Dimitry Vilensky (b. 1964) is an artist, writer and founding member of the group *Chto delat?/What is to be done?* and serves as the editor of its magazine. *Chto delat?/What is to be done?* is a platform that was initiated in 2003 by a collective of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers with the goal of merging political theory, art, and activism. Vilensky regularly contributes to the group's online magazine and he is member of the editorial board of the Art Journal. His most recent work, created with Tsaplya [Olga Egorova], was a video entitled "Russian woods" (2012) that was published on the group's website [www.chtodelat.org]. Exhibitions of his work and that of *Chto delat?/What is to be done?* include: "The Lesson on Dis-Consent", Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2011), "Chto Delat? Perestroika: Twenty Years After: 2011-1991", Kölnische Kunstverein (2011), "Study, study and Act again", Moderna Gelerija (Mala Galerija), Ljubliana (2011), "What is to be done between tragedy and farce?", Smart Project Space, Amsterdam (2011). He has also participated in number of group shows, including: "Truth is concrete: A 24/7 marathon camp", Sterische Herbst, Graz (2012), "Moving forward, counting backwards. Eastern Europe Palestra", MUAC, Mexico City (2012), "Living as Form", Creative Time, New York (2011), "Ostalgia", New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2011). Vilensky lives and works in St. Petersburg.

Artur Żmijewski (b. 1966) is an artist, primarily working with photography and film. He studied in the sculpture class of Professor Grzegorz Kowalski at the Warsaw Art Academy from 1990 to 1995, as well as the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam in 1999. In 2005, he represented Poland at the 51st Art Biennale in Venice showing a video "Repetition" – a reenactment of the famous experiment of Phillip G. Zimbardo . He is member of the Polish political movement "Krytyka Polityczna" and the art director of the magazine of the same name. He curated the 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art in 2012, which developed his position on social activism, formulated earlier in his manifesto *The Applied Social Arts* (2007). He lives and works in Warsaw.

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DMITRY VILENSKI
ARTUR ŻMIJEWSKI

FUCKING WINTER OUTSIDE

Did you hear that we have established *Chto delat*? to reach a communist revolution by 2005? Unfortunately, in 2005 we didn't reach it. But we are not departing, either to the moon or the Van Abbe Museum. Would you call me opportunist instead of revolutionist? That kind of categorization doesn't help to get out of the situation.

AŻ: Do you know any Russian brands?

DV: Vodka. Vodka is Russian. This radio and that lamp are from Soviet times.

AŻ: Yes, and petrol…

DV: … the whole of Europe is depending on Russian gas. Anyway I am sure that Europe will work it out soon. Then Russia will really wake up! I would predict some kind of Arab Spring situation in Russia. Can you imagine Putin in 12 years? He will be about 74. In the next 20 years Russia will be steadily running out of resources…

AŻ: What do you mean by saying that "Russia will wake up"? What art can do in this situation? Do you have any ideas as to what can be done? What is to be done? *Chto delat?*

DV: I think right now we have to impose some modest tasks on ourselves, rather than diving into radical leftism…

AŻ: Modest or soft?

DV: Not soft, but modest. For example, we should insist on a certain radicalism in thinking. I am very partial to Antonio Gramsci's idea of a war of position – you are a kind of small unit which wants to survive and gain new participants.

AŻ: Do you want to create a small community, in which you will survive?

DV: We have already done that. We have created an environment in which, for example, I don't feel alone when I am back in Russia, rather than Europe.

AŻ: This strategy seems to no longer be offensive. Your film *Museum Songspiel*[1] was a self-critique of the art world, which is now dominated by leftist views but not leftist practice. People have ideas but do not practice them. That's what the movie is about: let's be on the side of the "others", but not in the very moment when they need real support. And that's what makes all these ideas artificial. By the way, what I've read on your website was about politicising the cultural field. This is a very ambitious goal in a situation where people hate politics.

DV: Yes, absolutely.

AŻ: Could you tell me about the ways in which you are trying to politicise the cultural field? And why are you currently in this defensive position? You speak about danger and the risk of artistic activity in Russia, given that some things are forbidden and you might find yourself in prison.

DV: When I speak about danger, I mean the danger of pursuing certain politics. In Russia there is a tendency to separate aesthetics from politics and economics. From the very beginning, the *Chto delat?* group claimed that aesthetics was not an innocent activity isolated from politics and economy, and through our works we have insisted that the task of art is emancipatory politics. We start communication with the presumption that we are all equal with the public. So it's about emancipation and equality. Recently, I had a very interesting talk with Gerald Raunig[2] concerning the "winter years". Gerald told me, "Oh Dmitry, you know, you are so defensive right now. I remember you were different, what happened to you?" and I said, "Gerald, it's fucking winter outside. If you ran outside naked, full of joy with the red flag, you'd be frozen in five minutes. And then your brain and your body will be rather useless for the task of the future transformation. So, if you want to do it, please take into consideration what season it is, and don't pretend that the Californian sun is shining outside when it's actually a Russian winter.

AŻ: Coming back to your film: I think it's good criticism and it can function well within the art system, but at the same time, I don't see anything risky about it. The criticism of the film remains within the art world. As usual, it's welcome for art institutions to declare how self-conscious they are simply by showing the film, always without any actions or movement.

DV: I have to disagree with you. We always try to test the art world with the situation outside. Our film is not an institutional critique. We construct an intervention from outside in our film, showing how the art world operates under certain conditions that are not determined by the autonomy of art world. We show the moment when autonomy is broken. We ask: "how would you behave if your privileged position were questioned?", and then we say "ok, how far would you go with your radical politics and to what extent are you ready to take responsibility for it?". We expose a probable situation when any decision is risky and test how the system will react. But tell me, what kind of work do you consider risky? Maybe then I could better explain why doing *Museum Songspiel* was particularly risky for us as artists. At present, we have a very strong and confusing discussion about what is risky in Russia. A real criterion of risk is the police coming to your door. If they're not coming, then you're apparently full of shit. But I don't think that's the only way to assess a risk. What do you think is risky? Thomas Hirschhorn, Santiago Sierra, or your own work?

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[1] "Museum Songspiel: The Netherlands 20XX" (NL 2011, c. 25 min) is a staged musical which takes place in Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. It tells the story of a group of immigrants fleeing deportation by State authorities. They seek refugee in the museum of art, understanding it to be an institution that defends the rights of minorities and supports those who are politically oppressed. "Museum Songspiel" was realized by members of the *Chto delat?* group*:* Tsaplya (Olga Egorova), Nina Gasteva Glukya (Natalya Pershina-Yakimanskaya), Mikhail Ivanov and Dimitry Vilensky.

[2] Gerald Raunig is a philosopher and art theorist. He works at the Zürich University of the Arts and eipcp (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Poliecies in Vienna). He is co-editor of the multilingual web journal "Transversal" and the Austrian journal for radical democratic cultural politics "Kultrrisse". His recent books include: *Critics of Creativity* (co-edited with Gene Ray and Ulf Wuggeninig) (2011), *A Thousand Machines: A Concise Philosophy of Machine as Social Movement* (2010), and *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (co-edited with Gene Ray) (2009).

AŻ: I don't think that any of them wants to be risky. The situation is different in Western Europe.

DV: But your work?

AŻ: I don't expect to be punished.

DV: What about Yeal Bartana and the Jewish Renaissance Society?

AŻ: No, I don't think so. But the situation here is quite unique. Belarus is probably more similar to Russia.

DV: Belarus has reached the point where you can do nothing or you are expelled from the country. You can just sit in the kitchen and say something only when all the mobile phones are off.

AŻ: But it doesn't look like you, as an artistic group, are doing something in Russia.

DV: Yes we are.

AŻ: Do you observe any results or effects of your activity in Russia? Could you describe what they are?

DV: I could hardly imagine a young generation of Russian activists without our activity.

AŻ: So, the cultural field was politicised by you?

DV: Yes. Maybe we had expected more of them emerging, but unfortunately only a few of them appeared. Our situation provides some advantage for us. Western artists are more or less limited to that kind of culturalisation – whatever they do, even if it's politically motivated, is immediately integrated by the art world. Things are different here: what we do is distributed through an activist network, through circles of an alternative academy, by dissidents and the intelligentsia. We feel a little bit like Soviet dissidents, but with the privilege of enjoying international cultural life.

AŻ: Do you feel like a dissident or would you accept that label?

DV: Yes, we have dissident roots from the 80s. There's also another problem, the problem of generations. Young people are pursuing different politics, and I'm not sure how they can relate to the kind of dissident politics which appeals to us. We come from the old circles – Soviet circles of artists and the intelligentsia from the beginning of the 80s. I remember this atmosphere. Maybe it is a little bit perverse, but I really enjoy entering a similar situation today. At the same time, we are ready to do many things at home, like those things usually done in the West: participating in full-scale shows, serious public debates, and publishing our texts. Unfortunately, such things can't be done here.

AŻ: You do publish your texts on your website.

DV: Of course, but there are many other activities which we cannot realise here despite all our efforts. However, control over the Internet is a big issue right now. I imagine that they have already started the Chinese experiment – building the Chinese wall on the Internet and filtering everything.

AŻ: Do you expect it to be more controlled?

DV: I can't predict. It looks like it will get tougher, but it might just as easily become more liberal. Who knows?

AŻ: May I go back to this concept, "politicising the cultural field"? What else does it mean?

DV: Politicising the cultural field means establishing a link between art, politics and economics.

AŻ: How can you do it? What's the strategy?

DV: Our collective does it through different forms of activities which demonstrate the links. If you think that we're doing just a video opera, it is not true. We can show you political documentary films instead. If you think that we're doing documentary political video, we can show you newspapers, which produce and maintain an uncompromised attempt to think and research. If you think that we're doing just a newspaper/texts, we can show you some activist documentation for zero budget street action. If you think we're simply doing street action, we're doing something else. Such a strategy should really help us to escape simple market commodification. The idea that we're represented only by fancy institutions in the West – this picture is quite distant from reality, as we mostly distribute our work outside of mainstream western galleries.

AŻ: So, *Chto delat?* is a kind of brand? A kind of artistic, political brand?

TSAPLYA[3]: In the first place, it's a collective.

AŻ: How can you do it? What's the strategy?

DV: Look, in the world where everything can become a fetish, you can say so if you like. And there is a need in our world to obtain a power of brand if you care about serious change. One of my students said, "in order to escape a brand, you need to do everything under a different name". That's true, then you become completely free, but you loose political continuity. Your name creates a context – a certain value to which other people can relate.

AŻ: I guess you have this capitalistic association, according to which a brand is a kind of slavery - it gives you power only if you are loyal to it.

DV: I wouldn't mind running a discussion about being a star. For example, Jean-Luc Godard always proved his practice by being a star. Who would care if you were only marginal person heard by ten people maximum? But for example George Brecht and his *Drei Groschenoper* – that was a brand. That made sense, because he was really changing people's minds. Artur, you're a star artist, aren't you? And there's nothing wrong with it.

AŻ: *Chto delat?* is very famous.

DV: No, no, but Artur, I mean people really think that having a few big exhibitions abroad means being overexposed. But when you're inside the art world then you understand the economy of these big names. We're not one of them. Not at all.

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[3] Olga Tsaplya Egorova is an artist. She co-founded a feminist art group Factory of Found Cloths (1995) with Natalja Persina-Yakimanskaya (Gluklya). She has been an active member of the group *Chto delat?* since 2003. Her work is based on collective and research projects that combine performance, environmental works, video and sound recording. She is married to Dimitry Vilensky.

AŻ: But I think you have symbolic power. If you say something people think about it.

DV: Good to hear it from you, I hope that's true. Actually one of our aims was to gain capital in trust and to use it in certain situation. Whatever we say resonates somehow in a marginal circle but it reaches some audiences.

AŻ: When I was talking with David Riff[4], I asked him about a visible, material result of your activity, something you can really catch and observe. He said that the only example to be described is a letter to Alain Badiou, sent to stop his visit to Russia on invitation of Kremlin's spin-doctors. Could you mention something else?

DV: I'm speaking on a very pragmatic level – for example the number of people that read us. We have more than 100 000 of entries on our website each year, along with videos and things that we can't calculate. We don't publish pornography on our website, and we don't have adds. It means that people are really looking for something that we can offer. For me, this is a material result – it means that we gathering real attention and attention is concrete.

AŻ: I saw an editorial remark on your website that film is political when it documents the process of learning. So could you name films made by others, where such a process of learning is visible?

DV: I think our *Museum Songspiel* is this kind of place for learning, precisely because the viewers of the film are permanently challenged to take a side. The film is really demanding. We seek the situation in which the film leaves you kind of dizzy – when simple things becomes complex and complex things looks simple. It's didactic and entertaining at the same time. I am very sceptical about pure education without any quality of entertainment. We are practitioners of the idea: entertain, educate, and inspire. Unfortunately, many people try to educate, but they're not entertaining and therefore fail. Some people try to inspire, but they don't educate, and then it's pure agitprop.

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[4] David Riff is a writer, curator, and member of the group *Chto delat?* He works as a co-editor of the art section of the online portal openspace.ru and teaches art history at the Rodchenko School of Photography and Multimedia in Moscow. He published two monographs on the late Soviet artists Vadim Sidur (2000) and Vladimir Yankilevsky (2002) and has contributed to contemporary art magazines such as *Flash Art*, *Moscow Art Magazine*, *Rethinking Marxism*, and *Third Texts*.

AŻ: What is the mystery of the number of readers on your website? I mean there is no entertainment at all. These texts are really difficult to go through.

DV: Every issue of our newspaper consists, in general, of two complex articles, that even I as an editor can hardly go through. Nevertheless, they are really important and we insist on publishing them. Then we have three or four texts on a less demanding level that can be read by every student. And we always have a couple of very light texts. So overall, it's really balanced. Of course, it's not a newspaper that we want to spread near the metro station, but it's something that people could read many years after its publication.

AŻ: How can the philosophical theory you've constructed be transformed into real activity? What is the impact on society?

DV: What do you think about your own activity? Are the effects visible? Do you see any results?

AŻ: Unfortunately, I don't see anything. I am not satisfied. I know that people are attracted by my work, and they watch the films, etc. I usually have a strategy of accepting every proposal for an exhibition. Because I think that people should really see it...

DV: ... Everywhere.

AŻ: ... Everywhere, if possible. If only it is not a completely stupid exhibition or curatorial project, then I say yes.

TSAPLYA: Alexei Penzin[5], a member of our group, has shown *Museum Songspiel* to his mom. And she told him, "Loscha, that's what I feel, that's true, now I understand how it works." I think this is a result.

DV: For me, the result is when you receive these kind of messages on Facebook, "I hate the left. I always hated leftist rhetoric. But having seen your films, I've changed my mind. The left is not total crap."

TSAPLYA: I believe that we have found a method to change something. Just a bit, but it's still something.

AŻ: But you know that you share such a belief with 95% of artists?

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[5] Alexei Penzin is a philosopher and member of the group *Chto delat?* He is a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy of The Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow and is currently working on a book entitled *Rex Exsomnis: Towards a Political Economy of Sleep*.

DV: No.

AŻ: They say exactly the same: "You know, if there is a small change, if someone has changed his or her opinion, even if it is one person, I'm satisfied. That's the evidence that I did something proper."

DV: What we might share with other artists, even internationally, are some basics, maybe theoretical foundations and leftist positions. For us, the problem is that we can't preach anymore to convert - it's boring. We really want our politics to have much wider appeal. So for us, such comments suggesting that we produced a good or touching movie are absolutely fine.

In all honesty, I feel a little bit unease toward your question. People very often ask about our efficiency. We were recently invited to the Creative Time Summit in the USA, where things were really put to the extreme. Form me, it all looked a bit like 7 minute presentations of reports on business projects... "do your creative interventions, but remember to report afterwards; please share with the universe and tell us what change have you reached through the efficient implementation of your project". What seems the most intriguing for me is a possibility of the prolonged effect of some art works: if they would really like to kill freedom for Russians, they should ban Pushkin, because if you read Pushkin's lyrics at least once, they give you another dimension of freedom. And they were written two hundred years ago. And it still gives us a chance to survive as free human beings. And I still believe in this. At the same time, I watch some marginal films done in the 60s and I feel really inspired. I don't know what exactly they changed and who was their target audience, but they changed a lot, actually.

We have some influence as we became popular. Our texts attract more attention, and our films have a larger viewership. However, the most important issue is how the film will be seen in ten years or in a few decades. That's always the problem with activists. They produce an action which is like yesterday's newspaper – in a few days, no one cares. An artist should build continuity through his work.

As a doctor you can save someone's life and it's really an amazing value. We're not saving lives, nor are we saving souls. We produce other types of souls, or the possibilities for other types of souls to emerge.

AŻ: But in fact, your movie is about checking results.

DV: Why?

AŻ: Because, if someone – either a person or an art institution – declares that immigrants should be protected and have equal rights, he/she/it should really work for that change.

DV: Yes, and in our film we show how such a thing might work. There is one scene in *Museum Songspiel* of which I'm particularly proud. In that first scene, the director and guard appear. The director of the museum asks, "What do they(migrant-occupiers) say, and what do they want?". And the guard just reports, "They want shelter in a museum. Someone told them that the museum cares about immigrants." The director reacts by saying something like "Oh my god, how could they take it so literally...". But the guard continues, "Someone told them that art is on the side of the oppressed." And the director knows that it is retranslation of all his museum politics, but at this moment of danger under the attack of openly fascist forces, he cannot simply stay with this declaration – the time came to prove things with a real gesture. And then artist in the film poses another question: "What is the value of our project, if you don't let them in?" And at this point the director understands that there is the only one choice to be made, and this is a choice of pure ethical behaviour, which means in this situation the end of the critical museum and without helping the migrants. But it is about the possibility of heroic negation, which shows that there is no way out now but your gesture today might become point of reference for future generations.

AŻ: Do you know Galit Eilat? She was a director of the Digital Art Lab in Holon, Israel. She said, "My aim and the aim of the institution I created was to end occupation. I had a very precise, clearly defined goal. I didn't reach it. I failed. That's why I left Israel."

DV: I've know Galit for a long time. But I cannot buy what you are saying. How long did it take her to fail then? Five years? More than five? My reaction would be – why not stay another few decades and see what happens, if one is serious about this task. Maybe stay untill death. Did you hear that we have established *Chto delat*? to reach a communist revolution by 2005? Unfortunately, in 2005 we didn't reach it. But we are not departing, either to the moon or the Van Abbe Museum.

AŻ: Maybe at the beginning you were revolutionaries and now you are simply opportunists?

DV: I think this kind of view imposes kind of categorisation, which doesn't help to get out of the situation.

AŻ: So, tell me what is kind of step towards the communist revolution is your movie?

You said that what art institutions do is artificial. So, I am coming to you now, because the name of your group is *Chto delat*?. If you don't want me to think that it's just a slogan, please tell me: *chto delat*? What is to be done?

DV: I always do. Take control over means of production and distribution of art. Put some meaningful content in place. Distribute it alternatively. The surplus value of each project which you do on the invitation of institutions should be redistributed outside the circulation of art world. Reinvest all the money you get into something else and distribute it for free. Provide access to the work outside the limited spaces of the galleries. At the same time, do not ignore the power of the gallery space. If you work in a collective, have a task of your own. That's what we call self-organisation. The whole existence of our collective actually shows that there are other ways of doing things. But there we come to very complicated issues that cannot be discussed in the way you have approached things.

AŻ: Why not?

DV: Because it is completely misleading to impose the category of efficiency on art. We can't count it. Let's say you had 100 shows, we had 20. You have dozens of tabloid articles talking about your work, we have a few academics discuss ours. Who is stronger? Anyway, I am quite sure that in a decade or two Russia will change and they will all refer to us, because there is nobody else to which they might refer. There's a circle of friends who study what we did. It already has historical significance. There is a certain economy of attention that one could calculate but it has a very loose relation to what I would call the temporality of value production. And here we come to the zone of beliefs – I believe that what we are doing is important and I invest all my passion and effort in it. You do the same, but think that you make necessary judgements here.

AŻ: Do you feel responsible for young people? They can get into trouble if they go too far.

DV: Yes, absolutely. For example, the Street University[6] did a lot of things and they were never under police threat, at least until now [he knocks on the table]. Compared to the *Voina* group or to some other activists. And if you ask me who is politically more valid? I would say Street University. More interesting. More grounded. But they have never had any problems with police.

AŻ: Have you?

DV: We used to. But these were very small things. Our newspaper was arrested for investigation of extremist rhetoric - twice. Afterwards, they couldn't prove it, because it was really impossible. There is no direct censorship. However, I had considerable problems with finding a publishing house for the recent issue of our newspaper on a Gazprom story. When I explained to our publishing house what we are going to print it they refused. I called about five printing houses explaining the content of the newspaper. Two rejected our offer, one asked us to send the text and then said no. One of the five finally agreed.

AŻ: Can the state punish you?

DV: Of course it can. We're already paying a price by being seriously excluded from local public life. I cannot teach in Russia, despite the fact that I am teaching in leading art academies around the world. And all our exhibition proposals are rejected. But we do not engage in the politics of testing local limits of obvious taboos, which is definitely prosecuted.

AŻ: I can't believe that you once had revolution as a goal.

DV: There are certain things that I will not do as an artist or as a kind of intellectual, because for me it doesn't make sense. I am not doing investigative journalism, although there are lots of people who do it in a proper and risky way. But we can do something else – like exposing the mechanism of corruption and repression in our films. For me, it's more interesting to utilize the special power of art to analyse and show the structures of social forms, to demonstrate how they are historically determined and constructed and why are changeable. But there are a lot of activities in our country which seem to be much more dangerous and risky than being artist.

AŻ: Are you afraid personally?

DV: No. But I try to be careful.

