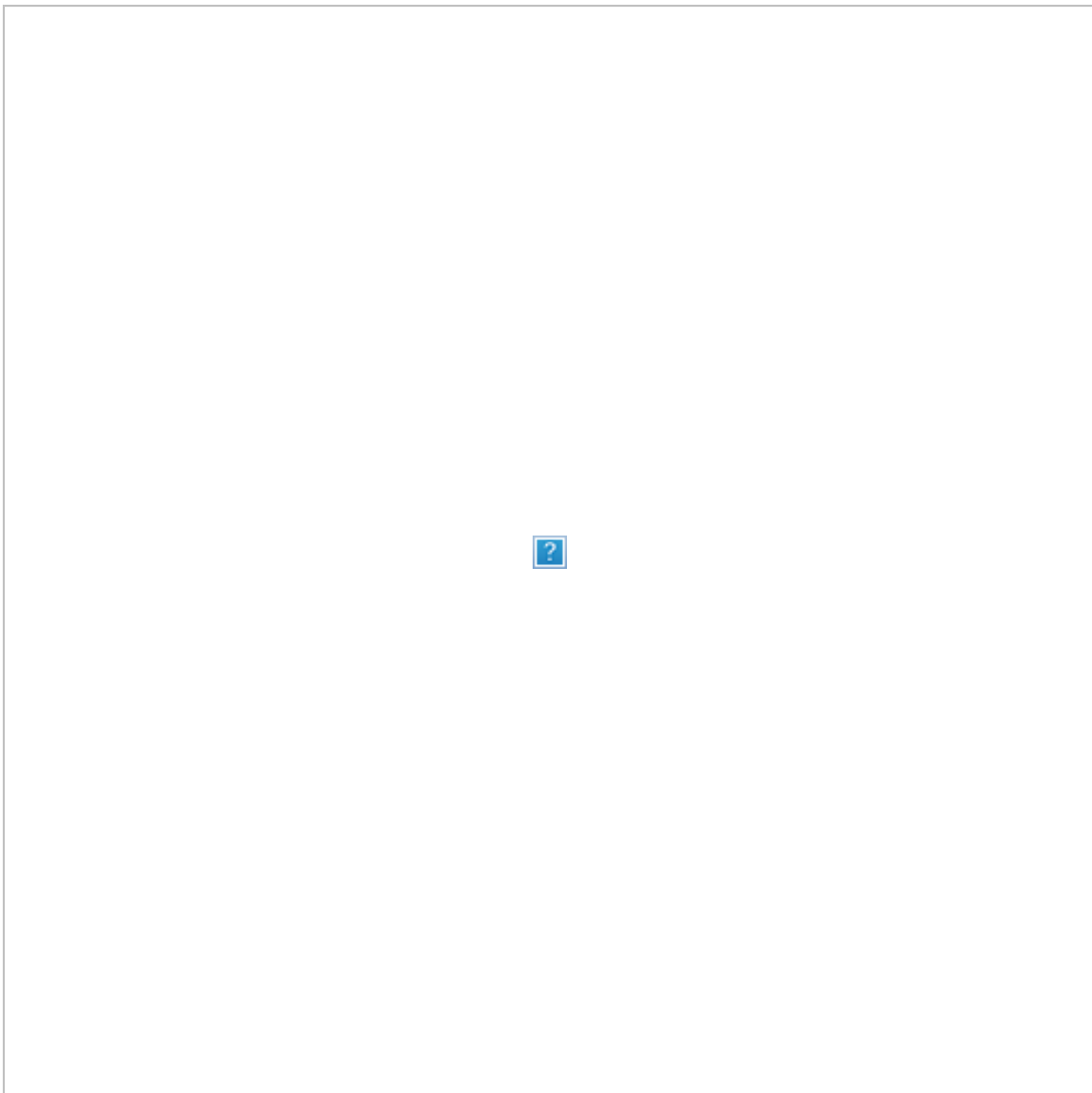
Public viewing an installation by Split Nik, as shown at the 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. Image credit: Split Nik.

The publication [added that audience numbers were high](#), which they attributed to the use of technology in this edition.