March 2011

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[6] Street University is a student lead initiative that was originally organized in response to the closure of the European University in Saint Petersburg on 8th of February 2008 for alleged violations of fire safety rules. Students, professors and activists initiated a campaign to reopen the University: a series of public actions, lectures and seminars took place in the streets, predominantly at Solyanoi Pereulok. Talks and lectures covered, for example, student unions in the US, pre-Revolutionary student solidarity, Situationism and 1968 revolution, activist interaction with the police, and the relation of art to democracy and censorship. Although the University was reopened on the 21st of March 2008, the Street University continued with its program of open meetings and lectures on the streets, fostering an alternative distribution of knowledge and organization of public space.

Dimitry Gutov (b. 1960) is an artist. He graduated from the Institute of Art, Sculpture and Architecture of the Academy of Arts, St. Petersburg. His recent solo exhibitions include: ***E’IK’ΩN***, M&J Cuelman Gallery, Moscow (2012), Russia, ***Condola,*** Art Museum Bourse, Riga (2012), ***Russia for all.*** Center of Contemporary Art, Tver; Museum “Perm-36”, Perm Region (2011). He also participated in the Shanghai biennale (2012), and numerous group exhibitions, among which: ***One Sixth of the Earth. Ecologies of Image*** in Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe (2012-1013), ***Russian Cosmos***. Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea, Turin, Italy, (2011), ***Counterpoint, Contemporary Russian Art***. Louvre, Paris (2010), Documenta12, Kassel (2007), ***I believe,*** Vinzavod, Moscow (2007), ***Progressive Nostalgia / Contemporary Art from the Former USSR***, Centro per l’arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato. He lives and works in Moscow.

Ekaterina Degot (b. 1958) is an art historian, art writer and curator. Amongst the many shows she has curated or co-curated, the following are especially noteworthy: ***Body Memory: Underwear of the Soviet Era,*** St Petersburg, Moscow, Helsinki, and Vienna (2000 – 2004), ***Struggling for the Banner: Soviet Art Between Trotsky and Stalin***, New Manege, Moscow (2008), ***Citizens, Mind Yourselves: Dimitri Prigov,*** Museum of Modern Art, Moscow (2008). In 2010, with David Riff and Cosmin Costinas, she curated the 1st Ural Industrial Biennial in Ekaterinburg under the title ***Shockworkers of the Mobile Image***. In the following year, she curated an exhibition and the discussion platform ***Auditorium Moscow*** with David Riff and Joanna Mytkowska, all in collaboration with Warsaw Museum of Modern Art. In 2012, she curated ***Art After the End of the World***, the discussion platform of the Kiev Biennial of Contemporary Art Arsenale, and ***Time/Food*** in the Stella Art Foundation in Moscow, in cooperation with Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda. She currently teaches at the Moscow Alexander Rodchenko Photography and New Media School. Her books include: ***Terroristic Naturalism*** (1998), ***Russian 20th-Century Art*** (2000,) and ***Moscow Conceptualism*** (with Vadim Zakharov, 2005). She has contributed works of art criticism to ***Frieze***, ***Artforum*** and ***e-flux*** magazines. Degot lives and works in Moscow.

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DIMITRY GUTOV EKATERINA DEGOT

SMALL TALK WITH THE PRESIDENT

I got a phone call from a young woman. She said that I had been invited to a meeting with the president and asked me if I would attend. I said, “well, it would be good to have a chat - why not? But please drop me a line so I know who else is coming”. And then the list arrives: eight people, all culture practitioners. My only thought was “hell, are they really going to have a knees-up to discuss contemporary art?” You know, I’m a naïve guy, perhaps really dumb.

I really liked him. His comportment is unpretentious and natural, all demagogy cut out. He’s young, educated, a lawyer, a scholar, an intellectual, and he probably likes art as well. Yet I saw a man who can’t influence anything – *not a single thing*. I just can’t blame him for anything.

ED: The *Kommersant* paper published a photo where Fedor Bondarchuk[7], Olga Sviblova[8] and you all reach your hands out to President Medvedev, united in a single outburst. What are you voting for so unanimously?

DC (laughs): We attended a meeting with President Medvedev at the Digital October Media Centre on the 15th of October 2012. At the end he said, "Well, perhaps just a few more questions or comments", so the three of us put our hands up. It looks like we are voting, but I'm actually like a first-year schoolboy sitting there, as if I've finally managed to do my homework.

ED: You've been branded for life... I got a link to it from several friends who were terribly shocked. Perhaps we should look at some Stalin-era photos from a slightly different angle. Perhaps it was all tweaked by photographers... At any rate, what was the question you asked?

DG: It actually wasn't a question – I was making a specific suggestion. He came up with some ideas, something about the "Big Government".[9] Even though I didn't understand what he was talking about, I suggested that everyone in the government should be forced to sit through a course of lectures on contemporary art.

ED: Did you think it was important to stand up for just this thing alone, contemporary art?

DG: Pure and simple, I was trapped. I got a phone call from a young woman, if I've got it right she works for Marat Guelman[10]. She said that I had been invited to a meeting with the president and asked me if I would attend. I said, "well, it would be good to have a chat - why not? But please drop me a line so I know who else is coming". And

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[7] Fedor Bondarchuk (b. 1967) is a director, actor, producer,clip-maker, and the chairman of the Lensfilm Board of Directors.

[8] Olga Sviblova (b. 1953) is director of the Moscow Multimedia Art Museum (former House of Photography) and curator of the Russian Pavilion for the 52nd and 53rd Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art.

[9] The system of consultants for the government coming from different social strata.

[10] Marat Guelman (b. 1960) is the head of the PERMM Museum of Contemporary Art. He was a director of the Guelman Gallery in Moscow until 2011. In the 1990s he organised political campaigns for different political parties in Russia and Ukraine as a PR-director. He was also a member of the μivic Chamber of the Russian Federation (a consultative organ for the President of Russia) until 2004, when he was expelled.

then the list arrives: eight people, all culture practitioners. My only thought was "hell, are they really going to have a knees-up to discuss contemporary art?" You know, I'm a naïve guy, perhaps really dumb. I've been out of touch with the real world. Eight of us! And he's the ninth!

ED: What fascinated you so much?

DG: The president wants to know what's happening to contemporary art - from the horse's mouth!

ED: Did you see an opportunity to actually do something for contemporary art?

DG: No, of course not. I simply had this idea: here's someone who went and got interested in contemporary art all of the sudden! Something you would never expect!

ED: So what? You're telling me that you wanted to help him develop his tastes?

DG: Well, you know, he does visit schools, and he meets with teachers. So there I was, one of the many rank-and-file contemporary art practitioners.

ED: The reason I'm asking is that earlier this year I had a phone call too, and it was almost the same. They invited me to a meeting with Medvedev. I likewise asked them who else was going to be there, and got a list of names, which only included people who work in culture (who knows – that's all they told me). I have to admit that I was scared to bits and I began thinking about whether or not this was a meeting worth attending, and what might such a meeting mean to all my friends who will stop saying hello to me afterwards? I thought about it for a long time before concluding that it was *not* the same as going to the Seliger camp.[11] The friends I consulted for advice convinced me that this might be an opportunity to do something, to help others. The Voina group, for instance, were in serious trouble back then. Anyway, they didn't want me in the end, and thank goodness for that. At the time everyone was trying to convince me, saying no one would condemn you for this kind of thing. But judging by the reaction to your appearance in that photo, that's simply not the case. Why did you go? Were you going to tell him we need to open a museum of modern art, or what?

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[11] Seliger camp is an annual youth camp run by the United Russia party, which has a vast educational program.

DG: No, not at all. I just wanted to let people know about this kind of shit. I was dead serious making that suggestion about lectures. I work on the assumption that this country is run by savages. Really, I mean people with a primordial conscience. I have come across this before, back when I was working with Luzhkov[12] [decorating the Gostiny Dvor shopping centre]. If you ask them about culture, the notion simply isn't there. Medvedev is terribly nice, so he must be clued up on things. But when you see Gryzlov, Shoygu[13]… all those decision-makers. And I would be inclined to put Putin in such a list. They can't see anything beyond Glazunov, the Lyube band and Nikita Mikhalkov.[14] But I think it's really important, and they simply have to be told. I'm not happy about culture sitting somewhere between sport and weather.

ED: Is this the central idea, you are basically unhappy about contemporary Russia?

DG: The rest is derivative. If culture means something to you, you behave differently. Totally.

ED: In all seriousness, the policy of making culture a priority can, unfortunately, lead to nationalism in many ways.

DG: Yes, you're probably right. But generally speaking, what I have in mind is Pericles, or those who commissioned Verroccio to make sculptures – I just have this idea that people should treat such things with respect.

ED: You mean things like Tolstoy-cum-Dostoevsky, or does one necessarily have to be familiar with 20th century culture?

DG: I'm obviously talking about the 20th century – what else? People have to know what's happening to man. And there are simply no sources of information. It's my sincere belief that, if you tell people, if you just go and tell them, they'll realise immediately what's happened to man and to culture, and they'll immediately begin…

ED: They'll immediately begin to behave better?

DG: I just know – I've been there myself. Culture changes people a lot. The whole global idea of aesthetic education is based on this.

ED: That relates to classical art. No one has ever said that contemporary art leaves people uplifted.

DG: It's not about uplifting – it's about the clarity of understanding.

ED: Suppose you had three minutes, what artwork would you show him?

DG: Oh no, I wouldn't even start if it was only three minutes, that's a TV format.

ED: How much time would you need and what would you show?

DG: An hour. From Duchamp to Osmolovsky.

ED: Do you think that would improve the life of people in this country?

DG: No, not really. The main thing is that they have to be told the following: there are values much higher than those they have in mind. To them, the main thing is the speed at which you acquire cash, oil, and/or information. No one is interested in the content – just the flow.

ED: In other words, you just wanted to distract him from thinking about cash?

DG: To remind him of what art really is. Higher values than what these mobsters live and breathe. You simply have to cram it into their heads.

ED (sighs): These are your art values. What about social values? Democracy?

DG: It's not my concern to offer remedies to anyone. I just went there like an idiot, thinking that eight people will have a conversation about contemporary art. I looked at the list and saw a broad spectrum of people. So there I was, walking from Christ the Saviour, and Ionly got as far as the bridge when suddenly they started checking people's passports. It freaked me out.

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[12] Yury Luzhkov (b. 1936), politician, co-founder and former vice-chairmen of United Russia. He was the Mayor of Moscow from 1992 until2010.

[13] Boris Gryzlov (b. 1950), politician, Speaker of Russia's State Duma (lower house of the parliament) from December 2003 to December 2011. One of the leaders of United Russia; Sergey Shoygu (b. 1955), politician, Minister of Emergency Situations from 1994 to 2012, and nominated on 6th November 2012 to Minister of Defence.

[14] Ilya Glazunov (b. 1930) is an nationalist, conservative painter. He is the founder and rector of the Fine Art Academy in Moscow, an alternative to the State Art Academy.

ED: Everyone must have thought the same thing, that it was a private invitation, a more or less informal lunch?

DG: No, as far as I understood, they were all regulars there. Anyway, in I go, and this lady comes running up to me and says, "welcome to the meeting of President Medvedev's supporters". I was totally flabbergasted. And then, just as I was about to turn around and leave, I looked up and saw the audience; media types, all of them, that Kandelaki lady (a TV presenter). Anyway, the lot of them were there, whatever their names are. TV people. Also, Veksel'berg (an oligarch and collector)… Anyway, they really were his supporters as far as I could see. So I thought, here is a chance an anthropologist wouldn't want to miss, an opportunity to look at them in their natural habitat. And I haven't regretted staying. Even though they unwittingly took me for a supporter.

ED: So what did you see?

DG: It was terribly weird. Things went very informally: Medvedev wearing no tie, everyone else also dressed quite casually – although I didn't fit in at all, of course, with my orange t-shirt. Still, the atmosphere was kind of emphatically democratic and totally relaxed, as if it were just a friendly get-together. All that – mixed with *such* obsequiousness! I've never seen anything like that in my entire life.

ED: Was it coming from the same people?

DG: Yes. I was shocked. Because they are not, after all, the United Russia party, in which they have to jump up at every word and start applauding. There was virtually no applause, and yet their faces radiated submission. Every speech began with a "thank you". This form of address must have been a triumph of democratic values for them, compared to United Russia. But I saw it as an offering of thanks to comrade Stalin for our happy childhood. Literally. Kandelakinearly jumped out of her dress while speaking. People came to demonstrate their affection. For me, the atmosphere was hardly bearable.

ED: What about our lot [contemporary art practitioners], did they behave in the same way?

DG: Oh no! Our guys were great. Olya Sviblova was impeccable. She sat right next to me. Calm, ironic, and not showing any

support in any way. Whenever everyone laughed she completely ignored their little jokes, which were, I must say, quite peculiar. The finale was brilliant. At the end, after everyone was done with their slobbering effusions, Svanidze (a television journalist) got up and delivered a speech. He simply outlined the real situation in the country and where it's all leading. That was really harsh and clear… You can read it online. In terms of dramatic composition, it struck precisely the right note.

ED: And was he the only one to have said that? Why did you talk to him about our wretched art, contemporary or not? We have much more serious problems right now.

DG: Yes, sure. But he knows all about it, he himself mentioned it. He was just explaining to everyone that it's impossible to break the existing management model in this country. Either way, I really liked him. His comportment is unpretentious and natural, all demagogy cut out… Perhaps not completely cut out, but present in proper measure. Which makes this situation look totally hopeless, because you couldn't dream of anything better. He's young (at least younger than me), educated, a lawyer, a scholar, an intellectual, and he probably likes art as well… and yet nothing's moving. What did we have before? A party official or an idiot, some drunk or an FSB man. And you always keep thinking, if only… Whereas now you've already got pretty much everything you want. Yet nothing's changing – *not a bloody thing*. Of course, I remembered Lenin who used to say, towards the end of his life, that even he never managed to achieve anything. And look at the methods *he* was using… But coming face to face with the Russian bureaucracy, even Lenin failed completely. So what do you expect?

ED: Is it an apology? Has anyone urged him to decline the post of prime minister and become the leader of an opposition party?

DG: Listen, that would have been ridiculous. I don't even give advice to my kids. Especially seeing that no one asked me for advice: I went there to talk about art, spending three hours doing purely anthropological research. Still, I was tempted to make some kind of link between this whole business and art, in some way or another.

ED: Sure.

DG: Listen, what Svanidze said was right, but it was only good as far as dramatic effects were concerned. Medvedev must be really keen to change something, you only have to look at him to see that. But he repeated several times that politics is the art of the possible. Why Putin? Because his rating is higher. Yes, you are the president, but your rating is lower, so what can you do? There must have been other people like Svanidze in the audience, but it was pointless to say anything.

ED: Why pointless? What about your reputation? You could've made sure they didn't think you'd all come there to show him your support!

DG: Yeah, well, I suppose. But this idea never even crossed my mind. Look, this is the kind of guy who ended up in this quagmire, he's floundering about there like a fly. What would be the point of challenging him to buzz around a different pile?

ED: OK, let's hear your verdict: what was the purpose of the meeting?

DG: My best guess is that United Russia is in some kind of trouble, they used to have some People's Front or something like that, but it's also in trouble, so people who kind of like Medvedev, with his tweeting and all, while likewise being sick of United Russia – anyway, they have to find a way to pull these people in.

ED: And yet you don't think you were all used.

DG: Absolutely not. He met with us, he said something – big deal. I don't think of myself as a supporter. If we sat there in close company, without cameras, that could've been a proper conversation. I might have said what I think, everything - it would've been a different format.

ED: When they invited me I had a completely different idea: I would go only if there was going to be a camera, so I could make a statement on record, and not a single word could be removed. But if you did meet in close company, would you still talk about art?

DG: Why would I want to explain things to him? Things about corruption, what the police are like and so on? He knows all that better than me. It's not that information isn't getting through,

so "please pass it on to Ilyich". From what he said I got the impression that he spends most of his time on Andrey Illarionov's[15] website. What am I supposed to think? That I know something he doesn't, or what? The only field where this is true is contemporary art. And look, here I am, spilling my guts to you.

ED: The way you look at it assumes a task of educating someone, getting knowledge across to them, whereas I'd look at the event from the possibility of a political act. A statement is per se an act. A performative act. I might, perhaps, have tried some threats... I don't know which of us is right. Anyway, they were mostly asking for money?

DG: Not once. There wasn't a single request. I didn't quite get why people wanted to talk, again, except to express their sincere admiration. First a worker gave a speech – that really was something straight out of Brezhnev's times. I think e was from the town of Zlatoust. So he gets up and says, you've visited our city and everything has been fucking great ever since, my wife is pregnant now, and trams now run for an extra half-hour - or words to that effect. And then I was amazed at how everyone started giggling... you know, they were like: here's our worker, giving a humorous little speech, what a fantastic atmosphere we've got here...

ED: It's not that they all went ironic: look at this country bumpkin sneaking into our intellectual company?

DG: Of course not! Perhaps this is how it used to be in the Stalin era. This model reproduces itself. It's a matrix. That was astounding. Yeah, something like that. By the way, I do have a bit of a confession if you want: they started on the subject of Georgia, all that rubbish about enforcing peace and stuff. When I spoke I mentioned that saying, I'm told you've got some enforcement powers, so why don't you enforce lectures on contemporary art instead. But at this point they laughed again, I even felt really embarrassed. Like, you know, "here's our lad, giving a humorous little speech". And then

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[15] Andrey Illarionov's (b. 1961) is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity. From 2000 to December 2005 he was the chief economic adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin. He also served as the president's personal representative (*sherpa*) at the G-8. He is one of Russia's most forceful and articulate advocates of democratic capitalism. Illarionov runs an influential opposition blog.

Sviblova turns to me and says, “That’s it, you’ve gone all Marxist as usual – do you always have to use this word, ‘enforcement’?” Anyway, I was about to take it back, but it was too late.

ED: For some reason this whole scene is really depressing. No offence, but don’t you think you yourself are reproducing the very same model, except one that works for a narrower group of people? For some kind of Stalinist-era intellectuals that were allowed access? They likewise only ever dared to stand up for art and literature, rather than for those who were being killed. You don’t think that you’re part of the same matrix?

DG: You know what, talking about him, I just can’t blame him for anything.

ED: Why not? He’s the President.

DG: Oh, you mean, to make opposition parties legal?

ED: Yes. And gubernatorial elections. And to stop people from dying in custody. And to make sure prisoners are able to take a shower not just once a week, unlike now…

DG: You’re right. But it’s hard to say which of these are up to him. I saw a man who can’t influence anything – *not a single thing*. If it had been a meeting with Putin it would have perhaps made some sense, to blame him for things like this.

ED (laughs): You think he’s not going to pass it on to Putin?

DG: Right, as if Putin doesn’t know.

ED: He doesn’t know our stance on this. That’s what he doesn’t know. And if all we do is talk to him about art, he never will.

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ILYA BUDRAJTSKIS
ALEXEY PENZIN

THE CATASTROPHES OF « REAL CAPITALISM »

Any society that has gone through "shock therapy" and neo-liberal privatisation takes a long time – perhaps up to several decades – to return to "normal". The question that must be confronted by contemporary Russia is how long will the dynamics of the contemporary situation delay a return to "normality".

Toast for Post-Soviets

IB: I would like us to speak about the concept of "post-Soviet". One of its defining characteristics has always been a ferocious desire, felt by almost everyone, to part ways with it. I remember meaningful toasts to the end of all things post-Soviet being raised at every New Year's Eve party since the mid-2000s, with the fulfilment of such wishes always postponed until the next such gathering. This threshold was seen in nearly every significant political event of the 2000s, from the start of Putin's first presidential term to the end of his second. Even if the brutality of the 90s was readily taken for a sign of great transitional metamorphoses, the mission of the 2000s was to make the post-Soviet reality a thing of the past, once and for all.

However, this state turned out to be far more massive, swampy and dangerous than it was once considered. Production, institutions, social structures kept changing, acquiring new substance – but the nature of those changes could only be understood through comparing them to the preceding state. The post-Soviet reality proved to be not just a transition from the Soviet to something new, but also a period of decay and the plundering of Soviet relics. The post-Soviet regime became the only possibility. Towards the end of the last decade, as recognition of this fact gradually sank in, a surge of nostalgia and disappointment with the future erupted.

AP: Taking stock in this way is related to a certain progressivist logic which, under the circumstances, is not necessarily efficient. In the post-Soviet context (and generally in today's world) people talk, more and more often, about a reactionary era which throws us back, perhaps as far as the 19th century. This implies that many theories and areas of research whose names start with "post", a prefix used to describe the scenarios of the past decades, are now losing their critical and diagnostic potential. Nevertheless, the combined evidence against those "post" studies – including such turbulent past events as 9/11, the Iraq War, the global economic crisis and, most recently, the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt – has not yet fully manifested its consequences. I would therefore prefer to begin with a more generic philosophical question: "What do we mean by modernity?"

Until recently, modernity appeared to have a straightforward meaning: there was a "Western" model of modernity, which was both imposed and critical in relation to the supremacy of capitalist rationality. This reality was contested by appealing to a variety of local histories and development models, or by identifying an alternative modernity, taking shape in resistance to capitalism. We are now left with a particular cross-section of events which might be called the pure present, a temporality stripped of any enveloping constructs that would allow us to articulate it, to charge it with meaning or to correlate it against our experience. This present exists as a series of moments and events which can be formally recognised as modern but cannot, it would seem, be incorporated into anything large-scale, similar to a modern or post-modern project.