The Fourth [Moscow] Biennale was successful in terms of the attention it received from visitors, and rightly so. The exhibition's technological and interactive orientation resonated with Muscovites, who are crazy about technical toys, and the themes

that Weibel presented are also local favourites. These included: contacts with extraterrestrial civilizations ([Susan Hiller's](#) sound installation [Witnesses](#)), terrorism ([The Garden of Error and Decay](#) by Michael Bielicky and Kamila B. Richter), fashionable Asian cinema ([Isaac Julien](#)), oil (several artists have touched on this theme) and traffic jams ([Ai Weiwei](#)).

Although there was a strong focus on new media and technology in the 2011 Biennale, other mediums and styles, such as paintings and drawings, were featured. Weibel stated that it was important that all the works were able to speak the language of modernity and that they combined together to reflect the [concept of the project](#).



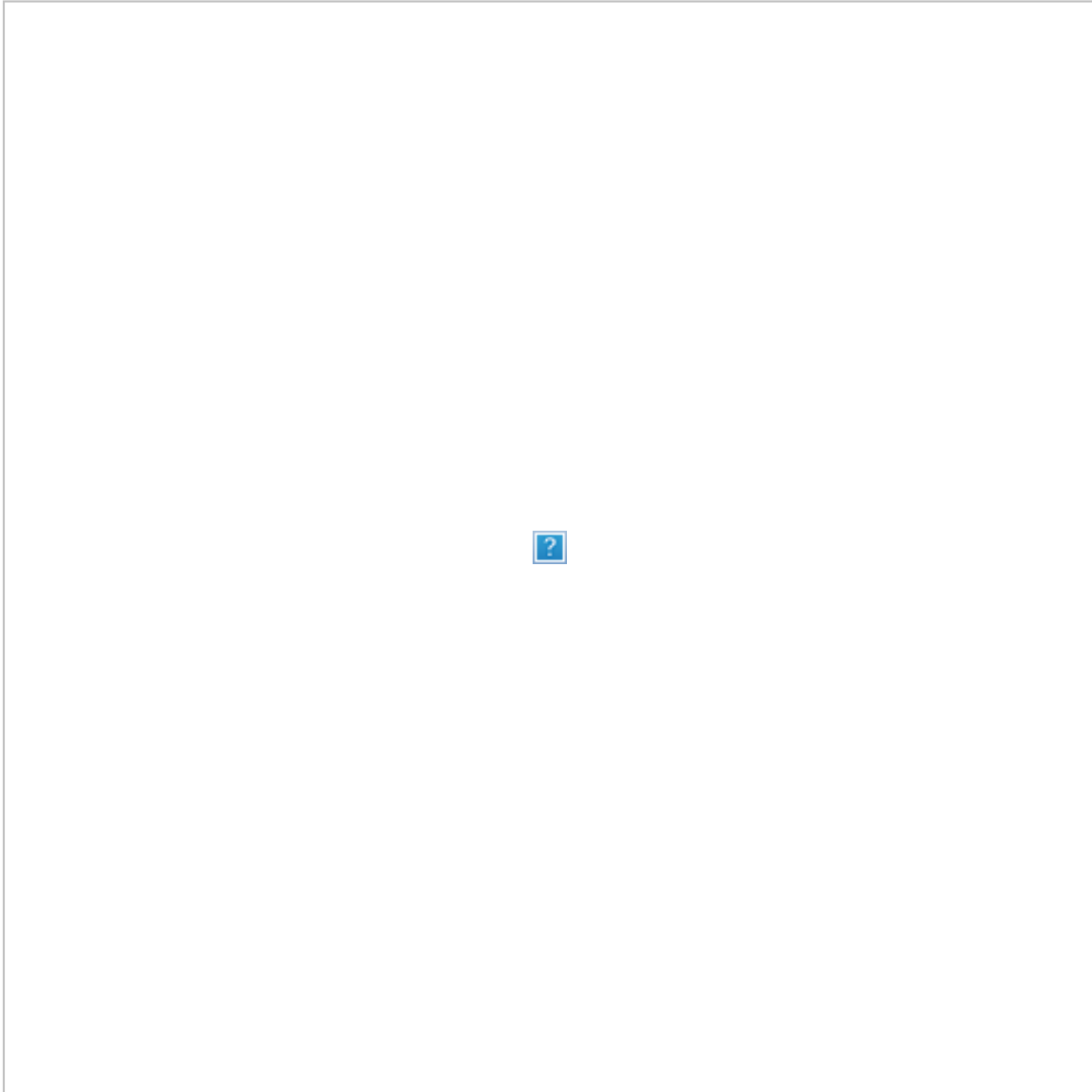
Visitors watch the animated video projection on free-standing sculptures; 'Circuit Square' by

German artist *Evol*, shown during the 4th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. Image credit: EPA/SERGEI ILNITSKY.