Modernity was previously seen not only as an objective "state of affairs", but also as a subjective drive "aiming for modernity" – as described, for instance, by Foucault in his famous work "What is Enlightenment?". The possibility of being "non-modern" exists in both 20th century New York and 19th century Paris, as well as post-revolutionary Moscow of the 1920s. To be able to access modernity one has to change, to revolutionise, and thereby subjectify oneself. "Aiming for modernity" means searching for and expressing the actual moment, participating in the political and aesthetic transformation of reality, being sensitive to any shock effects of the present, as well as creating special life forms, which are concentrated, dynamic and experimental. What we see now is this drive being weakened, people turning to the past, retreating into their private spaces or moving towards some "exit", trying to escape discomfort and risks and drifting into some kind of collective sleep. Withdrawn from modernity, we feel this pressure. Its vector appears to have been lost. No shared future has on the horizon as of yet, at least not in any tangible way. It exists at the level of disjoint expectations, private or common, of hopes, frustrations or apocalyptic sentiments, so widespread in our day and age.

If we take these general premises as a starting point and work from our post-Soviet experience, the above tendencies look even more clearly defined. We have now covered enough distance to be able to look at the 2000s with a more objective view, which I have described here as a loss of modernity, or a lack of clarity in our view of it. This loss is perceived as a strange mixture of cynicism, naïve archaism, radical dissociation, and an ever-increasing barbarism in social and political relations. It is seen as a vulgarisation of the everyday, a spectral shift towards the abominable in nearly all urban space and a total loss of bearings, sometimes bordering on the grotesque, the monstrous or the comic, affecting the majority of the society in an ideological and political sense. Moreover, all this is externalised and visualised in people's very bodies, in their appearance, physiognomy and facial expressions, in the behaviour of individuals we actually see on the street, in the underground or in other public spaces.

Different strata of our society seemed to harbour new projects in the early 2000s, which is to say new potentialities (specifically, among other things, the left-wing critical scene, fascinating and dynamic in its emergence). The late 2000s and the beginning of the next decade saw at least some of those expectations go bankrupt, causing many to express their emotions and opinions, which were far from positive. To keep this discussion going, I think we need to try and cast a critical glance at the existing versions of the 2000s and ask the following question: can we even credit the past decade with any special project or intention which would make it different from preceding periods? We have to cast a colder eye at the new possibilities brought about by the reality of recent years.

Natural Order of Things

IB: In the early 2000s hopes nurtured by those at different ends of the ideological and political spectrum were all to do with "normalisation" which was to replace the doldrums of the transition period. This normalisation was supposed to provide clear social boundaries, make political relations transparent and to ensure that political values were identified and distributed inside the society. The 2000s were supposed to bring out the natural order of things. To liberals this meant creating a new class of owners, independent from the state. This would be a class capable of establishing, for itself, the institutions it required. The far right expected the majority to reject their Soviet civil identity in favour of ethnic and religious analogues. As for the left, it hoped that capitalism would reproduce all the classical contradictions necessary to create a revolutionary subject.

But the edifice of Russian capitalism, completed over the last decade, turned out to be "subnormal" from all viewpoints. Of course, our variant of capitalism is anything but in line with the normal myth of liberalism. Not only does the established market society have no need for political democracy,at the economic level it can do without "fair and free" competition and the inviolability of private property. Instead of completing the reformation process first and then reducing its own role to that of a guarantor to all the key elements of this liberal "normalisation", the state itself became an active market player. Beginning with the 90s property redistribution, the privatisation process of the 2000s engulfed the state apparatus and thereby blurred the boundaries between bureaucracy and big business, almost rendering both indistinguishable.

That "normal" capitalism in Russia proved impossible was predetermined both by the special mechanism of its emergence (through destroying and appropriating the productive forces that preceded it) and by the new qualities exhibited by world capitalism as a whole. The main characteristics of contemporary neo-liberal capitalism – in particular, the destruction and commercialisation of the social sphere, the deregulation of the economy and the simultaneous strengthening of the state's repressive functions strengthened, the traditional working class being dispersed and the weakening of every institution established to protect collective interests (trade unions, mass parties and movements) – all these were recreated in Russia in their extreme form.

Myth of Stability

AP: There is a certain Hegelian "irony of history" to it all: from the 90s onwards, Russian liberals, together with everyone included in their field of ideological hegemony, have wanted to join in their idealised vision of a liberal capitalist modernity, with its cosy, small and medium business and industrious "farmers in hats". However, "real capitalism" has been something altogether different. This disjuncture, at least in part, stemmed from the liberals refusal to acknowledge any critical discourse on capitalism or parliamentary democracy, and therefore they are now outraged to find themselves in a capitalist reality (sometimes they would not even recognise the post-Soviet society as market-driven and "proper") that failed to meet their fantasies. I also agree that the majority of subjects leading a post-Soviet life are obsessed with the idea of parting with this condition, although they are working out of a distorted ideological perspective. The regime itself created an ideologeme which, by all appearances, allows one to forget about the post-Soviet atmosphere of the 90s and simultaneously legitimate or strengthen the new system of rule. I am talking about the proverbial theme of stability. This ideology was consistently aimed at parting with both "the Soviet era" and "the swashbuckling 90s", the latter already a self-evidently true pop-myth. The structure of the stability narrative is akin to a myth, pointing as it does to one fundamental event, the switch from the "chaos" associated with the 90s to the present and necessarily positive "order". This is some kind of a "grand narrative" which lays a claim to being able to structure our perception of that historical moment. Some kind of a sketch which parodies Hobbes' passage about a sovereign ending a civil war. The narrative itself is nothing but the effect of the ideological "restriction strategy" (F. Jameson) that removes from the equation any elements unable to fit into the pattern of the new "stable" regime (old age pensioners, say, or people living in depressive areas, migrants or budget-funded workers, who are simply invisible in this social landscape) – as well as the smouldering centres of chaos, informal relations, violence, which are revealed everywhere. Although stability turns out to represent everyday life and the "joys of consumption" possessed only by some segments of the population, this fragment protects the social totality not included in the picture. This is what the ideology mechanism is like. There is also, if we remember Marx's German Ideology, spurious universality, in which a whole is replaced by one privileged part.

It is interesting to look at how these narratives are refracted in what is produced by the culture industry. For example, the 2004 blockbuster Night Watch reacted to new stability narratives by examining a deal made between warring groups of super-humans. The clash was between the new ruling class ("dark" magi) and the old Soviet nomenclature class ("light" magi). Understood as a representation of the historical whole, it tacitly demonstrated the rejection of the country's contemporary history, which it depicted as a series of catastrophes. The magic "chalk of fate" cancels the past and brings the protagonist back to 1992, the moment when capitalism started to shape up.

It seems that even the global economic crisis, which began in 2008, has not done much to undermine this monotonous confusion on the subject of stability. Sometimes we are told that this kind of stability and "modernity" (dull, corrupted, cynical, and ugly) is better than "the chaos of the 90s" all over again. In fact, our society can be envisaged as a strange subject who, shocked by the world in which he finds himself, goes into a self-induced coma or a deep sleep. All the higher functions of this subject (his critical skills, ability to handle abstract ideas or political values, and openness to others) are switched off or completely instrumentalised. The only things still functioning are his stomach, grisp reflexes, and physiology, while his unconscious produces frightening phantasmagorias which turn into real catastrophes...

For people to become politicised again, this fear of chaos, constructed and carefully maintained, has to be removed. As Naomi Klein[1] points out in her recent book, any society that has gone through "shock therapy" and neo-liberal privatisation takes a long time – perhaps up to several decades – to return to "normal". The question that must be confronted by contemporary Russia is how long will the dynamics of the contemporary situation delay a return to "normality", which is to say a state of affairs characterised by reasonable political subjects reliant on their individual and collective strength to forge a way out of disoriented times.

IB: Indeed, Russian "stability" has a rather unusual structure. Our capitalism is subnormal, and stability here looks very different from what it is ordinarily implied. Putin's "normalisation" was constantly accompanied by extraordinary events: catastrophes, fires, terrorism and outbursts of mass violence. PThe political system was likewise far from predictable and full of dangerous twists which tested the whole structure's ability to endure. The very use of the term "controlled democracy" implied the necessity for constant manual interventions into a system unable to regulate itself. The stability myth could only work in constant coexistence with chaos, while order could only be recognised during a permanent and bloody fight with disorder.

On the one hand, this kind of stability, based on catastrophes, was the natural product of the decay of the USSR's legacy, thinking especially of social institutions, infrastructure and produc-

[1] Naomi Klein (2007). The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism. Knopf Canada.

tive forces. On the other, this was the main characteristic of the new ruling class. The constant threats of chaos and an internal "war of all against all" were intended to curb its own intrinsic contradictions. Any competition based on equal rights could disrupt the process (still ongoing) in which the ruling class was being developed, and which needed to be carefully cultivated by the bureaucrats and the "structures of force". In this regard, Night Watch provides a fairly accurate approach to the genesis of the Russian elite. Its two components, the "light" bureaucrats dressed in Soviet uniforms and the "dark" businessmen and mafiosi, are constantly fighting each other, each securing their coexistence in some parallel reality. Outside of this reality there is the disoriented population, not allowed to be part of the decision-making mechanism and reconciled to the status of victims. Even the vague prospect of this population becoming a new actor terrifies both segments of the elite so much that they are willing to reduce their appetites, on cue, and stand up together for their right to political solitude.

Only a short while ago, Kremlin ideologues used to call this majority "Putin's", proudly and not without grounds. But to what does it actually amount? Throughout the 2000s, the left was vainly hoping for class subjectivity to emerge from the masses devoid of any social identity. By the beginning of that period, the decay of the Soviet mass intelligentsia and industrial working class had produced new intermediate strata: small retailers, labour migrants, young people constantly changing jobs, and cultural workers without a steady income serving the elites. Their constant and acutely felt individual instability killed off any interest in political involvement and self-organisation.

Notably, a new intellectual type, mobile and thoroughly corrupted, emerged against this background, the so-called "corsairs" (to use the term introduced by the sociologist Alexander Bikbov) who left the jejune shores of the education system and set sail for a voyage into the troubled sea of post-Soviet politics, a journey full of exciting reckless schemes. Journalists, political technology specialists, bloggers and creative types; not only have they become mercenaries of the ruling class, offering their services in society management – they have also founded their own obstreperous brotherhood of pirates working to deliver political and cultural events. It seems to me that we have not yet done justice to the significance of this stratum to the ideology of the post-Soviet society, a population that is not numerous but incredibly dynamic.

Corsairs, Artists, and Activists

AP: Under the circumstances, "corsairs" is not a bad name for the intellectual servants of the new masters of the world. This phenomenon springs from some kind of neo-liberal "deregulation" of customers in the market of such "services". "Corsairs" have a certain inventiveness, virtuosity and boldness, which can be quite impressive sometimes. Such a corsair working for some Kremlin-linked foundation may have once been a liberal, then a black-hundredist, then a Christian socialist, and then something else, always living through these transformations and expressing them in a flood of heartfelt journalistic pieces that circulate rumours and intrigue in their narrow, rather muddy circle. At the same time, none of this extends beyond the limits of this extremely provincial scene, isolated from the rest of the world, projecting as it does the general logic of degeneration and shutting itself off from contemporary critical and political rationality. Like the natives of some banana republic, the members of this circle, of course, are very willing to support their isolationist status quo, using semi-colonial themes of "Russian specificity", some "spiritual exoticism" or indigenous insularity, which in turn feeds fancy speculations about the proverbial "sovereign democracy".

It would therefore be interesting to discuss the local posture of contemporary art – itself a vital part of the ideological and cultural spheres – and its transformations during the 2000s in this light. Despite being degraded, cynical andcorrupted, like many other spheres in Russia during the last decade, this posture, in my view, is relatively progressive. In many respects, this is due to the established set-up of the system of art, which treats the language of Marxism and critical philosophy as constitutive and inseparable from the procedures by which particular works or projects acquire their meaning. It is no coincidence that in the 2000s the overlap between this environment and that of political activism sprouted networks, communities and groups eager to revitalise the leftist project - to rid it of its rotting corpses, such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. In other words, this environment might be described as an intensive experiment concerned with new forms of organising and understanding communal life, turning grim post-Soviet everyday realities into something meaningful with political purpose.

The first half of the 2000s looked encouraging, with a significant number of participants and collaborators furthering their engagement on the left, particularly young people, newly politicised students, and a a number of accomplished intellectuals, artists and writers. Despite some attempts at uniting a number of groups, movements and initiatives, we are today faced with another wave of stagnation, more likely to have been caused by the state of the society itself. The majority of its members are extremely reluctant to enter into political relations with each other or contest established hierarchies, terrible economic inequalities, or cultural and social barbarity. All this is channelled into suppressed frustration and dreams of emigration rather than collective political actions. This is why the figure of an activist and the word itself both come across as something new and symptomatic. Given our circumstances, an activist is always an exception, a singular entity breaking away from the stream of dull and depoliticised life, transcending rather than following its premises or politicisation channels typical for other countries (universities, existing low-level political organisations, etc.). In my view, the key for today is finding new interfaces and methods for establishing contact with society, trying to overcome our “inorganic nature” and, consequently, our marginal position with respect to the mass framework of post-Soviet social life.

Art and Funky Business

IB: You made a very important point about the situated and progressive role of the Russian art system, principally created in the 2000s. But you have to mention from the start those special circumstances and the unique structural role of art that have made

such a progressive agenda possible. Contemporary Russian art emerged against the backdrop of the social chaos of the 90s and a general decay of educational andintellectual infrastructure, all of which devalued political meanings and social involvement. Of course,the figure of a new artist, concerned with his or her own unstable position, has been significantly influenced by the “corsair’s” lifestyle (many artists were personally involved in political technology raids led by Marat Guelman[2]). Nevertheless, the exceptional reflexive opportunities of art filled this social territory with an intellectual tension, bringing it to a critical climax that was no longer present in the collapsing academia or degraded opposition politics.

At the same time, the 2000s saw a powerful expansion of capital into the art sphere, with its new commercial infrastructure coming to resemble one of the components of a neo-liberal ideological offensive. Modernised Russian elites consider contributions to contemporary art as a necessary requisite for international legitimisation. In addition, the fresh and ironic qualities of art practices bring them closer to the joyful madness of initial accumulation and corporate “creative ideas”. More than anywhere else, contemporary art and funky business, in its ugliest forms, have become dangerously close in Russia. This extraordinary territorial coexistence of the most aggressive and strategic agents of big capital and its most progressive, internationally engaged critics seems to make Russia’s art scene especially edgy and tense. Nevertheless, the cultural left has yet to fully reflect on and make use of its ambiguous position.

On the other hand, I agree entirely with the point about the assets of activism. An important step in this direction would be to develop political involvement and expand activist practices. We need to demarginalise our few heroic political activists, as well as promote involvement of a wider range of artists and academics in the process of creating an anti-capitalist political culture which would be able to challenge the liberal-conservative hegemony. This new culture has to be anti-capitalist not just in its contents, but also at the level of everyday practices, including new formulations of solidarity, self-organisation, mutual assitance, perseverance and the strength of principles. This is where anti-capitalism steps up to the front line, opposing neo-liberal careerism, volatility, and the temptations of a "corsair's life". One has to understand clearly that we will have to solve these problems in extremely adverse and severe historical conditions. All the existent components of Russian catastrophe capitalism will successfully continue into the next decade, which we should, of course, look at with hope but without any illusions. Perhaps it is our decision to free ourselves from illusions – which, although bringing no joy in and of itself, is absolutely necessary.Perhaps this constitutes the main legacy of the decade we just happened to live through.

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[2] Marat Alexandrovich Gelman (born December 24, 1960 in Kishinev, Moldavian SSR, Soviet Union) is an owner and director of Guelman’s Contemporary Art Gallery, ex-owner of the Foundation for Effective Politics, and the former assistant director of Channel One (Russia).

A New Soviet Project

AP: Not only have we managed to disabuse ourselves of some illusions, but we have also, coming across various obstacles and difficulties in the process, we have arrived at a more sophisticated practical understanding of History (with a capital "H"), history in general. History does not, as a rule, follow our goodwill, nor is it measured in ten-year units, except in relation to periods of revolution and societal breakdown. There is some truth to the view that the Soviet project was some kind of exit or exodus from capitalist history. If not as radical an alternative as it might have seemed at the beginning, it served at least as a freezing agent, able to suspend the activity of the main institutions of capitalist society (the market, competition, bourgeois individualist ideology, etc.) and to free time and institutional space for the self-development of the people. And all of this despite its well-known problems and repressive nature. This is why returning to "history" for the second time – which necessitates a new fight against the old forms of oppression that have now become significantly more advanced – turns out to be so difficult.

We need more than just infrastructure – a problem faced by all left-wingers in different countries. The issue is to give our stances and practices an actual makeover in the presence of all-pervading neo-liberal pragmatism and cynicism. We need to contest and subvert the very core of what constitutes the foundation of this regime, i.e., neo-liberal subjectivity.

What can we rely on in the hard struggle which is now unfolding, not just in the spaces of public discussion, communication, organisation and political practices, but also in a different spaces of subjectivity in its "existential territory" (F. Guattari)?

In the first place, we can find our inspiration in the Soviet legacy of the 1920s, viewed as an example of everyday life forms and culture radically changed "right down to the last button" (V. Mayakovsky).Although this political and aesthetic experience has been universally canonised, we are only just starting to reclaim and understand it anew. We also need to pay more attention to progressive elements in late Soviet society.

Secondly, more systematic research and educational activities are required. Here we can use our international assets and relations with other cultural and political left communities whose conditions are more beneficial.

Finally, we need to reactivate our drive to "aim for modernity" in order to endow communist ideas with a new collective body, to flesh them out in particular forms of life, thought, self-organisation and art. We have to demonstrate the might, hope and joy they hold, contrasting these with the flat, life-deforming mantras of "efficiency" and "competitive power"... This may look like an overly schematic and ambitious way to make the above points. But unless we are ambitious, history will prove more ruthless than we can possibly imagine.

An email conversation conducted between July and August 2011

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ALEXEY IVANOV
ILYA BUDRAJTSKIS

TASTE FOR POLITICS

The central issue is that of a majority that is excluded in every conceivable direction. What will they do? Will they join the students to start fighting the police together? Or will they become a part of the new monstrous conservative bloc, merging with the elites, as the latter go for lowbrow populism? Cultural issues, to use the term broadly, will certainly be a priority in such a situation because culture is what enables one to achieve a top-to-bottom hierarchy.

IB: Over recent months, the awakening of politics in Russia and the emergence of a new type of citizen activism on our streets - at least in Moscow – has been widely noted. While sharing in this enthusiasm, I am more and more aware of how extremely impoverished we are, how lacking, first and foremost, we are in political and intellectual means. This upheaval caught us off guard in many senses. That ordinary participants in this movement are clearly more developed than its leaders seems to be one of its characteristic features, a drawback (or perhaps an advantage). Why is it so easy to participate in an event, yet so hard to give it an in-depth interpretation? Why is there a gap between the immediate participatory experience and the meagre political language this movement uses to express its demands?

AI: Until recently, we were stuck in a post-Soviet state. What I mean by this is that we remained dependent on the late Soviet decline of sociality. One of its most important characteristics, extreme individualism, originated in the ruins of late Soviet society, where all social links no longer relied on anything but physical contacts between people. With activities of all kinds becoming extremely atomised, a new type of solitary intellectual emerged, a type that tended to retreat into him or herself. The late 80s and the early 90s saw that tendency slightly reverse, but the Putin period gave a new lease on life to this extreme form of individualism using commodity fetishism, in particular, as well as policies aimed at individual consumption, and cultural values. Such a dissociated social fabric is easy to control.

However, different signs observed over the last six months suggest that this period is coming to an end. What's coming to an end is post-Soviet history. Both demographically and socially, the Occupy movement in Moscow is represented by people who were never been exposed to Soviet reality. This is a generation that hasn't been schooled in Soviet ways and has nothing to do with the tradition of late Soviet atomisation. Rather, the kind of atomisation they have experienced has bourgeois, fetishist roots and is related to the atmosphere created in the 2000s, that of most severe social traumas, economic and cultural chasms. Spontaneous unorganised activists emerged as a reaction to social and cultural inertia, and the origins of their behaviour are therefore hard to trace.

Where did they get it all from?

It may have to do with their immediate experience of being in contact with European and American social realities. Equally, it might be a reaction to a completely new "father-and-son" situation, the

2000s generation gap, in which children of the economic elite – at least a small proportion of them – already know that sharing the ideology of commodity fetishism is terribly outmoded. They don't want to live in a third-world country, which is crucified on images of total consumption. Strangely, the attraction that the "golden billion" holds for liberals has lead to the emergence of leftist social criticism as a necessary part of the left-liberal consensus. Russia today is moving in great leaps towards discovering left-liberal activism and practices related to the idea of autonomy and anti-corporate ideology. This ideology is very particular, bourgeois and simultaneously social and solidarity-oriented, which makes it left-liberal. This is how I would describe the general trend of the Moscow Occupy movement. There were more affluent young people involved than amongst their New York counterparts, who had far more of the city's poor, the new proletariat, in their ranks.

An architect friend of mine once told me about his experience of the '68 revolution in France: it started as an uprising of middle-class children. But at some point they were joined by youngsters from the suburbs. The disadvantaged suburban kids saw the crowd of students, they saw the police blocking them and went: "Listen, guys, these are cops, we gotta smash them the fuck up!" So a fight started, an ordinary fight typical for any working-class suburb. The middle-class children took up this impulse. It happened accidentally, but it did happen. A peaceful bourgeois manifestation turned into a radical flurry of activism. It reminds me of Pasolini's poem written in Rome in 1968: "When yesterday at Valle Giulia you clashed with policemen, I sympathised with the policemen! Because policemen are children of the poor."[1]

I've yet to see similar radicalism in Russia – except, perhaps, for the 6th of May clashes at Bolotnaya Square, when they started throwing stones and bottles at the police, but it was nothing to do with the involvement of the destitute – who are very numerous. It had much more to do with the radical spirit being born in the first place. If you look at Russia as a political island of sorts this means progress, but is still quite archaic by comparison.

[1] "Communist Party – to the Youth" in: P. P. Pasolini, Empirismo eretico, Milano 1977

In Russia, the 90s and 2000s were clearly lost decades in terms of theory, in terms of interest towards the social sphere. This can clearly been seen in the tastes of Muscovites. No socially marked writing, film or visual project would be remotely successful here. The Russian public does not care about things that make up natural food for intellectuals in Poland or Romania, like discussing issues of exclusion or oppression of minorities. At least since the Soviet dissident era of the 70s, insensitivity has dominated our social atmosphere. Obviously, this is a right-liberal attitude that aligns nicely with a trust in capitalism and democracy, with the combined potential to serve as saviours of the world.

IB: In many ways, the 2000s were dominated by the fact that the Russian elite actually wanted to live in a third-world country, with their fraction of a handful of absolute winners taking the spoils of the country for themselves. In the 2000s, the elite enjoyed their hegemony. And that hegemony supported the supremacy of right-liberal ideas, even amongst the intelligentsia who were themselves stuck in a socio-economic limbo. For its own part, the absolute majority existed somewhere at the very bottom of the ladder, still living a “naked life” throughout the 2000s: consuming. The level of consumption steadily grew, yet that segment of the population was excluded from the decision-making process, lacking its own language. Virtually no one – especially thinking about the upper and middle classes – took any interest in them. Going back to your analogy drawn from 1968, with the middle class turning to active street politics and thereby switching from right-liberalism to left, this meant, in the first place,attempting to part ways with the elite, who were no longer able to secure their dominance. Needless to say, the elite will try to fix the situation. It is rather plausible to think that Putin will make political concessions, and the system will get a cosmetic makeover. Still, this class system is evidently already broken, it is already changing. And the changes are irreversible.

The central issue is that of a majority that is excluded in every conceivable direction. What will they do? Will they join the students to start fighting the police together? Or will they become a part of the new monstrous conservative bloc, merging with the elites, as the latter go for low-brow populism? Cultural issues, to use the term broadly, will certainly be a priority in such a situation because culture is what enables one to achieve a top-to-bottom hierarchy. In both developed and third-world countries, we have seen the mechanism by which the rule of elites has been maintained: through religion, moral values, exploiting visceral hatred towards deviants (homosexuals, minorities, etc.). And that is where the question of culture’s responsibility seems most pressing, far more important than it was during the 2000s, when culture was essentially absorbed by the established model of power, the one that has now been left behind for good.

AI: I see it not so much as a question of culture, but rather of everyday practices. The disposition of today’s middle class in Russia is more or less clear: office work, family, consumption, and recreation. Culture is not a separate dominion here – it is dispersed throughout all these areas. Most office workers treat culture as leisure, not as a sphere of intellectual effort and critical conceptualisation. Yet there is a small group that can expand this recreation zone beyond the confines of Russia – be it from Turkey, Egypt, or elsewhere. This could be extremely useful. Instead of aiming for the “golden billion”, as is typical for the Russian elite, perhaps people should start, if not aiming for then paying far more attention – public, intellectual attention – to countries such as Turkey, Brazil, India, and Egypt.

Today these countries are able to give the Russians a valuable lesson in solidarity: discursive, cultural and social solidarity, which has its own zone in each of the aforementioned countries. In Turkey, for instance, there is a secular zone inside the religiously structured society. It includes people’s interest in social solidarity in general, more typical for developing countries than for “golden billion” countries. This concerns practices of living in urban areas, “on the ground”, practices of reclaiming local territories and reinstating them as a natural habitats free of outer influences. This process is vital for Turkey, and it also proved to be very important for the Egyptian revolution.

The importance of reclaiming our immediate urban spaces became manifest during the Moscow Occupy movement, which was very different from its analogue in New York. For instance, our protests never mentioned opposition to bank capital, never spoke of corporations being guilty for the crisis and for what now constitutes the real problem of the "golden billion" – the middle class thinning out, the society growing more proletarian. These problems have yet to become visible in Russia and, more specifically, in Moscow. The city is undergoing a period of high rotation as a managerial stratum is being formed. People come from the provinces and find jobs, so there is a certain dynamic, a zone of hope that is created.

I am particularly interested in the activists who marched down the boulevards and took part in the meetings (specifically the ordinary Muscovites rather than leaders of participant organisations). This interest arises, in the first place, because they put into practice the occupying an urban space, even though this occupation was not ideologically driven or value-rational. Secondly, instead of concentrating on the idea of an anti-corporate movement, or anti-capitalism, they promoted the idea of an anti-authoritarian perception of spaces. Their protest was not against capitalism as a system, but against Russian feudal authoritarianism, with its coercive methods of oppressing autonomy of all kinds. As a publisher, I am pleased to see this since we are likewise trying to create and develop the idea of horizontal links between publishing houses – thinking of the Independent Alliance founded this year. All this is happening within a common field characterised by a particular climate, widespread, I would like to hope, in the urban environment of contemporary Russia. Thinking about life beyond Moscow, in Perm, Ekaterinburg, Petersburg, and other cities where I detect a similar, if more localised, atmosphere.

I don't know what the future might hold.

It looks strangely devoid of politics to me, as does the frame of mind of those you called the elite. I was recently invited to a meeting at the Ministry of Press, which was attended by various representatives of publishing giants, while I spoke on behalf of their smaller counterparts. The deputy minister asked what sort of problems we publishers were facing: should the government lower our VAT rates, for example? I said: "Look, why don't you come up with some kind of a political thesis? I'm not asking you to be a Russian Malraux – just put forward some thesis on cultural policy so we can move on to economics. It's not an industrial board meeting, after all."

No political theses are heard from the Kremlin or large corporations. For that matter, the opposition has no political theses either. Their main thesis is that the regime is replaceable. But this argument is easily destroyed, as it is so obviously weak at present, when the foundations of social life remain undefined and there has been no social catharsis through a reassessment of many things, or the arrival at a national consensus – for example, in relation to the whole of our 20th century, or the events of '91–'93[2], thinking especially of the circumstances and consequences of privatisation. Politics in Russia today, like in Brezhnev's time[3], is of a hidden, unconscious nature, akin to certain symptoms, a rash, an eczema on a social body, rather than theses coherently formulated within group-consensus thinking. And this can be said about every single stratum of Russian society, without exception. It is extremely depoliticised. It doesn't even have a taste for politics.

Politics is part of civilisation, and Russia – in the form of its so-called elites – wants civilisation, albeit consumer-centred. The desire to get good cars, clothes, yachts doesn't go hand in hand with a desire to construct a political and social reality that would bring these commodities with it. Their reasoning is this: "Give us Maybachs and Mercedes, but when it comes to civil society, municipal structure, administrative and legislative authorities, or independent courts – we don't really need them, it's too complicated, and we've got our own unique character anyway. Although your Maybachs and togs are pretty good. We've got oil – we'll exchange it for your wheels and your togs." Exchanging oil for wheels – without politics, without social institutions – has led to a total dead end. How can one get out of it? Are there any encouraging signs?

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[2] 1991–1993 were first years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (25th of December 1991), marked with several political conflicts. Difficulties of the transformation had its culmination in the constitutional crisis in 1993, a stand-off between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Russian parliament resolved by military forces.

[3] Leonid Brezhnev (1906–1982) was a General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, presiding over the country from 1964 until his death in 1982. Brezhnev's rule lead to national decline by the mid-1970, due to stabilization politics in economics. Cultural policies imposed by him ended the liberalizing reforms of Khrushchev. They were highly repressive and included strong censorship, invigilation, placing intellectualists and oppositionists in solitary confinement in a psychiatric hospital. Brezhnev's period was at first referred to as the time of "real socialism", at second, as the Era of Stagnation.

IB: You are absolutely right about politics having been replaced by technology. Everyone, the authorities and opposition all included, thinks of politics as procedure. Even when free elections are demanded, this is done in a nonsensical and non-reflective way. People say: "It doesn't matter who we are going to vote for, what our choice is going to be, or what for what it happens to be. What matters is that we are going to have this opportunity."

AI: I'd be inclined to separate legal formalism from technology, as such. The authorities talk to us in the following manner: "We're all Russians, after all, not some Germans or whatnot, we understand that things are done differently here." And libertines, like the journalist Sergey Parkhomenko[4], say: "No, no, no. What we need is procedure. What we need is fair elections. That's the only thing we want." But we've long known – it was Marx who first demonstrated this using the first German general elections as an example – that no elections can work without media technologies or governance technologies. What's lacking in Russia is not so much formal legal rules, but specific social practices, practices of hegemony, including legal ones.

Imagine this: Russia enjoys absolutely fair elections, and Putin wins again, perhaps with fewer votes. This happens because the opposition does not realise that the thesis of fair parliamentary struggle alone is not sufficient. There is a crucial component which consists of invisible technologies of influence, technologies of discursive power, while what's required of us intellectual labourers is to denounce the use of certain speech practices as improper. What I principally mean is that the old mantra, "Russia is a thing of which the intellect cannot conceive", as well as all the arguments revolving around the question of local identity - this has to be

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[4] Sergey Parkhomenko (b. 1964) is journalist and editor of the monthly magazine "Vokrug Sveta". He became one of the organisers of the protest demonstrations and rallies in Moscow from December 2011 – March 2012.

seen as improper, undignified, and downscale. This is a very big task, one which will occupy us for many years to come.

Imagine a different situation: power in Russia is taken by force, radically. Given the existent undeveloped social space, deinstitutionalisation, atomisation, such a coup would lead to everything falling apart. The country would step backward into a barbarian state, rather than move towards a state of progress.

IB: The issue of direct democracy and its associated practices, which involve no leaders, doesn't imply that leaders simply aren't needed and that everything has to be decided by consensus. I'm not an anarchist. In my opinion, an assembly and direct democracy always works here and now, since they reflect the real situation and the growing need for self-organisation. As far as leaders are concerned, they are rejected not because of people's anarchic dogmatism, but because these leaders amount to nothing but leadership technology.

I recently saw an interview with the writer Dmitry Bykov [5]– in the company of his liberal colleagues, he was holding court about what kind of personality is needed in Russia today. So he said: "I think Russia needs someone like Lenin." Everybody essentially went: "Are you fucking crazy? What do you mean – Lenin? You must be off your nut!" And he says: "I think Lenin was the only leader who used power as a tool, giving primacy to an idea. I want us Russians to have someone who would treat power as secondary in relation to an idea, to principles, to the goal of building a better world." There are no leaders of this kind today. This is because the social culture formed in the '90s and the 2000s was of a variety that was unable to create anything but cynical managers. People don't trust them, they feel this would be a losing position from the start. Lenin's opponents, the imperialist members of the Entente governments, didn't understand the man, and so they were terrified of him. Whereas today, you can read and essentially comprehend any leader.

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[5] Dimitri Bykov (b. 1967) is a writer, poet, journalist, and member of the *Courtouaznye Manierysty* group of poets (Courteous Mannerists). He is author of a bestselling biography of Boris Pasternak (2005) and regularly contributes to the *Ogoniok* magazine. Being well known for his political engagement, he became a popular speaker during the protest rallies in Moscow from December 2011-March 2012.

AI: I think the question of leadership comes down to a dual problem. A leader is always there to express the interests of a group in a concentrated form. He invents the language of the group, he verbalises and distils it. What's interesting about Lenin is that his personality type wasn't purely cerebral. His dislike of the intelligentsia was linked to their stance, which provided the intelligentsia with an alibi. He used to say that only "involvement", only the rejection of the alibi granted to the intelligentsia, can endow you with politics[6]. Instead of dispersing revolutionary intelligence throughout the whole movement, the whole sphere of activism, the only way forward was to get rid of a privileged part of the social body – the elite, the pure mind behind its movement.

The way I understand him now, Lenin is highly immanent, being a truly *political* thinker in this regard, although not in the least of the classical type, in contrast to 19th century liberal thinkers like Marx. Compared with Lenin, even Carl Schmitt would qualify as a liberal thinker who values the function of a transcendental boundary established through reflexive differences, through dividing people into friends and enemies. For Lenin, politics belongs to the sphere of the immanent, with no separate zone of transcendental analytics which would allow one to say, "this is our friend, and this is our enemy." Politics as an immanent zone requiring its own descriptive language. And this is what Lenin was trying to create, but he ran out of time. Of course, Stalinism is a return to the conservative discourse of power, inherent in classical transcendentalism.

The main challenge posed by the Russian front of the Occupy movement – in its essentiality – is that it marks a **territory of social happiness.** And happiness is very hard to fight because it's immanent – in other words, *positive*. As a figure of unhappiness, anxiety, hatred and *ressentiment*. You can see that he is full of excruciating thoughts, inner doubts, constantly striving to prove something to someone or to express himself in some way. Of course, the main challenge for him are the happy young faces of the protesters on the boulevards. It's a huge challenge for the authorities, one that works at physiognomical and anthropological levels. Why are they so happy? And they can't explain it either. It is this incomprehensibility that requires close attention. We must not rush to net it with conceptual maps, or to locate these signs of happiness, one way or another, on the territory of political choice. It's an amazing moment, reminiscent of revolutionary happiness, minus the revolution.

Classical revolutionary images, like barricades, don't seem to work particularly well today. Even if they return, we are hardly going to be able to recognise them in their new guises. Power can be taken or transferred in a non-constitutional fashion, but it's likely to happen in a banal way, by means of some "Declaration of...". As for social physics, the real practice of this coup, I don't know what it's going to be like, if anything, but it's of utmost importance and interest.

People with a good sense of urban spaces, people of the situationist type are now in demand, as never before. The recent [May 2012] events have shown how important it is to modify urban spaces – for instance, take the space of Chistoprudny Boulevard, a place with a high degree of social marking, always full of Muscovites, suburbanites, homeless people, Goths, and various youth groups... Curiously, the Occupy movement has equipped this space with a new kind of hygiene, making it clean by removing traces of social decay. The police complain about the mess that's been created, but it's exactly the other way around. The space turned into something neat, organised, muscular. The same can be said about the spring processions [March and April 2012]. The city's space is growing more dynamic, more fit for a moving body – not sitting on a bench with a beer, but a mobile and young body. A body capable, for instance, of covering the whole Boulevard Ring with its movement, of giving cops a slip, putting up a leaflet or a banner and disappearing. This kind of thing hasn't happened in a long time. We've known this from occasional episodes, like Strategy 31 at Triumfalnaya Square[7] or the 2010 antifascist attacks on the Khimki administration building. Urban dynamism is definitely growing, which is incredibly interesting.

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[6] Lenin's attitude to "intelligentsia" was articulated in 1903 at the 2-nd Congress of Russian Social-Democratic Working Party (RSDWP) in London. It was the first paragraph of the Party Rules. Второй съезд РСДРП. Июль – август 1903 года. Протоколы. Москва: Государственное издательство политической литературы, 1959, µ. 259 – 282.

Indeed, the problem of stagnation is also the problem of low dynamics typical for an urban environment with ghettos specifically designated for entertainment and “active leisure”. A few days ago I was in Gorky Park[8] and saw an installation of neo-Moscow “euro-leisure”. It’s not too bad. It’s just that the place is incredibly packed with people, and yet its spirit is beyond all comprehension. Provincial girls sashaying in tights and high heels, relaxed young hipsters walking around barefoot and in shorts; yogis sit right there too, while next to them there are ten pétanque lanes with people playing. A strange story, but it’s also part of the metamorphosis of urban space, its “change from above”, so to speak. Anyway, the key things will unfold in cities, and in this regard we are inevitably doomed by a new urban dynamic, as well as a new understanding and conceptualisation of it.

The task of a Russian intellectual today is to become a bit of a poet, to listen to new slang, new sounds and rhythms, and to try to catch them - not simply at a conceptual level, but also at the level of metaphor, focusing on unusual, strange words capable of channelling protest energy far more efficiently than existing concepts. There is very little, or perhaps no, perception of the universal as the most emotional and immediate thing, the most charged with energy and the most personal. This is another important consequence of space being revolutionised, the fact that the universal suddenly appears to be the most energetic, sensual, and erotically charged thing. Instead of becoming a squabble or a conflict form, any form of protest communality turns into a form of energetic self-expression within a group of people united in their feelings, very close to each other, anthropologically and emotionally: a revolutionary space is very similar to a space of love.

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[7] Article 31 of Russian Constitution guarantees a right to peaceful assembly. Since 31st of July 2009 a series of civic protests under the name “Strategy 31” were held on Moscow Triumfalnaya Square. Co-organized by Moscow Helsinki Group on 31st day of each month with 31 days, they have never received official permission. Each of the actions was dispersed by police riot and accompanied by detentions.

[8] Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure is an amusement park in Moscow.

The most dangerous thing about our present circumstances is the opposition’s political discourse, torpid and pulled from somebody else’s pockets and minds. These people are totally devoid of all sense of the aforementioned rhythm. If politics is a dance, you have to dance rhythmically instead of doing this blah-blah-blah shit borrowed from some books, which have been badly read and badly thought through.

May 2012

Ekaterina Degot (b. 1958) is an art historian, art writer and curator. Amongst the many shows she has curated or co-curated, the following are especially noteworthy: *Body Memory: Underwear of the Soviet Era,* St Petersburg, Moscow, Helsinki, and Vienna (2000 – 2004), *Struggling for the Banner: Soviet Art Between Trotsky and Stalin*, New Manege, Moscow (2008), *Citizens, Mind Yourselves: Dimitri Prigov,* Museum of Modern Art, Moscow (2008). In 2010, with David Riff and Cosmin Costinas, she curated the 1st Ural Industrial Biennial in Ekaterinburg under the title *Shockworkers of the Mobile Image*. In the following year, she curated an exhibition and the discussion platform *Auditorium Moscow* with David Riff and Joanna Mytkowska, all in collaboration with Warsaw Museum of Modern Art. In 2012, she curated *Art After the End of the World*, the discussion platform of the Kiev Biennial of Contemporary Art Arsenale, and *Time/Food* in the Stella Art Foundation in Moscow, in cooperation with Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda. She currently teaches at the Moscow Alexander Rodchenko Photography and New Media School. Her books include: *Terroristic Naturalism* (1998), *Russian 20th-Century Art* (2000,) and *Moscow Conceptualism* (with Vadim Zakharov, 2005). She has contributed works of art criticism to *Frieze*, *Artforum* and *e-flux* magazines. Degot lives and works in Moscow.

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EKATERINA DEGOT
BORIS KAGARLITSKY

FRAGILE AUTHORITARIANISM

European institutions are steadily growing more authoritarian and less democratic. Democracy is being emptied of its meaning. The procedures and institutions are still there, but there is little left of the democratic decision-making process. In this regard, Russia is ahead of its neighbors, not behind. I In this sense, if it all begins to collapse we can be the first to start coming out of the crisis. Our misfortune is our fantastic luck.

ED: In *Empire of the Periphery*[1] you suggested that Russia built "periphery capitalism" in the 90s and 2000s. Could things have developed differently?

BK: In order to be successfully integrated, Russia had to get involved in world-system processes as a periphery state. Were Russia to have laid any claims to joining the ranks of leading countries, it would have resulted in deep shocks to the whole world-sys-

[1] Boris Kagarlitsky, *Empire of the Periphery: Russia and the World System*, Pluto Press: London, 2008

tem, which no one – least of all the Russian elite – wanted. The lower classes were not happy with this periphery position in the 90s, but no one asked for their opinion. By contrast, they were reconciled with the situation seeing it as relatively safe in the first decade of this century – an effect that can be ascribed to positive market conditions. In fact, being on the periphery doesn't necessarily mean being poor. In my book, for example, I mention that assets redistributed within a system are not always directed from the periphery to the centre –under certain conditions, they can be directed from the centre to the periphery. What's important is the way the whole system is structured. For instance, both Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Muscovy had a positive international trade balance in the 17th century, receiving more silver than they were giving away. Nevertheless, both countries were sinking into an extremely deep system crisis. That was because these processes were completely dependent on the logic of development elsewhere by others.

The same thing happened to us in the 2000s. Positive world market conditions allowed Russia to receive significant sums of petrodollars, along with valuable resources, which were distributed in favour of feedstock suppliers. And yet, Russian capitalism never managed to use those assets efficiently for development. I wonder why.

During these decades a model has taken shape in Russia which, I think, can also be defined as "rent capitalism". This would refer to capitalist relations – although they are not linked to production development for which there is no need or demand – in which main thing is to extract rent, first of all, from natural resources. Secondly, the remains of the Soviet Union have been utilized as another source of rent, even in terms of moral and cultural capital. As an arts specialist you will know that we are still living off the remainder of the Russian avant-garde's moral and cultural legacy, relying on it as parasites without creating anything comparable to it. In the same way we are living off the legacy of Russian literature, which now also includes the legacy of socialist realism. If the intelligentsia can do it, why are we so unhappy with Lukoil, Gazprom and Rosneft when they do precisely the same thing?

The political scientist Mikhail Malyutin[2] said that everything made in the USSR had a huge factor of safety built into it – the country had to be able to survive a medium-force nuclear attack. Instead of a nuclear apocalypse, reforms happened. And in terms of the scale of destruction, their results turned out to be relatively similar. If we compare the casualties, these events have been similar to a tactical nuclear bombing.

Be that as it may, we used to have a safety resource. The country continued to use its old infrastructure, achievements of science and technology and ageing industrial facilities. By the way, the latter source of rent is as non-renewable as the former. Oil, roads, cultural capital and human resources, all these can be exhausted. One has to find new deposits, build new roads and train new personnel. But our rent capitalism took the form of economic management that was held together by both predatory and parasitic features. For some reason, Engels thought that such a style was peculiar to primitive peoples.