Stand out artworks: flying machines, silver dogs

A much discussed work of the Biennale was a project entitled [REMOTEWORDS](#) (2007, ongoing) by artists [Uta Kopp](#) and [Achim Mohne](#). *REMOTEWORDS* consisted of a Google map of Moscow covering the exhibition space floor at the TSUM Art Foundation. Viewers could magnify the city from above using a remote-controlled drone which projected the images onto an iPad and projector screen.

Another work that garnered a lot of attention from commentators was an installation work called *Houndington* (2007) by Indian artist [T.V. Santhosh](#). *Houndington* showed thirty silver life-sized dogs with red digital clocks accompanied by text that told the story of a boy who has suffered from the effects of exposure to radiation.



'Houndingdown' by Indian artist T.V. Santhosh as seen at the 4th Moscow biennale of contemporary art. Image credit: EPA/SERGEI ILNITSKY.

Another digitally inspired creation was a large video installation of Czech artist Michael Bielicky, called [The Garden of Error and Decay](#). It encouraged viewers to interact with the work by shooting at the piece and thereby eliminating or multiplying current world disasters, which are also influenced by the stock exchange and Twitter updates. As reported by [Reuters](#), Bielicky said of why he chose the new media format, "It's a metaphor showing how helpless we all are. It is a data driven narrative. Like in real life, things that happen actually take place in another sphere."

Another exhibition that dealt with the challenges of modern society was *Composition 911* [presented by Olga Sviblova](#), held at the Multimedia Art

Museum Moscow. This exhibition considered the environmental, social and economic challenges our society faces and explored the idea of optimism in the face of fear and terror.

The Russian context

The troublesome economic climate and the challenges Russia has faced in its attempts to foster contemporary art, such as "[infrastructure shortfalls and a lack of funding for art education](#)", were brought to the fore in some of the works on show at the Biennale. Biennale commissioner Joseph Backstein was quoted by *Reuters* as saying, "Life for an artist in Russia is not easy. Moscow's contemporary art world is still very marginal compared to other world capitals."

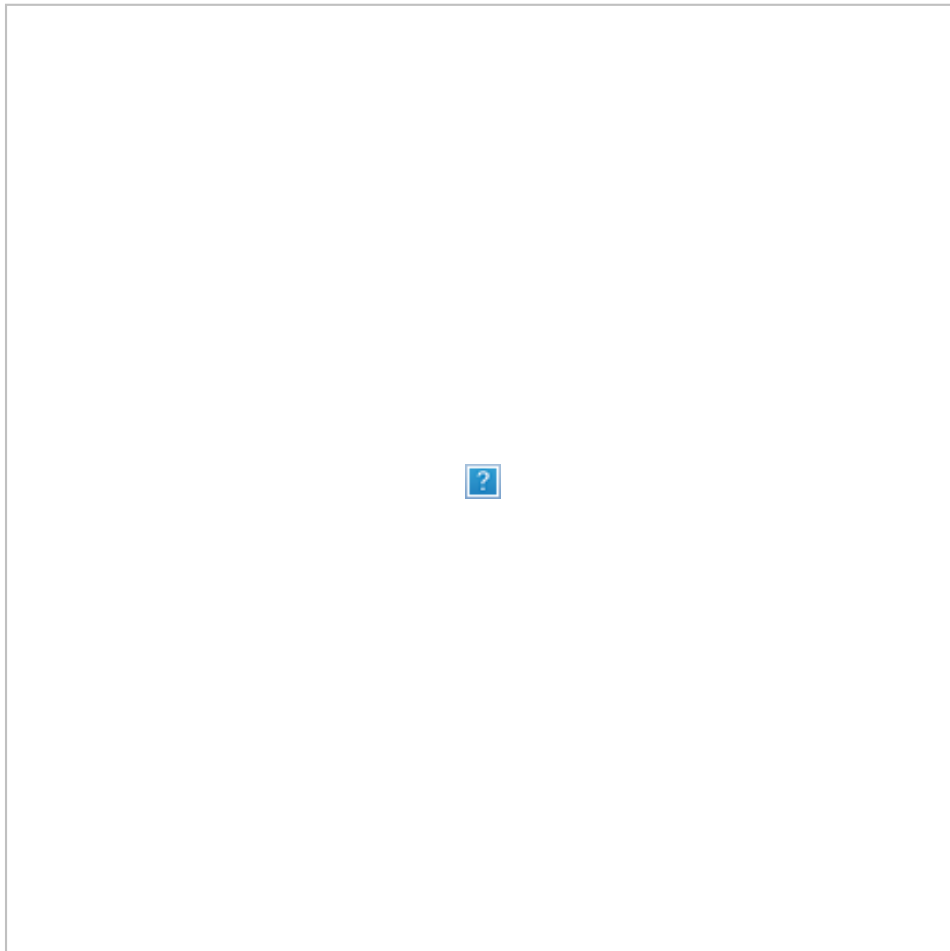
Installation of works by Electroboutique. Courtesy of Electroboutique.