Rent capitalism has created a ruling elite which cannot handle modernisation, amongst other things. It is also incapable of reproducing any social relations, creating development mechanisms or establishing a self-sustaining structure. While there are still funds coming from outside and resources that can be extracted from the earth, the system is unable to create anything new. That is why the world crisis for Russia became the moment of truth. At the end of 2010 it looked as if Russia was flooded with petrodollars, but the purchasing power of the dollar in relation to gold had dropped. We have now come to a threshold where all our resources have been exhausted at the same time, simultaneously. Even our cultural assets are exhausted. We are also on the brink of permanently depleting another asset, which has otherwise always been there : "professionals willing to work for free". They have grown older or simply need cash, if only to replace an old computer. In the 90s, university departments and faculties would raise money to pay their electricity bills, but now people can't and won't pay – their psychological resources

[2] Mikhail Malyutin (1955–2009), a Russian political figure, in 2000–2011 Minister of Finance

have been overextended. Back then there was a feeling that you had to bear with it for a while and then everything would somehow be fine. That feeling is gone.

I published an article titled "Depreciation" at the beginning of the last decade. I expected the existing equipment to be depreciated by 2007–08. It was, but everything was so durably made that it continues to work. Still, everyday you have something physically breaking down, failing. There has been no basic maintenance for some 20 or 30 years. This is why the system in Russia is beginning to disintegrate amidst the world economic crisis.

The present-day protest movement started not because of people's awakened sense of dignity, but because people felt, emotionally and intuitively, that a certain limit had been reached. Perhaps they don't even understand themselves what they are unhappy about or how to name it – nothing has changed, after all. At best, they say that things have accumulated. But the question remains: Why now?

My answer would simply be that the limit has effectively been reached – people sense it much as animals sense an earthquake coming before reacting hysterically and fleeing. Our whole society is like these poor creatures. And the fact that they react irrationally doesn't make the reaction less precise.

Receiving Two Documents and Drinking Tea

At the same time, the bureaucratic system continues to disintegrate as a result of the general economic crisis. The authorities are trying to react to the crisis by redistributing resources. And that clashes with another task, as formulated by these very authorities, that of changing nothing. If bureaucrats were directly tasked with "abolishing education", that is, if the authorities themselves put into words our accusations directed at them – "we want to abolish free education, free health care, the public pension system…" – it would make our life easier. No such luck. At present, a bureaucrat in Russia receives two different documents from the same office in one day. In one we find an injunction declaring: "the facility you are heading has to function perfectly, you cannot touch a thing". In yet another: "the facility has to be completely destroyed". If they fail to satisfy either of these requests they will have to answer for it. The authorities give themselves a contradictory and impossible task, securing full stability while systematically and ruthlessly destroying everything stability is based upon.

Whenever I mention this two-document example to bureaucrats they admit that this happens every day. And when I ask them the obvious follow-up, "What do you do?" they tellingly respond: "Nothing". Let's take Pavlov's experiment. A dog is shown a rectangle, which is followed by an electric shock. It is then it's shown a circle and brought a piece of meat. The dog's natural reflexes start to work. It's then shown an ellipse. Dogs with a weak nervous system have a fit of hysterics, those with a strong one turn away and fall asleep. That's what happened to the state apparatus last spring. One part of it is in a permanent state of hysterics, while the other is turning away from the whole thing. As a result, there is no longer any state governance at the lower level, people are just sitting there drinking tea, or formally trying to put into effect the instructions they've been given while essentially doing nothing. A friend of mine is now in the process of merging two universities, having to put together an hourly schedule of classes for a new department which doesn't exist, her task being indefinite in terms of its contents and workload. Yet the document has to be finished no later than this Wednesday.

ED: You've always insisted that it is wrong to think of Russia as being behind the West. And in point of fact, contemporary Russia is unfortunately in the vanguard of global socio-political processes. Could you elaborate on this point?

BK: The neo-liberal model has exhausted itself everywhere. The practical effects of this can take different forms, as can the model's system-wide disintegration in Europe, but that's another matter. One might be tempted to say that our form of disintegration is better because it's clearer. Remember Antonio Gramsci: a war of position and a war of manoeuvre. Cultural-political institutions in Europe are a very tenacious environment. Therefore, the process can develop quickly, but not in a clear-cut way, not in any pronounced forms or in local momentary flashes. This is what we see in relation to social protests. In fact, the system of social state institutions likewise used to be tenacious, and neo-liberalism found it hard to overcome their resistance. This is a well-known problem faced by leftist, progressive reformatory movements, although the problems of Thatcherism were similar: institutions are naturally inclined to sabotage any change processes. In the end, the right managed to break down social state institutions just in time – by then they needed those institutions really badly in order to be able to oppose the crisis they themselves generated.

Conversely in Russia, the environment is not very tenacious and, at the same time, quite fragile. This is a characteristic feature of the form of authoritarianism we've created. It's hard but not durable, like glass. Even bulletproof glass can still be smashed, as long as you find a weak spot. Hence, the disintegration processes in Russia could be quicker. We've held our ground for longer than others. Today Russian bureaucrats are eager to say, time and again: "Look at Western Europe, how everything is collapsing there." But Western Europe can afford to take its time in disintegrating.

From Liberal Promises to Authoritarian Measures

ED: We can see a new phenomenon in authoritarian Russian rhetoric today. In his repressive politics, Putin is starting to appeal to the European case.

BK: Western Europe is also drifting towards authoritarianism. Our controlled democracy is no anomaly, it's an example of the kind of state political arrangements Western elites strive for. But this model is unlikely to survive. Look at what they've done to Italy: Mario Monti, a man who hadn't been elected or even nominated by anyone, was parachuted into Italy by international banks, and the Italian political elites were forced at gunpoint to go with it, while the population simply hadn't been asked. Say what you like about Berlusconi, but he had his base of supporters, whereas Monti has no political base. This is an attempt to implant controlled democracy on a pan-European scale. In point of fact, the shift towards authoritarianism is a pan-European tradition. You should read Susan George. *Post-Democracy* by Colin Crouch[3] is a wonderful book. European institutions are steadily growing more authoritarian and less democratic. Democracy is being emptied of its meaning. The procedures and institutions are still there, but there is little left of the democratic decision-making process. In this regard, Russia is ahead of its neighbors, not behind. I In this sense, if it all begins to collapse we can be the first to start coming out of the crisis. Our misfortune is our fantastic luck.

The authorities in Russia say: "Look at what's happening in the West – they have a budget deficit while we have a surplus. They have mass protests while we had nothing at all up until December. They have a hard-line aggressive police force..." But the paradoxical thing is that it's all going to start later here, and is most likely to finish earlier. In our case, the whole process will be very intensive, even spectacular, and everything will just begin to collapse with an awful lot of noise. This is a very Russian thing. Europe would take decades to go through a particular period – we would be done in a couple of years, in a month. And then just as suddenly, we might find ourselves in the rear-guard of the process. We have nowhere to go – everything is so bad we have to make decisions that would take us beyond existing models.

ED: A quick question: don't you think the Monti scenario is possible here? Coming not from the World Bank, but from Russian oligarchs who might decide they have nothing to gain from Putin and replace him by Kudrin [4]or some such...

BK: Ah, Kudrin. Yes, we are going to see it all, it's a question of a few months. By the time you've transcribed, translated and published all this, when it comes out we might already have Kudrin

[3] Colin Crouch. *Post-Democracy.* John Wiley & Sons, 20.08.2004

[4] Kudrin: Alexei Kudrin (born 1960) - Russian politician, in 2000–2011 minister of finance, an ardent partisan of the free market and neoliberal capitalism of the thatcherist variety. He represents one of the main hopes of the liberal intelligentsia seeking westernization. On September 26, 2011, right after Vladimir Putin's announcement of his intention to seek the presidency for a third time, he was asked to resign from his position by President Dmitry Medvedev, probably because of his dissatisfaction with this turn of events. Nevertheless, Putin still publicly calls him one of his closest friend.

and a national unity government with Navalny[5], for example, as some kind of top-level bureaucrat.

ED: But that would be a harder, a real dog-eat-dog version of neo-liberalism.

BK: That's right. They might end up being physically killed, all of them, and that's the thing. The level of opposition increases with every stage. Primorye Guerrillas are no joke. I very much hope it never happens in this way. In fact, I am trying to slightly frighten my virtual interlocutor. However, the society has a huge backlog of accumulated aggression. The question is how to channel it in a sensible way. But to a large extent, this process is uncontrollable. Nuances and details are hard to predict. At some stage, a government of liberal opposition close to the powers-that-be is inevitable.

ED: That is, by definition, a government more right-wing than Putin.

BK: Of course. But there will be virtually no resources left for it to be able to hold power. This kind of government will be extremely weak and incapable of governing, of using its repression resources efficiently. The keyword here is efficiency. Because it'll be a matter of mere weeks, months at most, for them to move from liberal promises to authoritarian measures, but when it comes to technicalities it's going to be very hard to put things in practice.

ED: What kind of authoritarian measures? Economic? Increasing the pension age by 10 years?

BK: These policies, only beginning now, are going to cause a social explosion. Now, let's consider a government that will, in the aftermath of this explosion, try to carry on with the same policies or tighten them up even more. There will be mass protests with some violence involved. Given that the liberals' victory would mean an inevitable demoralisation of the repressive apparatus (they are going to become casualties of the new configuration), they will simply sabotage the new government's instructions.

ED: You mean, they will join the side of the people?

BK: No, they'll just stop working, much as the Ministry of Education isn't working now. What will the police do? They'll have nothing to do but sit around and drink tea. They won't go over to the people's side or join demonstrations. They'll just stop arriving on time, they won't have enough petrol to start up their vans. They'll be chronically short of batons and champaign bottles (in a widely publicised case in 2012 policemen raped a detainee using a champaign bottle – ed.).

ED: What you are describing is reminiscent of the late Brezhnev period. But I don't believe in mass protests organised by those who are affected by economic reforms. The creative class will probably be happy, it'll think of itself as the elite.

BK: Ah, but there won't be any creative class. They'll simply have no money. All these projects will be terminated. Six months later, the majority of their projects will cease to exist. The creative class will join the ranks of the unemployed and join the margins.

USSR Postcolonial Problems

ED: Where does the so-called New Europe, which in part coincides with the former Eastern Europe, come into the picture? Looks like it's trying to be the "formal" in its treatment of European ways. Needless to say, Russia ignores these countries…

BK: I think Russia is right to ignore these countries. The irony is that the situation there is not bad enough for them to start affecting societal, global or pan-European changes. Unlike us, they are not desperate. As Lenin said in 1922 when taking stock of the October Revolution, it was the revolution of hopelessness or desperation. They remain purely passive. If the crisis in Western Europe and Russia results in the rise of fascism, rather than a new democratic revolution, then they will also be able to build a quite adequate fascist regime. But considered independently, they have no resources to generate it themselves or to launch a certain trend that would become pan-European. Eastern Europe is in trouble. They wanted to be part of Europe, but today's Russia is far more correlated with pan-European processes. By the way, the same can perhaps be said of Ukraine. It's a big country undergoing a very acute socio-political crisis, which is developing faster than in Russia, following a slightly different scenario (which yet again proves that Ukraine is not Russia), but according to the same, nominally oriental, scheme. If the European environment is institutional, tenacious and structured, in Russia it's not institutional and is therefore poorly structured and fragile. The same applies to Ukraine.

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[5] Navalny - Alexej Navalny (b 1976) - a Russian lawyer, political and financial activist. Since 2009, he has gained prominence within Russia, and notably within the Russian media, as a critic of corruption, and especially of Vladimir Putin. On the other hand, he has expressed nationalistic views on many occasions. He was one of the most well known leaders of Russian opposition in the winter of 2011–2012.

ED: What about post-colonial problems with respect to the USSR?

BK: I think it was just an attempt to bring our set of problems closer to the world-wide discourse, which in itself was quite controversial. This discourse, in my opinion, is inapplicable to the Soviet republics or to the Eastern bloc – especially seeing that it would be problematic to apply it even to Africa. Post-colonialism was invented by European intellectuals suffering from guilt complex towards the third world. The world-system theory gives you a fairly good understanding of this process. Colonialism was not a process of subjugation and conquering – it was a process of involving nations into Europe, whereby they got included and integrated into the world-system, hierarchical from the start. Therefore, decolonisation does not represent a radical change in the logic of this process. Decolonisation, which meant Western Europe rejecting its social responsibilities to third world countries, was worse than late colonialism. Given the form it took, decolonisation was a crime towards colonial nations.

ED: And would you extend this to the USSR's relations with, say, Armenia or Georgia? Do you get the impression that, by dissolving, the Soviet Union failed to fulfil its promises to the former republics?

BK: This is a very different story. The dissolution of the Soviet Union has nothing to do with the dissolution of colonial empires.

ED: Is Russia not an heir to the USSR?

BK: It is – to the exact same degree as Armenia or Uzbekistan. It wasn't a colonial type of empire. I'd rather compare it to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; another good analogue would be the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. An Oxford historian specialising in the late Roman era and the early "barbarian kingdoms" wrote in the foreword to his book that there were many processes of that time he didn't understand until the USSR collapsed. At that point he was able to test experimentally some of the mechanisms that existed in the late Roman empire and later emerged in the barbarian kingdoms. Today we are like those barbarian kingdoms. What does it matter if we belong to the Lombard Kingdom or the Visigothic Kingdom? The nature of the relations between the pot-Soviet oddments is exactly what it used to be in the barbarian kingdoms. Joint actions, conflicts sometimes, but for the main part, everyone getting their share of the mutual legacy. Counterintuitive though it may sound, this is why we cannot develop at this stage – the state's aim is to share the existing legacy rather than to create something new.

Occupy Moscow

ED: I would like to move to your diagnosis of social processes in Russia, in particular, new ones, that is, the protest movement that started in December 2011.

BK: We are experiencing a state of desocialisation now. When social relations are disorganised the concept of an intellectual's responsibility vanishes and there is, at best, only the notion of personal honour left. It's unclear who you are responsible to – there is no object. Nor are there any reference groups, except what you create for yourself: my friends, the colleagues I respect. This problem of subjectification of expert opinion exists in the West too. The expert community is no more, there are expert communities; you are free to choose whichever one thinks of you as a prominent expert, and if they don't recognise you, so what – it's you who doesn't recognise them. Each group lives its own life.

In part, this is a by-product of neo-liberalism. In our case, the general neo-liberal process is also augmented by mass declassing and social disorganisation. However, its effect is that even the ruling ideology becomes very difficult to force on people. It used to be, first and foremost, a problem for opposition ideologies, which were hard to anchor to public interests, but now alternative ideologies (leftist variations, for instance) are still experiencing difficulties, whereas the ruling ideology cannot hold onto anything either. This is why the regime is groping for ideas, one after another. Strangely, I think the situation is now is better for alternatives than it was three to five years ago, because we have crossed the threshold beyond which dominating ideologies no longer work.

The protest movement of December was an outburst of emotional dissatisfaction among Moscow and St Petersburg's middle classes. Not the creative class, I must stress, and not the representatives of "Putin's generation", those who have achieved something in Putin's time. No, that was emotional discomfort expressed by the mass of the middle class. Far from being hipsters, these people were not necessarily very well-off. In total, several hundred thousand people took part in the protests – perhaps even two hundred thousand. You can't find two hundred thousand hipsters in Moscow. There were people from different walks of life, pensioners, even workers (according to statistics, their percentage was higher than the percentage of workers among the whole population of Moscow). The protests were highly democratic in nature. At the same time, a surge in the provinces subsided quickly – provincials didn't identify themselves with Moscow's protesters, they couldn't recognise their interests and problems. The leaders who usurped the platform proved to be unpopular in the country, one can even say, appalling to the masses: Navalny, Ksenia Sobchak, and Kudrin. The platform itself, this variety of people appals the provinces. The opposition activists themselves are talking about this problem. As soon as they start meaningful conversations, people say: "You support them, don't you." There is another irony here. Up to now, those who rioted against Putin were those who supported him, to an extent. Those who really hate the regime and want to physically destroy it are those who voted for Putin. They really dream of hanging the elite on lampposts.

ED: Those who voted for Putin want him dead?

BK: Yes – because, voting for Putin, they thought they were rescuing themselves from the pension reform, from the rise in utility bills, from the privatisation of education. Here is the bastard you hate with your whole heart, and he is telling you: you are going to die tomorrow unless you vote for me. They voted while hating the regime to an extent Moscow's intelligentsia can't even imagine, try as it might.

ED: What do those Putin-hating masses think of the left?

BK: Nothing. They don't know the difference between the left, the right, the green and the purple.

ED: Will this system be changed to become more politically explicit?

BK: Well, everything has to burn down first, and it's not until then that we can start building a new world on the ruins, among the ashes. You can't build it in any other way.

ED: In other words, until that happens the left as a significant political force has no future?

BK: Well, if you join the arsonists you certainly have a chance. But you have to bear in mind that you can be burned down along with the rest.

ED: In this light, what do you think not of political movements being created, but of fluctuations without a leader, like the Occupy movement in Moscow?

BK: They've already failed.

ED: Were they bound to fail?

BK: Of course. A political organisation has a certain mechanism; it has existed since the time of the Ancient Greeks. If the earth was triangular that would be fun, but it's round, and that's a fact. You can invent a thousand models of political action, but they won't work. All those models have also been tried since the ancient days, only to fail each time.

ED: You didn't think much of the idea of enlightenment promoted by Occupy Abay?

BK: What enlightenment? Whom have they enlightened – each other? Although it was great to have it, nothing useful came out of it.

ED: You wouldn't take the physical dimension of human experience, which involved solidarity and being together, as sufficient justification?

BK: If you are talking about the individual experience that made some particular people happy, I am glad for them. The society gains nothing from it. We all have our fair share of pleasant memories. Yesterday I was talking to the guys who acted as press officers for Occupy. They gush about how wonderful it all was, while the audience is nonplussed: it's a total mess, nothing works, all those actions make no sense. And the guys go: "Yeah, sure, but it's fun to remember it now."

Adaptation of the Left

ED: So how would you define the political aims of the left?

BK: To collaborate with social movements as they emerge, to try and lead them down a civilised route, as far as that's possible, to generalise and synthesise, or integrate, their demands, transforming them into a political project, and to use this surge of activity to show that the left can be useful.

ED: Where does their collaboration with European and American left-wingers come into play? And where do they belong: inside political movements, the academy or among street fighters?

BK: Political forces are being reconfigured now, this process has only just begun. Greece is very typical in this regard. True, this new political movement is powerful, but that's not the point; to be able to play some significant role it has to become the loudspeaker of the mass protest. Until that happens, it remains a mediator, and is inefficient as such. The protest will continue to gain momentum because, objectively, the situation will keep growing worse. With whom will we have to speak then? With those who will, in the process of fighting, be transformed into the next generation of the leftist movement, its next wave.

The leftist movement in Europe is going through an extremely acute crisis today – strangely, to a greater extent than in the States, since the pathos of a social transformation has been replaced by the idea of protecting minorities. The social has been replaced by the group.

ED: While the political has been replaced by the ethical or the cultural.

BK: The cultural, yes, if understood in a very narrow sense.

Whether it's good or bad – it doesn't work. Over the last 20 years we've seen the leftist movement adapt to the victory of neo-liberalism in different ways. This adaptation reached the peak of its success at the moment when neo-liberalism itself started to collapse. Hence, during the crisis of neo-liberalism the left is inept. The system is in crisis, your moment has come, yet you are unable to do anything. Why? Because you are more conservative than even those who are at the helm of the system. Your whole programme is about securing a larger percentage of jobs within the system for homosexuals, who will pursue neo-liberal policies. It's better if this is done by homosexuals rather than by alpha males.

ED: Are you critical of the system based on affirmative action, quotas and political correctness?

BK: It's totally reactionary. It's one of the ways to integrate more people and groups into neo-liberalism.

ED: Comparing the Russian left-wingers to, say, their Western counterparts, do they differ in their theoretical platforms? In their intellectual experience or their habits? Or should we, perhaps, stop using the term West altogether?

BK: It depends on how we use it. Geographically it is applicable; in terms of intellectual processes, probably not. It would be more relevant to distinguish between the centre and the periphery, but then again, they are interrelated. Talking about experiences, ours is harder and less structured. There is very little insurance. Our moral risks are higher than in Western Europe. Developed capitalism allows for a more or less developed form of liberal democracy. We don't have it. Still, I don't believe the risk to our physical survival, to our chances of losing jobs or becoming penniless, is any higher at the moment. I think it may even be lower than in the West. Our moral risks, though, are higher. We haven't got a Western European mechanism in place, one which allows you to be comfortable using a system of compromises: you take on a particular level of compromise, there are numerous compartments, the rules are clear. None of this has been defined in our case. You have to make decisions yourself; every minute you have to decide what's allowed and what's not. Boris Kupriyanov (the manager of Falanster bookshop – ed.) finds it hard to deal with, he complains about constantly having to make decisions anew. If you could find your niche once and for all and have everything clear-cut that would be a different story.

ED: I feel exactly the same; all your energy gets spent on this.

BK: Same here. When doing practical things you understand that you can't do them unless you make compromises. In Europe, everything is clear: you have to follow some rules here, other rules there, you've defined your own compromise, started down your route, you've got your limits. Sometimes you stop somewhere; once again, you can plan things ahead and find a suitable niche to occupy. Whereas we don't have such morally comfortable niches. One moment you see it, the next – whoops – it's gone, like in a nightmare. You've only just settled and defined your boundaries, you look up and it's already been swept away in a flicker.

ED: Which is why we feel inclined towards unending intellectual activities?

BK: Yes, and that is why our brains are much better trained, while theirs are frozen. To finish, let me use a concrete example to demonstrate the difference between the Russian and the Western left. I am lecturing in Sweden, my audience belongs to the youth movement of the Left Party, the compound where all this is happening is, of course, completely dry. After the lecture we decided to go outside to have a few beers with the young Swedish revolutionaries. Suddenly I can see they are terrified. They go: "Oops, we've got no bottle-opener. We can't drink beer now." I open one bottle using another, then open one more using the table and say: "There are half a dozen other ways, but I think these two should be enough." That's when I really grew in their eyes. This is the difference between a Russian intellectual and a Swedish revolutionary. They know that a bottle is opened with a special tool, a bottle-opener.

ED: This tool is available, deideologised and non-class – everyone has a bottle-opener. This is something that doesn't exist here.

BK: Yes, every time we need to open a bottle we come up with a new way, depending on the circumstances that happen to be at hand at any given moment.

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ORIENTALISM: A RUSSIAN VERSION

Russian society, its intellectual community included, seems to be indifferent to issues of cultural diversity. Virtually no public discussions on this subject are to be found, at least none of any note. This is especially surprising, given that Russia is a "multinational country", at least according to its constitution. This fact is even more surprising when juxtaposed with the vast array of publications and institutional standing of "multicultural" and "postcolonial" studies in the West. While orientalism (as conceptualised by Edward Said) has firmly entered the academic parlance of the West over the past last twenty-five years, Said's very name, until recently, was entirely unfamiliar to many in Russia.[1] Topics usually grouped

[1] Said's death in September 2003 went completely unnoticed in Russia. The author has pointed this out before (see V. Malakhov, "Orientalism, Russian-Style", *Russkiy Zhurnal* [*Russian Journal*], http://old.russ.ru/politics facts/20031024-malakhov.html; date of access September 2012). The Russian translation of Said's book was published in 2006, 28 years after the original edition was released.

under the heading of “Orientalism” seem to be of absolutely no interest to our academic community.[2] How are we to account for this indifference?

Amongst others, the following three reasons ought to be considered first: (a) trauma resulting from the collapse of the state; (b) the nationality policy implemented by Communist authorities, with attention given to its special features and long-term effects and (c) the specific features of identity politics pursued by contemporary Russian officials and opinion makers in recent years.

The Trauma Resulting from the Collapse of the State

In the late 80s and early 90s Russian public opinion was not opposed to the prospect of losing territories that were perceived as not rightfully belonging to Russia. However, it did oppose the prospect of losing the territories that people felt were indeed their own. Meaning that the majority of the population was rather indifferent to the loss of the Baltic states, Central Asia and Transcaucasia, whereas Kharkov, Semipalatinsk, Tiraspol, Sevastopol and Minsk[3] were an entirely different matter. It is for this reason that the society of the new Russia was shocked to find itself with borders that coincided with the administrative borders of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

The trauma in question was further aggravated by both the size of centrifugal forces typical for the early 90s and the streams of refugees and economic migrants moving to the interior of the country, coming from both the newly independent territories and the south of the Russian Federation itself. Because of this trauma, the intellectual approach that is often cited under the title of “postcolonial studies” was unlikely prospect in Russia.

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[2] The only exception being, of course, professional ethnographers and orientalists, who have to address these questions as part of their regular duties.

[3] Cities in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Belarus where the majority of the population is Russian or Russian-speaking, and therefore historically considered Russian in the popular imagination of Russia (ed.).

As we know, history does not allow for the conditional tense. That having been said, if the USSR had not collapsed (an option that perhaps remained open as late as the 19th of August 1991) debates on “colonialism” and “postcolonialism” would inevitably have emerged. The arguments provoked in the 70s by Olzhas Suleimenov’s *Az-i-Ia*[4] could be taken as the necessary precursors for such discussions.

The Specifics of the Nationality Policy of Communist Authorities and Its Long-Term Effects

The antinomy of this policy was identified by the St Petersburg sociologist Viktor Voronkov, who called the USSR the country of triumphant multiculturalism.[5] The “nationality policy” of the Soviet Union was aimed at creating a new historical and supra-ethnic community. However, it was precisely this policy that institutionalised and sponsored ethnic nations.[6] Ethnic cultural elites and ethnic institutions were established not only on the level of the Union’s republics, but also on the level of “national-territorial autonomies” within Russian Federation. Universities, publishing houses and unions of composers were created, and the activities of officially endorsed artistic collectives were given generous financial support. Fiction and academic books in the languages of the USSR’s peoples enjoyed impressive print runs. Again, it has to be stressed that the languages of ethnic groups residing in the Russian Federation likewise enjoyed generous support by the central government.

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[4] The book by the Kazakh Russian-speaking writer Olzhas Suleimenov, *Az-i-Ia, or Notes of a Well-Meaning Reader* (*1975*). Its first part is dedicated to relations between the Turks and the Slavs, and it was banned in the USSR, only becoming famous as an underground publication (ed.).

[5] This characterisation was first voiced in 1999 at a conference on multiculturalism held at the Carnegie Moscow Center. The publication of the talk was severely delayed. See V. Voronkov, “Multiculturalism and the Deconstruction of Ethnic Boundaries”, in *Multikul’turalizm i transformatsiya postsovetskikh obshchestv* [*Multiculturalism and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Societies*], edited by V. S. Malakhov and V. A. Tishkov, Moscow: Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2002, pp. 38–47.

[6] See Y. Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism”, *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2, 1994, pp. 414–452; Brubaker R. *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Cornell University Press, Ithaka, London: 2001.

Institutions of ethnic statehood proved useful in the era when central power was weak. Many "national territorial autonomies" declared their sovereignty in the early 90s. Although these declarations turned out to be purely declarative and were readily disavowed, they were not without consequences. There are clear preferences for people from titular ethnic groups made by authorities in these entities (in terms of language and symbolic politics, as well as in the politics of personnel).[7]

This fact is of great importance for understanding the specifics of the Russian situation. Not simply the political situation, but also the *epistemological* situation. In the Russian case, discussions of topics such as cultural hegemony, acculturation, assimilation, etc. – if at all – would have been conducted in a context other than that of "inner colonialism". For our purposes, the most significant consequence of the Soviet "nationality policy" was the low prestige of belonging to a minority group. It is no coincidence that the Russian word "natsmen", short for "national minority", has decidedly negative connotations. In my view, the problem lies not in the cultural chauvinism of the Russian or Russified majority, but rather with the *deficiency of the practice of recognition* typical for the Soviet era. Since ethnic categories served as an instrument of power (namely, as a means of dividing the population and determining access to social benefits), ethnic identity was not derived from individual choice. The fact that people found themselves belonging to a particular ethnic group was the result of administrative decisions. The question of affiliation to a particular ethnic group was not a question of cultural choice. It was predetermined – by a record in one's passport, the fact of living on the territory of a "national republic", etc. In other words, individuals did not voluntarily identify with a particular ethnic group – their identification was prescribed from without, sometimes in extremely harsh ways (by deportation, for instance). This is the first point concerning the practice of recognition pursued by Soviet authorities.

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[7] One could refer to the following fact: Russian teachers squeezed out of universities and, more generally, Russian-speaking specialists out of education, on the pretext of their not being able to speak the "state language" in Chuvashia; Buddhism given the status of the official religion in Kalmykia; the "islamisation" of the public sphere in Chechnya, etc.

The second point is as follows. Over half a century, between the 30s and the 80s, urban culture dominated the country. This culture is largely *ethnically indifferent*. A communication space devoid of ethnic characteristics (except for Russian as the language of international communication) has been created in cities. By definition, this space is *anonymous* – it was assumed that all people resembled each other and, accordingly, that social interactions were not affected by individual cultural characteristics. The individual addressed and constructed by this culture was "the Soviet person". By default, to be soviet implied two characteristics, the ability to speak Russian and the absence of particular ethnic features.

Hence the third point that the country represented itself – projected outwards and inwards – as multinational (multicultural, if we borrow from contemporary vocabulary). Yet this multiculturalism was ostentatious and controlled. People realised how artificial and "orchestrated" the cultural diversity promoted by authorities actually was. Officially supported Soviet culture ("national in form, socialist in essence") did not imply any self-activity, spontaneity or lower-level creativity. Therefore, the majority of the population was guided by those cultural patterns that had taken shape in their anonymous, ethnically neutral urban environment. Despite national elites quietly opposing the "Russian" centre in the Union's republics, Russian-language culture was absolutely dominant inside the Russian Federation by the 60s or 70s. No one could challenge this domination.

To summarise, the practise of recognition (and non-recognition, if you will) which defined the perception – and self-perception – of minorities in post-Soviet Russia, was affected by three factors: (1) ethnicity as a result of administrative regulation rather than of their choice; (2) the hegemony of ethnically indifferent urban culture; (3) the silent identification of Soviet identity with speaking Russian, and vice versa.

This combination of factors resulted in the low prestige associated with being a 'natsmen'. No one wants to be called a minority in today's Russia. A typical example is the title of a federal law aimed, in point of fact, at protecting the cultural rights of ethnic minorities. It is called "On National Cultural Autonomy". The wording suggested earlier, "On Protecting National Minorities", was not adopted – for the simple reason that the term "national minority" was considered derogatory by members of the minority groups themselves. [8]

The Specifics of the Identity Politics in Recent Years

The future Patriarch (then Metropolitan) Kirill made a statement along the following lines: it is wrong to think of Russia as a multi-religious state; Russia is "a Christian Orthodox country with religious minorities". This statement can be seen as a caesura between the symbolic politics pursued by the Russian government in the 90s and that of "the Putin era". It would be an overstretch to call these politics particularly comprehensive. You occasionally come across ritualistic mentions of the country's "multinational character" in official rhetoric, presidential speeches, for example, are peppered with mentions of "the Rossian nation" [The term 'Rossians' ('Rossiayne')refers to all the citizens of Russia, as opposed to the term 'Russkie' which refers to a particular ethnicity], the media sporadically refers to "the Rossians[9]", and the leaders of the other three "traditional religions" are still occasionally invited, along with the Patriarch, to the Kremlin. However, you cannot help noticing that "the Russian project" is getting stronger and stronger. This project consists in:

1. Reducing the traditional cultural variety of Russian life to a certain canon. The contents of this canon remain (and will likely continue to remain) blurred, but its contours are quite well-defined and can be described as revolving around "Orthodox Christianity and Great Power ideology";
2. Attempting to semantically reload the word "Russian" – it has to regain its supra-ethnic meaning which it supposedly had in the Romanov Empire. In particular, the urge to squeeze out the notion of "rossiysky" and replace it with "russky" smacks of *assimilationist obsessiveness*. It is likewise worth mentioning that "russky" is used in numerous brand names: Russian Cars, Russian Bus Lines, Russian Aluminium, Russian Credit, and The Russian World Foundation. And perhaps it goes without saying, "Russian culture".

The proponents of "the Russian project" sometimes show their willingness to bear with the word "rossiysky" related to phenomena lying beyond the reach of culture. For instance, they are willing to classify the state as "Rossiyskoe". Still, they are positively against using "rossiysky" when referring to the symbolic entity which currently exists in Russia, that is "Russian culture".[10]

As far as I can see, any attempts to avoid the public use of expressions including the term "rossiysky" (in particular, the expression "Rossiyskaya kultura" [*Rossian culture*] are counterproductive. First, the term "russky" has been used *specifically as an ethnic category* for too long. Under the Communists it served to denote an ethnic rather than a civil community. Perhaps this term could have been de-ethnicised when the Soviet regime was being dismantled, but this opportunity was missed. In particular, I mean to reference the two Chechen wars[11] and the subsequent events in the North Caucasus. What happened after November 1994 does not suggest that the population of this region could think of themselves as Russians in any sense of the word. Equally illusory are the hopes that the population of central regions, already used to thinking of people coming from the south of Russia as "persons of Caucasian nationality", could accept this appellation.

Secondly, the culture of today's Russia, being supra-ethnic, is not an absolutely uniform entity. It consists of different elements, including ones whose ethnic origins are easily recognised. They are not Russian in ethnic sense of the word.

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[8] See: Malakhov V., Osipov A. *The Category of "Minorities" in the Russian Federation: the Reflection on Uses and Misuses* // International Obligations and National Debates: Minorities around the Baltic Sea / Editor-in-Chief Sia Spiliopoulou Akermark. – Marienhamn, Aland, Finland: Alands Islands Peace Research Institute, 2006. P.497-544.

[9] *Radio Russia*, for instance, broadcasted an eponymous programme in 2007 ('Rossiyane').

[10] A. I. Solzhenitsyn, "«The Russian Question» by the End of the 20th Century", in *Publitsistika* [*Political Essays*], vol. 1, Yaroslavl': Verchne-Volzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1995, pp. 616–702; M. Sokolov, "How to Escape a Grammatical Trap", *Expert* 2006, 13 November, no. 42 (536); A. Miller, "Nation as a Frame for Political Life", *Pro et Contra*, no. 3 (37), May–June 2007, pp. 6–20.

[11] The first war in Chechnya broke off in 1994 and ended in 1996; the second one began in 1999 and lasted, in its active phase, up until 2000 (ed.)

Does the line “I shall bury a grape seed in warm soil”[12] have Russian origins? Is the tune “Seven Forty” Russian? Are such dishes as lavash, pilaf, and basturma Russian? And what about lezginka? And overtone singing? And the imagery of Paradzhanov’s films? And allusions coded in the prose of Fazil Iskander, Sholem Aleichem, and Chingiz Aitmatov? The obsessive desire to consider such elements of culture “Russian” looks very much like what our Western colleagues would call cultural imperialism.

The Russian Version of Orientalism

‘Orientalism’, again citing the paradigmatic definition of Edward Said, is wilful ignorance of the other, a refusal to recognise mixed with a willingness to patronise. The subject produced by orientalist discourse is the exotic “Orient” (with either positive or negative connotations), which has little to do with the real life of the communities that fall under its grasp.

In 21st century Russia this discourse is practised with the same naïve straightforwardness as it was in Western Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Our version of orientalism is “the burden of the Russian man”. Of course, such terms are not openly used in the era of political correctness. But this is what hides behind the the popular (and popularised by the media) mask that Russian and Soviet armed forces brought nothing but the benefits of civilisation to the territories they occupied.

This intellectual posture does not receive critical treatment in journalistic or academic circles. A typical rhetorical gesture made in response to a query from the postcolonial studies camp can be summed up as follows. What is orientalism, after all? It is epistemological colonialism. Since we had no colonialism (although we did have an empire), it is not our problem.

I would not like to be misunderstood. When people talk about orientalism, as they have been doing for the last three decades in Western Europe and North America, it is generally not done with any guilt. It has nothing to do with former colonisers self-condemnation or former subjects of colonisation triumphing.[13] It is a critical reassessment of research procedures as well as theoretical assumptions and conclusions made by scholars in humanities in the era after colonialism. No such conversations can be found in the present-day Russia.

While discussions about orientalism and anti-orientalism allowed Westerners to overcome their narcissism, Russians seem to be completely unaware about this vice in their own habits of thought.

Everyday Life vs. Official Representations

If one compares the image of Russia constructed by the state-controlled media with actual sociocultural practices, the contrast is astonishing. On the one hand, we have “Russia as a civilisation”, “Great Power, Spirituality, Victory”, “Eurasian civilisation” and related symbols forming a self-sufficient symbolic universe. On the other hand, book stalls are piled high with feng shui and yoga manuals, Haruki Murakami’s novels and Harry Potter stories, while dance studios teach “latino” and belly dancing, daily gigabyte-sized downloads are made of videos produced in the West (and recently also in South Korea and China), and mushrooming cafes offer shawarma, pizza and sushi. And here we ought to insist on deliberately mixing material and symbolic dimensions of culture, the level of consumption with the level of meaning-making, as this borderline is blurred in reality itself.

Adherents of hip hop are often not just the consumers but also the producers of this kind of art. Almost every school (and certainly every university) has an amateur team which does not simply compose music and lyrics in some progressive style, but also keeps attempting to record a “demo version”. The popularity of ethnic music is growing, slowly but steadily; records are distributed, venues where folk rock and ethnic jazz are performed multiply, and the relevant festivals are attended more actively.

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[12] A line from a well-known poem by the Moscow poet Bulat Okudzhava, in which the author refers to his Georgian roots (ed.).

[13] Yet such vulgar versions of anti-orientalism are not unheard of. Such analysis can be found in B. Turner, Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism, London: Routledge, 1994.

However, the more pluralistic and diverse the Russian society becomes on the level of everyday life, the more homogeneous and dull it looks at the level of official representations. The real society is involved in the global cultural context. In the simulative world produced by power holders it exists in isolation.

The request for a separate Russian identity, as was made by Russian authorities, was received with enthusiasm in intellectual circles. This is not to say that all the intellectuals have followed the Orthodoxy and Great Power line of identity on commission. Many have been practitioners of this discourse without any pressure from the Kremlin. Which is to say that we are really talking about the phenomenon of two classes, bureaucrats and intellectuals, moving towards each other. It is their mutual support that explains the persistence of the phantasm called "the Island of Russia".[14]

Self-Orientalisation?

The "inward" nature of Russian orientalism (as opposed to Western, outward-facing orientalism) was pointed out by the historian and journalist Kirill Kobrin.[15] As long as our bureaucrats and the intellectuals at their disposal find it useful, they will talk about Russia as an integral part of Greek Christian (i.e., Western) civilisation. The moment they come across a situation in which Russia does not compare favourably with the West, the whole arsenal of uniqueness is mobilised, "conciliarism" and "spirituality" being its trenchant weapons. What is happening here might be called self-orientalisation, the process of transforming oneself into an exotic subject. The formula of orientalism once read: "East is East, and West is West". Anti-orientalism has changed this formula by claiming that a Western mind is unable to solve the mystery of an oriental soul. Russia's own contribution to exercises of this kind might be the following: "Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone.[16]

January 2008

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[14] I refer to the formula coined by Vadim Tsimbursky in his eponymous article and later book. See V. L. Tsimbursky, *Ostrov Rossiya. Geopoliticheskie i khronopoliticheskie raboty. 1993–2006* [*Island Russia: Works on Geopolitics and Chronopolitics. 1993–2006*], Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007.; M. Nazarov, *Tayna Rossii* [*Russia's Mystery*], *Moscow: Russkaya ideya*, 1999; V. Chesnokova, *Tesnym putyom: Protsess votserkovleniya naseleniya Rossii v kontse XX veka* [*Along a Narrow Path: The Churching of the Population of Russia at the End of the 20th Century*], Moscow: Akademicheskiy proekt, 2005; A. Panarin, *Pravoslavnaya tsivilizatsiya v global'nom mire* [*Orthodox Christian Civilisation in the Global World*], Moscow: Algoritm,Eksmo, 2003; A. G. Dugin, *The Evolution of the National Idea of Rus* (*Russia*), *Otechestvennye zapiski* [*Notes of the Fatherland*], no. 3(4), 2002, pp.125–140; N. A. Narochnitskaya, *Rossiya i russkie v mirovoy istorii* [*Russia and the Russians in World History*], Moscow: Mezhunarodnye otnosheniya, 2003; M. P. Mchedlov (ed.), *Rossiyskaya tsivilizatsiya: Uchebnoe posobie dlya vuzov* [*Russian Civilisation: A Textbook for Colleges and Universities*], Moscow: Akademicheskiy proekt, 2003.

[15] See the roundtable discussion "Kto on – russkiy konservator?" ["A Russian Conservative: Who Is He?"], part of the "Facts and Opinions" programme on Radio Liberty, http://archive.svoboda.org/programs/rt/2003/rt.052403.asp; date of access September 2012.

[16] [This is the first line of a well-known Tytchev's quatrain:
Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone,
No ordinary yardstick can span her greatness:
She stands alone, unique –
In Russia, one can only believe – ed.] It was only after my talk at *Russia's Paths* that I discovered that the aforementioned Kirill Kobrin made the same point a year earlier, and in much more elegant form. See K. Kobrin, "μμμμμμμμ μμμ μμμμμμ" ["Thirty Years Later"], http://www.polit.ru/author/2007/09/18/kobrsaid_print.html; date of access September 2012.

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THE DOUBLE PERIPHERY

Russia's current geopolitical status is most commonly described as peripheral. This status applies to the base of the contemporary order (Russia is obviously in the periphery of global capitalism) as well as to its superstructure (most notably, to the field of cultural production, including contemporary art and the so-called creative industries). Russian culture today confirms its belonging to the global periphery both through its conscious discursive self-recognition – as with Western-oriented liberal intelligentsia[1] – as well as through the obsessive negation of its peripheral status in the form of various state-supported nationalist cultural projects. Of

[1] The implications of the notion of «intelligentsia», rooted in the intellectual history of Eastern Europe, are highly debatable at the moment. In my view, the most accurate definition of «intelligentsia» refers to this social group as an actor of social change, developed and implemented by the educated elites dedicated to the ideas of progress and social justice. Unfortunately, late-Soviet and post-Soviet liberal intelligentsia had largely defied this dedication in favour of vulgar free-market dogmas and social darwinism.

course, this historical situation is typical for a metropoly deprived of its former colonial grandeur. But post-Soviet social reality blurs not only the strict divisions between notions like 'base' and 'superstructure' and 'liberalism' and 'nationalism', but also – rather distinctively – the ideas of 'metropoly' and 'colony', 'oppressor' and 'oppressed', 'center' and 'periphery', etc.

What is peculiar about post-colonial discourse within the post-Soviet sphere is the relation of Russia to the former republics of the USSR that were transformed into neo-capitalist nation-states in the early 1990s. Although responsibility and guilt for the 'unfulfilled promises' of democratic transformation in most of these republics is often blamed on Russia, which has supposedly blocked their democratic aspirations out of evil imperial will. What's usually ignored in this regard is the fact that Russia's influence on most of these territories has never, at least in modern history, been as weak as it is now. Most of Russia's attempts to reassert its domination of former colonies by force (the war with Georgia in 2008, for example) or through information wars (thinking only of PR-based, mass media propaganda campaigns against Ukraine's Viktor Yuschenko and Georgia's Mikhail Saakashvili) were fruitless, while the subordination of Russia's supposed vassals – from Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko to Islam Karimov, the self-perpetuating dictator of Uzbekistan – remains highly dependent upon regional and international politics. Moreover, Russia and most of its former colonies have occupied a relatively similar position in the global constellation of power since the early 1990s – that of the former Second World, hopelessly aspiring to enter the First World but seemingly fated to the Third World status. The identification of the oppressor and the oppressed in the post-Soviet context thus poses a highly complex task for the post-Soviet, post-colonial theory.