Installation of works by Electroboutique. Courtesy of Electroboutique.

The [Biennale Foundation](#) states that there has been growth in the contemporary art scene in Russia since the establishment of the Moscow Biennale in 2005. This was supported by news magazine [Russian Mind](#):

Since the first biennial started in 2005, evolution has been monitored and the inclusion of other Russian cities has been pivotal in Backstein's agenda: 'It is not an exaggeration to say that since the 1st Moscow Biennale in 2005, Russian society's interest in contemporary art and its culture has grown, and this culture now constitutes a significant part of Russian society's value system.'



Screenshot of 'Allegoria Sacra (The Purgatory)' (2011) by Russian group AES+F, third part of a video trilogy which also included 'Last Riot (The Hell)' (2007) and 'The Feast of Trimalchio (The Paradise)' (2009).

However, according to *The Art Newspaper*, [in 2011 the Biennale had fewer political works](#) than had been included in previous years.

Several works on display at Artplay were among the few in the biennale to reflect the current economic and political climate, including P.I.G.S. (2011) by Paris-based artist collective Claire Fontaine, a map of the debt-ridden countries of Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain assembled out of 360,000 matches that were burned at the end of the Biennale, and Earth Report, 2010, a series of mini-installations by South Korean artist Kijong Zin, which focus on the geopolitical and ecological threats of globalisation. Disappointingly, anticipated events such as the arrival of Ai Weiwei, the Chinese dissident artist, who was invited to attend, did not materialise.