What Is the Double Periphery?

What makes this identification even harder is the extreme variety of scenarios that post-Soviet nation-states have enacted over the last twenty years. Some of these nation-states – particularly those inCentral Asia – found themselves under the rule of tyrannical regimes that seem to outdo, by far, the harshest methods deployed by contemporary capitalism at its peripheries (however, this fact does not prevent Western democracies from an ongoing and fruitful cooperation with some of these regimes – particularly in the area of military cooperation and the 'War on Terror'[2]). On the other hand, some notable exceptions point to the fact that successful neo-capitalist transformation accompanied by a total break with *Pax Russica* is also quite possible in the post-Soviet context – not only in the case of Baltic states that did not experience Stalinist politics on the scale of the rest of Soviet republics, but, more recently, also in Georgia itself, the land of Stalin's birth.

However, the most curious cases of post-Soviet transformationreside somewhere between such extremes: the post-Soviet nation-states of Eastern European, whose paths of post-colonial transformation seem to be at odds but are actuallycomplementary. I'm speaking here about Belarus, a country whose national sovereignty is continually (potentially endlessly) shrinking to Russia's benefit, and Ukraine, a state that is able to maintain a paradoxical equilibrium between its pro-Russian and pro-European aspirations.

What makes these cases so peculiar? Instead of developing into sovereign peripheries of global capitalism in their own right, these Eastern European nation-states are still strongly attached to Russia's political, economical and cultural contexts of the periphery, effectively constituting a 'double periphery': the condition of being subordinated to a power which itself is subjected to global subordination. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the relations of power and subordination between its (Russian) center and (national) peripheries did not wither away. They were preserved in the new, neo-capitalist reality and transformed according to its logic, with the Soviet ideology of colonialism replaced by post-colonial biopolitical power. Living in the double periphery thus entails a series of spatial as well as temporal paradoxes that are crucial for grasping the historical condition of the large part of Eastern Europe that found itself on the wrong side of Schengen. Located geographically to the west of Russia, these post-Soviet republics still absorb a great deal of Western culture through Russia's mediation. Operating in a context of global supranational unification, they seem bound to the early stages of modern nation-building, with debates over the preservation of ethnic authenticity and national language dominating the public sphere, as in the case of Ukraine, or constituting the major intellectual 'alternative' to current pro-Russian cultural policy, as in the case of Belarus – an alternative that will undoubtedly occupy mainstream debate when the regime that degrades Belarusian national culture will stumble. It seems that both countries are stuck in a vicious circle of national sentiments and complexes, while the burden of their actual subordination lies far from cultural, identitarian and linguistic issues.

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[2] 'War on Terror' was first used by US President George W. Bush on 20 September 2001.

Mirrored Nationalisms, Mirrored Colonialisms

Why do these late modern nation-states, liberated from cultural and economic oppression suffered at the hands of both the Russian Empire and the USSR, the nation-states that were due to finally enter the 'global community' (or rather, global periphery) as equals, become trapped in their postcolonial attachment to Russia and the relations produced by its downfall as a global power? A common explanation usually provided by liberal analysts blames both Ukraine and Belarus for not being self-determined, nationalist and 'authentic' enough in their will to 'undergo a successful post-socialist transformation'. In other words, these societies failed to thoroughly introduce neo-liberal market reforms and simultaneously build their respective national particularities to the satisfaction of Western needs for the multiplication of difference, and necessary for further reproduction of global order. In the same vein, it is often said that Russia has historically dominated these countries to such an extent that their chances at developing into normal nation-states, compatible with the West, are considered extremely

low. While it is hard to object to the latter statement, its premise is completely false. Paradoxically, the post-Soviet republics of Eastern Europe are so hopelessly attached to Russia precisely because of their post-Soviet nationalisms, which were literally imposed upon them as a replacement of Soviet communist ideology. In what follows, I will stick with the example ofUkraine so as to show how the patterns of Post-Soviet nationalism are used in the former colonies of Russia in order to constrain them within the vicious circle of post-colonial resentment.

For centuries, the territory of Ukraine (or, rather, the various political entities that preceded the emergence its current nation-state format) has been a bridge linking Russia (referring to the various political entities that preceded its emergence as a global power) with various civilizational currents originating in Europe's West and South. To cite few examples, Kiev, the capital of modern Ukraine, has been a capital of Kievan Rus, a medieval state that launched the advance of Slavs into the territories which later came to be known as Russia. Orthodox Christianity was adopted by the Eastern Slavs in Kiev, and later on, European cultural currents such as Baroque were adopted in Russia after their full-scale absorption in the territory that later came to be known as Ukraine. However, modern (principally Soviet) history has reversed this relation. Despite its geographical localization to the west of Russia, Ukraine's cultural, economic and political relations with the West take place through Russia's mediation. For decades, identification with Russian culture was the only option available for educated Ukrainians to be recognized outside their own context, and Ukrainian intellectual life has long been (and largely still is) defined by the (un)availability of Russian translations of Western theory. It's no surprise that such a cultural constellation may only lead to post-colonial resistance that appropriates national (or even nationalist) discourse as a tool of liberation.

However, more than twenty years of Ukrainian post-colonial nationalism has brought little or no success in the cause of liberation from Russia's control of Ukrainian relations with the outside world. This failure is visible everywhere, from the international art scene with Ukrainian artists representing Russia, to Ukrainian national media dominated by Russian language and pop culture, all shaded by occasional outbursts of primitive nationalism perfectly suited to the goal of preserving the social status quo. As was already mentioned, this failure is usually explained (or justified) by Ukraine's lack of genuine cultural authenticity or by the fact that Ukraine is simply not nationalist enough. But the reason for this failure lies elsewhere – post-colonial Ukrainian culture is unable to cope with Russian domination precisely because it has borrowed its nationalist core with only minor adaptations for its own national specificity. The reasons for this forceful adoption lie in the dialectics of Russian colonialism itself.

In his book *Empire of the Periphery*[3], Boris Kagarlitsky describes the Russian colonial project as a kind of Uroboros, the colony and the metropoly consuming itself: according to Kagarlitsky, Russian territory was colonized by domestic rather than alien elites. It was self-colonized. Obviously, this statement may sound like a legitimation of colonial politics: were the Russian elites 'domestic' in, for example, Tashkent or Kiev? However, such an interpretation may prove useful for the understanding of Russian colonialism as a response to the global colonial project. In his landmark essay, *Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique*[4], David Chioni Moore explains how Russian colonialism basically mirrored the Western colonial enterprise. "Whereas the British mimicked no one but themselves, the Russians were mimicking the French and British, to whom, again, they had long felt culturally inferior" – adding that "colonial expansion was the price of admission into Europe's club, and this was Russia's ticket". What if the process of mimicry that lies at the core of the Russian colonial project is mirrored in its outcomes, that is, in the emergence of 'independent' post-Soviet nation-states?

What if Ukraine as a nation-state is paradoxically bound to Russia, precisely because of the nationalist project that

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[3] B. Kagarlitsky, *Empire of the Periphery: Russia and the World System*, London 2008

[4] D. Ch. Moore, *Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in the Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique*, "PMLA", Vol. 116, No. 1, Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies, January 2001, pp. 111–128.

underlies its self-justification as an 'independent state'? What if this project is nothing but a mirror-effect, a direct result of the nationalist agenda that Russia pursues in its post-Soviet years, an agenda that actually originates from late-Soviet Russian nationalism and became part of official party discourse? Sadly, the much-praised 'national independence' of Ukraine, granted, if not induced, from above by the (post)Soviet party elites, has more to do with contemporary forms of dispersed, decentralized (self-)domination that came to replace the old-fashioned oppressive regime, than with any potentialof post-colonial liberation. The Ukrainian transition from Soviet oppression to national 'self-determination' is best grasped in Georgiy Shkliarevsky's *Steps of Democracy*[5], a documentary from 1992 which focuses on various political actions in the public space of Kiev from 1989 to 1991. The first scenes of the movie are filled with joyous exaltation of the masses that were granted the right to celebrate their national identity and authenticity for the first time. One can hardly hear a word concerning social or economic demands in their pathetic speeches. However, by 1991 the situation has drastically changed: the protesters suddenly stop caring about various issues concerning their identities, since they are suddenly faced with the need of physical survival. This line of argument may also be applied to the wave of civic movements that shook Ukraine in early 2000s, leading to the Orange revolution of 2004. Most of these movements may be referred to as identity-based, that is, dealing with issues of language, national and cultural emancipation and (self)-identification, the so-called civilizational choice (between 'Russia' and 'the West'), and so on. However, when these waves of protests contributed to the introduction of ultra-liberal 'orange' government, the focus of people's dissent immediately turned from cultural to social demands.

From Scientific Communism to Scientific Nationalism... and Back Again

Much has been said about the miraculous withering away of the USSR and the awakening of its peoples from the ideological nightmares of 'real socialism' into the post-political market paradise. Some commentators have gone so as far as to claim that the self-destruction of the USSR was actually the highest stage of the Soviet communist project, an ultimate move on the side of the regime that led to its survival – albeit in an entirely different historical form. In any case, the end of Soviet rule was clearly inspired and realized by the oppressors rather than the oppressed. Perestroika, glasnost and uskorenie [acceleration] – the famous triad promoted by Gorbachev – are a classical case of 'revolution from above', as were the transitions to market economy, rampant privatization, and the outburst of nationalisms that was supposed to cover the atrocities of the "social transformation" induced by the former party elites. Although the last years of the Soviet Union saw a tremendous national upheaval in nearly every national republic – from peaceful nationalist rallies in Ukraine and Belarus to ethnic cleansing in Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan – the cancellation of Soviet supranational identity that followed this upheaval was in no way the success of grassroots movements. The tradition of anti-Soviet nationalist resistance was reappropriated by the ruling class, and when combined with the popular anti-Soviet sentiment towards the basic conditions of people's existence, this tradition gave the ruling powers a chance to preserve its power by sacrificing the ideological background from which it originated.

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[5] *Steps of Democracy*, dir. Georgiy Shkliarevsky, 1992

A popular academic anecdote, based on a true story, grasps this foundational sacrifice that gave birth to a seemingly new nationalist order, an order that was in fact another reincarnation of the old regime. Immediately after the 1991 coup d'etat and subsequent separation of national republics from the USSR, a department of Scientific Communism at one of Ukrainian universities was struggling to survive under the new conditions. As it was clear that the department of Scientific Communism could no longer exist under its old title, its staff suggested transforming it into the department of Scientific Nationalism. One can easily imagine such an institution with all its staff remaining on its previous positions, with communist dogmas being replaced with nationalist ones, and state-supported research projects aimed at the justification of ruling class' continuous existence. This is actually an exact model of a post-Soviet nation-state, and this model applies to the former national republics of USSR as well as to contemporary Russia. Moreover, it is precisely this model that keeps the post-Soviet nation-states within Russia's current geopolitical reach: the institution of Scientific Nationalism is by definition incompatible with any entity from outside the post-Soviet realm, while inside this realm such institutions are ideally fit for collaboration, be it in the order of continuous nationalist antagonisms with the (former) oppressor, as in the case of Ukraine, or in the order of silent self-negation, as in the case of Belarus. The discursive 'independence' of these states is nothing but a tool luring them into a vicious circle of national antagonisms in the world ruled by transnational bodies. Of course, the antidote to this situation does not lie in the negation of these 'independences' and the subsequent comeback from the 'double periphery' into the welcoming arms of a first-degree Russian periphery. It rather lies in the negation of an order that imposes peripheral statuses upon its newly gained territories.

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NOTHING TO COMPLETE: SOMETHING TO START

No revolution can avoid its own rhetoricity. But not all of them are suffocated in a rhetoricity that is not even their own. This is precisely what happened to the revolution that was once generally called “democratic” and was believed to have ended the epoch of totalitarianism: the revolution, or better, the revolutions of 1989/1990, also known under the more descriptive heading of “the fall of Communism”. The event was supposed – and was understood so by those who carried out the real change on the ground – to mark a new beginning. Yet there was nothing new in the goals it set out to achieve. Democracy, human rights, the free market, and an open public space, these and similar values had already existed as part of everyday reality – but elsewhere, in what is called the West.

Becoming the East

Thus, the revolution was culturally localised. Concretely, it was “easternized”. Not only did it happen in the East, but it happened because of the East. And in this specificity resides the entire historical meaning of the event. Already in 1990, the liberal German philosopher Jürgen Habermas defined this historical sequence as "the catching-up revolution" [*die nachholende Revolution*].[1] Following his line of argument, the toppling of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe cleared the way for the expansion of modernity into the East, an expansion that had been blocked for decades by totalitarian rule. He likewise called it a "rewinding revolution" (*rückspulende Revolution*), a metaphor that clearly evokes the logic of a time machine and suggests that the democratic revolutions of 1989/90 rewound recent history to the point before the arrival of the Communists. In which case, "normal" modernist development, which had been violently interrupted by the Communist dictatorship, could now be resumed. In summary, the significance of the event should have been found in enabling the East to catch up with the project of modern development. Of course, the modernity at stake is Western modernity, which, rather curiously, doesn't make it culturally particular. On the contrary, the self-understanding of Western modernity is suggests a universal achievement and ambition, in which Western "modernity" is conceptualised as modernity as such.

By contrast, the notion of the East does not imply universal values. In fact, it implies no values at all, given that its meaning is defined exclusively by its relation to the West. Antonio Gramsci knew that the notions of both "East" and "West" were merely arbitrary, conventional, historico-cultural constructions, retaining little or no meaning outside of real history, "where every point on the Earth is East and West at the same time".[2] Yet precisely when it came to the social and political transformations that generated this real history, Gramsci was likewise ready to invoke the simple juxtaposition that Habermas used more than a half century later, with the East understood as a "belated" counterpart to the historical development of the West. However, as might be expected, Gramsci did not blame the Communists for this belatedness. He rather discerned the genealogy of this problem in the backwardness of Tsarist Russia. That having been said, the idea of "normal historical development", which might have been interrupted, for example by force of ideological will, and thereby sent into hibernation for decades only to be voluntarily rewound and played "correctly" at some later date, was completely foreign to him.

As is well known, Gramsci developed a whole theory to explain this problem that was reflected historically in the traumatic failure of the socialist revolution in the West and its respective success in the East (the backward lands of Tsarist Russia) – the theory of hegemony. According to this theory, the rule of bourgeoisie over the working class relies on consent, not simply coercion. We ought to recall that for Gramsci there are two – *nota bene*, not mutually exclusive – ways to challenge hegemony: a "war of position" and a "war of manoeuvre".[3] While the first can be enacted in the West, where there is a strong civil society, the latter can succeed in the East, where, as Gramsci wrote, "the State is everything". In the East, civil society is still underdeveloped, it is "primordial and gelatinous" and therefore it does not provide the ground for bourgeois rule over exploited classes. The power to rule is rather concentrated in the apparatus of state's coercive capacity and often exercised by sheer force. By contrast, power in the West is rooted in a well-developed civil society. The domination framework of the state is only a forward trench of the bourgeois fortress whose real bastions are made of culture, i.e. cultural forms of persuasion in which the exploited classes also actively participate. One cannot simply take control such spheres and mechanisms by force. Instead, they may be subverted by the very same cultural means they employ.

Born to be Westernised

Regardless of how we finally define the difference between East and West, as the divide between an advanced modernity and its historically belated counterpart or simply as an effect of the uneven development that is intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production (constantly reproducing the difference between the centre and the periphery), the material of which this difference is made and the means to challenge it seem to be exclusively cultural. We are ultimately speaking of a cultural difference and should critically address the subject as such.

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[1] See Jürgen Habermas, *Die nachholende Revolution*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990, p. 203.

[2] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (ed. and trans.), London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p. 810.

[3] See the chapters: "Political Struggle and Military War" and "The Transition from the War of Manoeuvre (Frontal Attack) to the War of Position – in the political Field as well", ibid., p. 481– 497.

This is the point on which Gramsci and Habermas agree. Moreover, actual Western hegemony, as discernible in the its various guises, seems to agree with them in understanding the "democratic revolution of 1989/90" as both the result of and a remedy for historical, that is cultural, belatedness in former communist societies. This is particularly the case with respect to the regime of so-called "transition to democracy" that the West imposed on the "post-communist" East, in order to save the East from itself.

In a curious way, the hegemonic Western lens for understanding the post-communist transition has followed a familiar Gramscian pattern. In large part, the East is viewed as being the historical victim of both an excessively strong or violent state and a weak or underdeveloped civil society. By this measure, the "transition to democracy", seeks to redeem by softening the first – bringing the state apparatus under the democratic control, for instance – and strengthening the latter. In fact, it replicates the major paradigm of anti-communist thought in the West, in which the whole political reality of historical Communism was reduced to the simplistic and demeaning cliché of an ideologically evil totalitarian state terrorising good, freedom loving people.[4] At this point, however, differences with Gramsci become clear. In his thought, civil society is not a historico-political subject in its own right, especially not a subject of good will that necessarily generates progressive transformation. Civil society is rather a battleground on which the struggle for emancipatory change takes place – obviously in the West, where it is properly developed.

In this case, the trope of a chronically belated, underdeveloped, and essentially backward East remains unchanged. Only

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[4] If nothing else, at least the bloody collapse of Yugoslavia has proved that some "freedom loving peoples" could be much worse than a Communist state, or in other words, that a fascist civil society is still worse than a week civil society, beyond the difference in level of modernisation.

the rhetoric is new, a rhetoric in which the East now appears as populated by immature political and social subjects. This becomes obvious in the way the discourse of post-communist transition talks about democracy in the post-communist East: it ought "to take lessons", "make its first steps", "grow and mature", then again, "it might still be in diapers or suffering from a children's illnesses", and so on.[5] Above all, this is a rhetorical strategy that relies on endlessly perpetuating the supposed immaturity and infantile innocence of the East, thereby calling on the patronage of the West.

In a striking reversal, the otherness of the East that was previously the unremitting threat in the Cold War has now become an object of instruction and care – to nurture into the respectable maturity of Western self-understanding, in short, to westernise. In dealing with the East, the West has moved from a "war of manoeuvre" to a "war of position". If less than thirty years ago it was stockpiling nuclear warheads to bomb the Communist East into the Stone Age, today the West launches cluster bombs of ideas and theoretical concepts in the East with short and long range cultural projects, smart biennials, cruise curators and storms of democratic, intellectual, aesthetic and other related values. It is attempting to blow the East into contemporaneity – that is, into the West.

Should the post-communist East be pleased with such developments, with its fresh-faced "partners" in the West helpfully interested in the cultural advancement of former foes? The only way to begin to answer would be by recalling that there is a steep price, on both sides, to be paid for such help.

It Would Better Be Forgotten

According to the Slovenian Philosopher Rastko Močnik, the Cold War divide has survived the collapse of communism primarily due to its ideological function, which is to rob both sides, the East and the West, of their history.[6] At present, the West appears as emancipated not only from its own history, but from any history at all. This is why it can be imposed as "general" and "canonic".

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[5] See Boris Buden, „Children of postcommunism", Radical Philosophy 159, Jan/Feb. 2010. p.18–26.

[6] See Rastko Močnik, "Will the East's past be the West's future?", in Caroline David, (ed.), "Les frontières invisibles", Oostkamp: Stichting Kunstboek, 2009.

In necessary contrast, the East functions as a mechanism of amnesia, whose purpose is to get rid of history and thereby become an a-historical non-space, just as the West. What makes the East peripheral and provincial is its own history. It thus has a history that, as Močnik writes, "would be better forgotten", or, in words of Jürgen Habermas, a history that has to be "rewound". This is precisely what must be kept in mind when we deal with the notion of the "musealisation of the East". This concept presupposes, as condition of its possibility, a historical oblivion into which the whole recent history of the East has been pushed. In this sense, the East can be constructed as a museum only after it has already been made into the landfill of history, where failed ideologies and political concepts of the past have been throw away and deprived of any historical experience. Only a past from which no lessons have been learned can be culturally fetishised into a museum. It is for this reason that Močnik argues that the West-East divide not only robs both sides of their common history but also prevent them of having a common history in the future: "It freezes them into an eternal unequal couple, one part of which is forever doomed to struggle to get rid of its phantom past, while the other is bound to an everlasting autistic celebration of its idiocy."

A Shame Parade?

It is rather easy to demonstrate how this frozen cultural difference between West and East generates historical oblivion and is at the same time self-perpetuating. Let us thus take as an example of this difference the much noted case of "pride parades". As is well known, over the past several decades the marches of the LGBT communities have become an integral part of urban culture in Western metropolises. From San Francisco to Chicago, New York to London, and Paris to Berlin, hundreds of thousands of people – or sometimes even more than a million, as in Madrid – many of whom not even belonging to sexual minorities, take part in these city festivals to enjoy and celebrate the culture of tolerance. In Eastern

Europe, the picture is rather different. If a pride parade has managed to take place, despite all obstacles and obstructions, there will often be more police and security personal on the streets than parade participants. In some cases, Belgrade comes to mind, clashes have emerged between the police and counter-protesters with participants themselves being severely beaten up.[7] Even further to the East, pride parades simply do not take place. In St. Petersburg and Moscow they are banned. And in the case of the Russian capital, this ban has been extended for the next hundred years.[8]

Is this not clear proof of deep cultural differences between the East and West, as likewise suggested by statistics that demonstrate the homophobia constantly increases the further east we move? And does this not confirm the need for even more westernization of the East: more "schools for tolerance", care for minorities, support for cultural projects dealing with human rights, and, in short, a more developed civil society that will be able to put the pressure on the state and thereby influence legislation and political decisions?