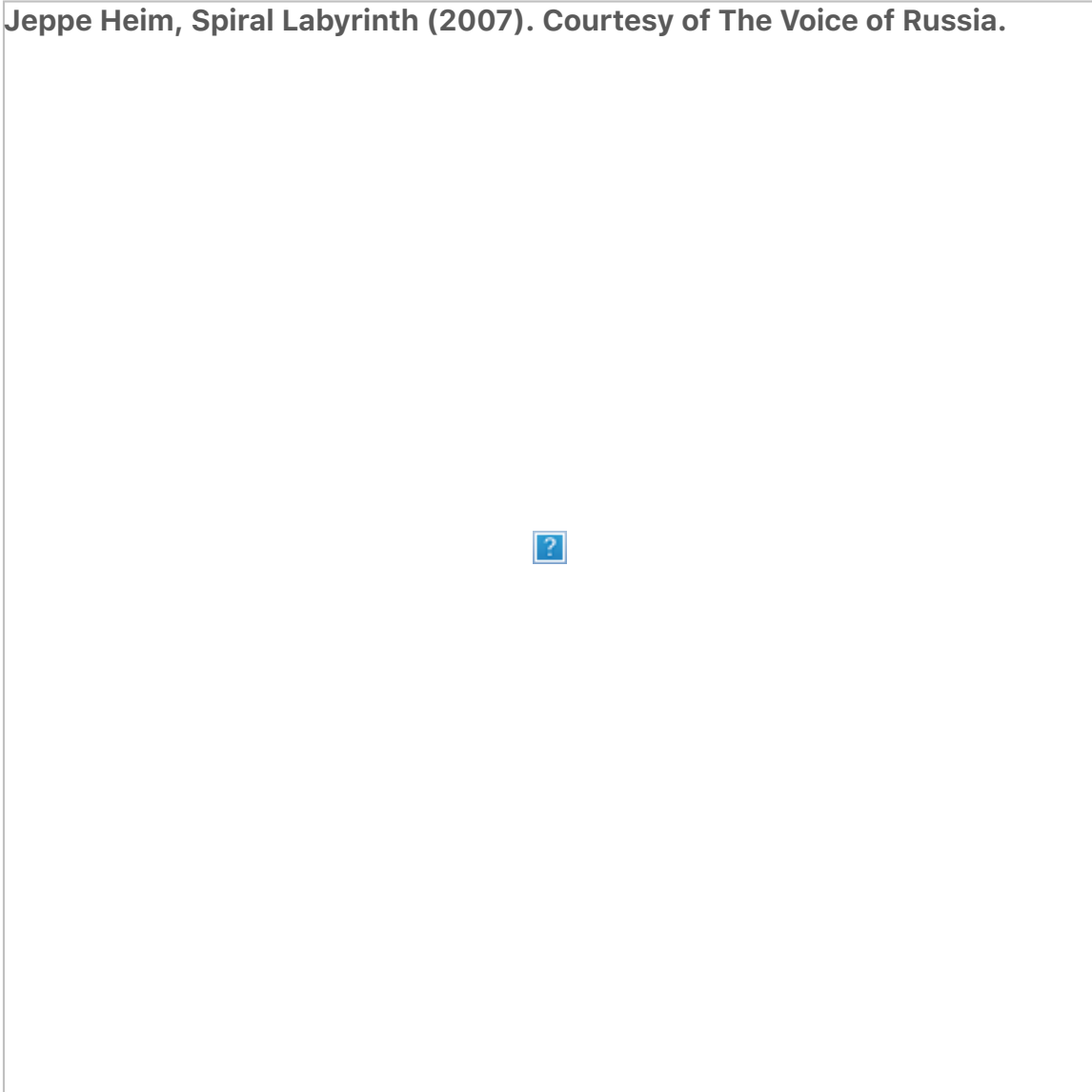
Controversy

What sparked much debate during the Biennale was the controversy with performance artist cooperative Voina. [Voina asked artists to boycott the Biennale](#) after [Kiss the Cops](#) was selected to be exhibited under the name of Voina. The work was created by two artists, Pyotr Verzilov and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, who are no longer part of the cooperative. The artwork included in the Biennale was an intervention where the artist/activists forced kisses on policewomen on duty in the Moscow metro.

In their response to Voina posted on the Internet on Sunday, the organisers [of the Biennale] refused to withdraw the work, saying that Verzilov and Tolokonnikova claim they have the same right to the name Voina as the other members, and that the organisers have no way of influencing the names of participants.

[St Petersburg Times](#)

Jeppe Heim, *Spiral Labyrinth* (2007). Courtesy of The Voice of Russia.



Jeppe Heim, 'Spiral Labyrinth', 2007.

Engaging audiences with 'gadget art'

Though opinions were divided, the overall impression of the Biennale was that it spoke successfully to audiences and that it is developing with each edition. Said [The Art Newspaper](#),

The biennale divided critics and commentators. Some described the exhibitions, curated by Peter Weibel, the director of the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, which focuses on multi-disciplinary works, as bland or off-the-mark in artistic terms. 'Maybe it's connected with the fact that people think you need to show something lightweight in Moscow, not burden it with

anything too serious,' said Milena Orlova, an art critic, who noted that another commentator had described it as a kind of festival of 'gadget art', with many interactive works.

More on the Fourth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art

The 2011 edition of the Moscow Biennale was [themed "Rewriting Worlds"](#) and featured 64 artists and 14 groups of artists from more than 33 countries. It ran in various venues in and outside Moscow from 22 September to 30 October 2011. The Biennale was curated by newly commissioned [Peter Weibel](#), artist, curator, media theorist and Director of the Centre for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany. Commenting on [the final list of artists of the Main project in the event press release](#) Weibel said,

As you can see, we have made a selection of artists ranging from Chile to China, from Ukraine to the USA, from Austria to Indonesia. That means a real global selection of contemporary art. These artists are ... making an important contribution to the transformations of contemporary art.

The main project was held at two venues, the ArtPlay Design Center and the TSUM Art Foundation, both situated in central Moscow. There were an additional [six special guest artists](#), as well as 69 special projects and [parallel programme](#) at different venues. The Biennale expanded to include [special projects in Yekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Kiev, and London](#).

CW/KN/HH

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