But how much can we speed up the process of transition? How long does it take to complete? When will the East have sufficiently "caught up" with the West? When, finally, we will see a million people on Red Square waving rainbow flags? In a hundred years?

Rather than speculate about an unpredictable future, we would do better to look back into the forgotten past. The question is simple: Is it really true that sexual liberation and the subsequent reforms of gender relations are exclusively Western phenomenon, a liberal turn in the development of modernity in the West that can be traced back to the so-called "sexual revolution" of the sixties? Did the former "communist" societies in the East not experience something similar?

Ahead of Our Own Time

For the German political theorist Bini Adamczak, the fact that Russian Revolution of 1917 started on the 6th anniversary of International Working Woman's Day is more than a coincidence: "People who had, until then, been considered women, put on trousers, cut their hair and grabbed cigarettes and guns. Shortly after, they get divorced – a handwritten paper was the only thing needed for that."[9] Adamczak points out that the Russian Revolution instituted the most progressive code on marital relations and divorce that the modern world had ever seen. It abolished Tsarist penalties against homosexuality and legalised abortion. In 1922, a Soviet court ruled that the marriage between a cisgendered woman and a transgendered man was legal, regardless of whether it was a same-sex or trans-sexual marriage. It sufficed that it was consensual. Adamczak concludes: "The Russian Revolution was not only ahead of its own time, but also of ours. It was, in part, a queer-feminist revolution".

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[7] This is perfectly documented in Igor Grubić's video: "East Side Story (2006–2008)".

[8] See "Gay parades banned in Moscow for 100 years, BBC News, Europe, 17 August 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19293465

This certainly does not fit into the concept of a belated East. What is more, it undermines and perhaps even refutes the blame put on Communists for their alleged blockade of western modernity.

Adamczak reminds us of how the Bolshevik delegates were celebrated at the conferences of the World League of Sexual Reform, co-founded by Magnus Hirschfeld. The reason, as she states, was slightly ironic – it was precisely the Bolshevik revolution which had introduced the liberal bourgeois discourse on sexuality into Russia, in which the categories of homosexuality, pseudo-hermaphroditism and transvestism had not really existed before the revolution. These were developed and institutionalised within Western medico-biological and psychiatric sciences. Tsarist Russia knew only of different forms of non-reproductive sexuality, which were prosecuted by sodomy laws. After the revolution, the abolition of such laws was justified by the argument that homosexuals were not sinners or criminals but simply biological deviants. Adamczak explicitly states that it was the Western bourgeois model that was imported into Russia by the Bolsheviks.

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[9] In the following I rely on a lecture given by Bini Adamczak in ICI (Institute for Cultural Inquiery) in Berlin under the title: "The Feeling of Revolution. Queer Questions of 1917", at the conference "Utopia:Wreckage", held on Jun 16 2011.

In which case, the Bolshevik revolution not only did not block the expansion of modernity into the East, but it fostered it, at least to the extent that it was able to turn the East into a West that was more Western than the West itself. However, we know very well how emancipatory development was reversed only a decade later. In the Soviet Union of Stalin, abortion was again prohibited, sodomy laws were reintroduced and the nuclear family was restored as the fundamental cell of the state. This would not have been possible if the experience of revolution had not been destroyed before, an experience that kept an open horizon of possibilities alive, in which not only "male" and "female" could have articulated their profoundly queer character, but also every moment in the emancipatory struggle could have been "east" and "west" at the same time.[10]

A Hamster Who Preferred Not

What does this tell us about the situation today? Historical amnesia, which according to Močnik is intrinsic to the East-West divide and deprives both sides of their common history (preventing them at the same time from having a common history in the future), has itself a long history that is similarly forgotten. It can be traced back to the emergence of the Stalinist terror and the sinking of Western Europe into fascism. It is probably no more than a symptom of a failed revolution – or, as some would prefer, of a successful counterrevolution – but its consequences are far reaching. In a time that seems obsessed with the past, with this or that form of cultural memory and cultural heritage, a time that Pierre Nora even calls the age of commemoration, there is a past that is structurally disavowed, a past that was once called history and that is believed today to exist only in a museum where it is properly preserved, cared for, archived, selected for occasional display, enjoyed and eventually marketed. In fact, what we call the East is a museum of history that is curated by the West. It is discursively grounded in the ideology of the post-communist transition, the rhetoric of which determined the whole dynamic of this open-ended process of having to constantly reproduce relations of domination and control – obviously, by consent.

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[10] In dealing for instance with homosexuality, Soviet legislation in the 1920s was prepared to adapt to cultural differences among its many nationalities and religious communities. It constructed ist own „belated East", where deviations from general norm were allowed. Soviet governments in the Caucasus and Central Asia for instance did enact laws against some forms of same-sex expression.

However, there has also been resistance. One of the best articulated strategies was so-called self-Easternisation. It was a try to and rearticulate the notion of a "belated East" into a counter-concept to the West through a sort of over-identification with an imposed identity that has become a mere trope of exclusion and submission. Either it took the form of an ironic self-canonisation of a dubious construct called "Eastern art", its essentialization through an allegedly unique and in the Communist East commonly shared experience of totalitarianism and its transgressive use mostly in the western context, or it has been articulated in a more pragmatic and a bit cynical way as a niche in the globalised art system that can claim some particular value and attention, in both cases the resistance has been deadlocked within the an identiterian paradigm.

These and similar strategies of resistance to Western hegemony relying on identitarian logic not only have lost today their subversive character and their market value, the whole teleology of the post-communist transition has fallen apart. Its rhetoric no longer moves anyone. It has lost the power to touch hearts and minds and to trigger identification. When people today protest on the streets of Moscow, when they occupy their universities and struggle in factories or otherwise express their refusal in what is still called the post-communist East, it is not because they have identified themselves with the subject of a "catching up revolution" and tirelessly – or worse, endlessly – pursue its *telos*. There is nothing to catch with, nothing to complete any more. The hamster has jumped off his wheel ("I'd prefer not", as Bartleby might have said) and found real ground beneath its feet. Now it really moves. We don't know to where it is heading, but we know that its every step is towards the "East" and "West" at the same time.

On One's Own, Like a Tangent

It could well be that history has escaped the museum, that it has managed to break out of its identitarian confinement

called the "East". Did its guards, those curators, archivists, forensic experts, cultural canonisers, Western normativists and Eastern compradors fall asleep for a while, or did historical experience itself unexpectedly awaken from the decades of deep amnesia and show the way out? We have no answer, but we do certainly know that history is back on track again, free to pursue its own goals.

However, this doesn't automatically make the East-West divide obsolete. The aforementioned hegemony is still intact, a Western hegemony of setting the direction. What has changed is the way in which we are dealing with it.

Caught in the deadlock of transition, the East was translating itself into the idiom of the West by desperately striving to achieve the impossible – the authenticity of the original. But this is not what translation is about. Far from being a mere secondary production of an original that necessarily lacks its authenticity, the translation can claim an authenticity of its own. In its translations, as Walter Benjamin once stated, an original struggles for its survival. Isn't it the West that now exists, after the ideological edifice of the post-communist transition has crumbled, desperately struggling for historical survival in its Eastern translations? Or it is rather history itself that is struggling in these translations for its survival beyond the very divide of East vs. West? Again, we have no answer, but what we know for sure is that this struggle is about freedom. In summarising his theory of translation, Benjamin used the metaphor of a tangent. Translation relates to the original like a tangent to the circle. It touches it at a single point, only to thereafter follow its own goals. Today, this is probably how we should imagine the East translating the West, or to radicalise the point, how we should think of history struggling for its own survival.

Ekaterina Degot (b. 1958) is an art historian, art writer and curator. Amongst the many shows she has curated or co-curated, the following are especially noteworthy: ***Body Memory: Underwear of the Soviet Era,*** St Petersburg, Moscow, Helsinki, and Vienna (2000 – 2004), ***Struggling for the Banner: Soviet Art Between Trotsky and Stalin***, New Manege, Moscow (2008), ***Citizens, Mind Yourselves: Dimitri Prigov,*** Museum of Modern Art, Moscow (2008). In 2010, with David Riff and Cosmin Costinas, she curated the 1st Ural Industrial Biennial in Ekaterinburg under the title *Shockworkers of the Mobile Image*. In the following year, she curated an exhibition and the discussion platform ***Auditorium Moscow*** with David Riff and Joanna Mytkowska, all in collaboration with Warsaw Museum of Modern Art. In 2012, she curated *Art After the End of the World*, the discussion platform of the Kiev Biennial of Contemporary Art Arsenale, and *Time/Food* in the Stella Art Foundation in Moscow, in cooperation with Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda. She currently teaches at the Moscow Alexander Rodchenko Photography and New Media School. Her books include: ***Terroristic Naturalism*** (1998), ***Russian 20th-Century Art*** (2000,) and ***Moscow Conceptualism*** (with Vadim Zakharov, 2005). She has contributed works of art criticism to ***Frieze***, ***Artforum*** and ***e-flux*** magazines. Degot lives and works in Moscow.

THE CASE OF YEROFEEV AND SAMODUROV: WHAT IS TO BE DONE AND WHO IS TO BLAME[1]?

Yuri Samodurov and Andrei Yerofeev are charged with actions directed at inciting hatred and animosity among the public, as well as at disparagement of a group of persons on religious grounds. The Archdeacon, Andrei Kuraev, urges “banning the accused from practising their profession”. Human rights are routinely violated in Russia. However, the right to view provocative works of contemporary art is probably not the most important of all.

A friend of mine, an experienced human rights practitioner, is trying to persuade me not to write this piece. “Whatever you write,” he says, “is only going to help the prosecution.” Working on the assumption that there is no freedom of speech in Russian today, he no longer believes in open discussion or public opinion. As a corollary, he assumes that anything said openly will be used in an eventual attack on the speaker/writer – nothing uttered in freedom can be held in reserve as credit.

[1] *What Is to Be Done?* and *Who is to Blame?* are two 19th century novels written, respectively, by Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1863) and Alexander Herzen (1845/46).

The Insulted

An exhibition entitled “Forbidden Art 2006” opened at Moscow’s Sakharov Museum and Public Centre on the 7th of March 2007. Its curator, the art critic Andrei Yerofeev, brought together works that were excluded from Tretyakov Gallery exhibitions in 2006. Each of those exclusions were the result of a verbal request coming from the gallery’s director or his deputy, “this has to go”, and dictated by fear. The origins of this impulse can be traced back to another exhibition, “Beware: Religion”, also organised at the Sakharov Centre, which was vandalised in 2003. The vandals, a group of religious fanatics linked to the radical right wing of the Russian Orthodox Church, were eventually cleared of all charges – in contrast to the museum’s director, who was sentenced for inciting religious hatred, leaving every museum director trembling andfearful.

Wanting to exhibit this fear itself in conjunction with the art in question, Andrei Yerofeev allowed visitors to look at the works through little holes in walls. It is noteworthy that nearly half of these supposedly dangerous pieces were made in the Soviet era with the intention of criticising communist ideology by comparing it to religion. Apparently, some obscene words could occasionally be found in the works.

What followed was similar to the events of 2003, minus the vandalism. After securing support from the fundamentalist wing of the Orthodox bureaucracy, several far right organisations, including the People’s Assembly [*Narodny Sobor*], the People’s Defence, the Union of Orthodox Citizens and the Movement Against Illegal Immigration,, went to the public prosecution service claiming that the Russian people had been insulted and provoked.

A group of experts was commissioned to produce a report. Again, as in the case of “Beware: Religion”, the appointed experts were all involved in some way or another with the right wing of the Orthodox Church, holding what can only be described as chauvinist views in their insistence that “Russian mentality is inseparably linked with Orthodox Christianity”. And just as before, they asked Natalia Eneeva, a researcher at the Centre for History of Religion Studies, whose name is unknown among professionals in contemporary art, to act as an expert.

The Experts

Natalia Eneeva claims that the exhibition’s aim was “to discredit traditional cultural and spiritual values held by the main part of the population of the Russian Federation”. Although the expert refrains from using the crypto-fascist term “title nation”, a newly revelead claim about the Russians, her meaning and intentions cannot be mistaken. For the most part, the statement was a copy of the 2003 report. It still asserts, for example, some special claims that the Orthodox church lays to generic cultural values with Judeo-Christian origin. Every piece where the sacred is juxtaposed with the non-sacred (profane) is likened to sacrilege. Alexander Kosolapov’s work, *Caviar Icon*, in which an icon cover is filled with a photographic image of caviar, is described as especially insulting, given that it features black (that is, dirty) caviar.

One might be tempted to argue that the work criticises the icon trade rather than religion, but Eneeva forecloses this line of argument by remarking that “in any case, the notion of religion is represented here as negative”. Essentially meaning that religion has been insulted. Given her pronouncement that “art is [...] an area of human activity whose aim it is to cultivate spiritual values,” she must hear any critical reasoning in or about art as tainted by blasphemy.

Another expert, Viktor Slobodchikov (who advertises himself as “Christian-Orthodox psychologist”), claims that the exhibition provokes the viewers “to interpret what they have seen in a way that is dangerous, as it can lead to their losing their bearings in life”. In short, no interpretation should be allowed. The expert thinks that visitors have been subjected to “an extremely strong influence that may affect their mental states and directly threaten the integrity of their personalities, with their established pictures of the world in danger of being destroyed”. By way of conclusion, this must have “caused them unbearable moral suffering and stress”.

These “expert” reports formed the basis for the legal proceedings started on the 15th of May 2008 against the director of the Sakharov Museum and Public Centre, Yuri Samodurov, and the head of the Tretyakov Gallery's Department of New Artistic Movements, Andrei Yerofeev. Both are alleged to have committed criminal offences against Section 282 of the Penal Code of the Russian Federation. The prosecution of Moscow's Tagansky district has charged them with actions directed at inciting hatred and animosity among the public, as well as at disparagement of a group of persons on religious grounds. Andrei Kuraev, an Archdeacon and professor at the Moscow Theological Academy, urges "banning the accused from practising their profession".

The Bewildered

According to lawyers, the charges suffer from various inconsistencies. However, the case is being investigated in a very urgent fashion, so the offences are very likely to be found indictable.

For an attentive observer, it is perfectly obvious that contemporary art is merely being used as a screen by the far right, whose real intention is to destroy the Sakharov Museum. Were the exhibition to have run elsewhere, it likely would not have attracted this kind of attention. Samodurov had a visit from people working for the "Department of Outdoor Advertising" in 2003, requesting that a non-authorised "advertising board", which read "Stop War in Chechnya!" and was displayed outside the museum, be removed. Samodurov refused. A few months later, "Beware: Religion" was trashed. While the board is no longer there, the museum remains a nuisance. It's a place where different public groups meet, it's frequented by foreign visitors and schoolchildren, who are still being brought here out of habit – in short, it's some kind of perestroika-era relic.

Is it possible for other curators to avoid similar accusations in the future? More generally, what do we do now that the number of those willing to feel insulted is likely to grow? What do we do, seeing that similar things happen not just here, but also in Europe?

I put this question to a few organisers of exhibition projects. Most of them are convinced that they personally have nothing to fear since they aren't the Sakharov Museum, and, what is more, they have nothing to do with politics. Those whose venues are popular with the public have some doubts. Anna Zaitseva, the art director of Winzavod, is going to look into the letter of the law in some detail, to see what is regarded as pornography and what isn't. She would even be willing to go so far as having a policeman at the door to check visitors' passports for their age. As for the issue of religion, she is totally bewildered; passports don't show people's confession. Some think they are protected by money, by the commercial nature of their institution; the masses don't flock to expensive galleries. Very many believe that their connections are going to save them. As the director of the Architecture Museum, David Sarkisyan, thinks that "everything can be arranged", provided you talk to the right people in advance. The channels which allow you to make necessary arrangements are more or less common knowledge, the email address of Father Vsevolod Chaplin, the Russian Orthodox Church spokesman, is no secret. Indeed, the lessons of "controlled opposition" have been learnt well, in particular by the art community.Indeed, Samodurov himself is convinced: it was "arrangements" of this kind that spared him from jail the first time around. He believes those who say that his file landed on Putin's desk, and that the President put in a word for him.

Samodurov

Yuri Samodurov talks gently, somewhat self-deprecatingly. He keeps repeating such phrases: "I am no dissident, am I. I was never inside", "I am no revolutionary", "I am no art critic, I don't understand these things". Trained as a geologist, he became fully immersed in social activism at the end of the 80s. It looks like he was the first to come up with the idea of commemorating the victims of Stalinist repression, and he gave the institution he wanted to create the name "Cryptorium".

In 1987, while the scale of the crimes was still denied by those in power, standing up for this idea required a lot of courage. Samodurov was emboldened by the fact that he saw his project as purely cultural rather than political. An archive – a museum – a library, he wanted it to be a nationwide project.

The idea was supported by a number of creative unions, and a public committee was formed, which included Sakharov, Yeltsin and other prominent public figures. Samodurov was among the founding fathers of the Memorial society, but slammed the door in their faces, leaving as early as January 1989, during an inaugural conference. People with their own political interests had come to Memorial, they were keen to implement changes in the country, and the original mission was forgotten. At the time, Samodurov thought that Memorial should not be involved in human rights activities. The atmosphere had become tense, some lady called him a KGB man, and he realised he couldn't take it anymore. "The Memorial was everything to me. Indeed, I'm like a monolith. But staying human was more important. And I realised that in the last six months all I had been doing was trying to figure out who was going to vote for me." He adds with a defeated smile: "They must have got sick of me, all of them." And then, without a pause, he remembers with childish joy being invited to a meeting held by Memorial in 1999: "Still, they allowed me to speak first..." To this day, that story is more important and real to him than the current situation. In the early 90s, Samodurov met Elena Bonner and soon found a different platform for fulfilling his mission: he became the director of the new Sakarov Museum and Public Centre. Local municipal authorities gave them a small building in 1992, and the museum was opened its doors in 1996.

It wasn't exactly what Samodurov wanted: done on the wrong scale, the project didn't attain nationwide status. The museum got involved in public activism. Samodurov supported Lam, a movement of the Chechen intelligentsia; he tried to find a social base for his centre, but things were not going especially well. He isn't your typical leader anyway, someone capable of making people rise and follow him. But he has a subtle perception of art and is full of gratitude and infinite respect for it. All this despite the fact that he grew up with 19th century realist painting. One day, he found himself in the Pompidou Centre in Paris and saw avant-garde as emblematic of the idea of democracy and freedom. Since then, he has sworn by contemporary art and is prepared to take any punishment for it.

Human rights practitioners associated with the Sakharov Museum are not entirely sure about Samodurov's course of action. Many can't see why he's got involved in art in the first place. Indeed, activists have more urgent things to do right now. Human rights are routinely violated in Russia. The right to view provocative works of contemporary art is probably not the most important of all. Perhaps the Sakharov Public Centre could attempt to become the hub of those scattered elements of social protest that we do have: at least it could try to take under its umbrella those swindled equity holders and exploited street cleaners, battered wives and battered-to-death officers – at least at a local community level. Personally, I think this would be the best way to develop Sakharov's ideas.

However, it is the various symbols of freedom – first and foremost, art – that have the greatest significance for Samodurov. In this sense, Samodurov is a typical figure of the Soviet intelligentsia. His "an archive – a museum – a library" with equals to be found in our proverbial "post offices – telegraph buildings – train stations". But does contemporary art live up to his expectations?

Yerofeev

When Samodurov was first trying his hand at public activities, Andrei Yerofeev, a graduate of the Moscow State University, devotedly threw himself into collecting nonconformist art for a future museum. He went scavenging for things out of rubbish heaps and persuading people to give or lend him their artworks, all in hopes that one day a state museum would be able to buy something. Although some artists still haven't forgiven him for his - perhaps not entirely fair - methods, you have to admit that it was thanks to his efforts that the underground Russian art of the 60s -80s, instead of getting lost, ended up in a state-managed repository. He managed to set up the Department of New Artistic Movements in Tsaritsyno's Museum of Decorative Arts and Crafts. In 2001, the collection and its creator moved to the Tretyakov Gallery.

Andrei Yerofeev is a stubborn personality famous for his public fights with the authorities. The son of a Soviet ambassador in Paris, the younger brother of the well-known writer Victor

Yerofeev, he has led a socially privileged life, which may explain his protests. At present, the elder brother is eager to make friends with the powers that be, whoever they are, whereas the younger sibling has embraced a social protest model that he sees as the only decent way to live.

Andrei Yerofeev has a very clear picture of the world. An artist's task is to seek and probe society's pressure points and to break its taboos. As for the state, it must tolerate art because of art's role in educating society. At the same time, artists must never turn directly to gestures of violence, otherwise invention, that trademark of all art, will be lost. Roughly speaking, an artist's responsibility before his community is "to erect monuments" and create visual emblems for the values society itself is unable to fully understand.

Yerofeev himself, for that matter, doesn't think very highly of society. He simply prefers art. At a meeting at Winzavod, held on the 29th of May (2008) to discuss the state of affairs, he wanted to hang the walls with photos of the accusers. But rather than doing the job himself or entrusting it to journalists, he delegated it to an artistic collective called Voina. Voina added some obscene phrases (not very witty and rather direct) to the photos. An awkward situation ensued as all the speakers began distancing themselves from this action. The next day, Yerofeev published an open letter in his blog, in which he apologised for failing to stop the group from acting like naughty kids, only to take the apology back the very next day.

For all that, Yerofeev takes upon himself tasks that should be done by journalists and artists. He speaks and writes about the fact that accusatory rhetoric is already approaching the status of neutrality, that the media is already allowed to label pictures as provocative, without any quotation marks, and to spread the now dominant notion of the contemporary artist as an unwell or unstable person. Censorship has become self-censorship.

He can say all that without anyone's help, but he does need an artist. A protest artist, an artist-as-humorist. Hence the fuss Yerofeev makes over those who may be fit for this role: groups such as Blue Noses and PG, and now Voina[1]. However, the "political works" of all three groups are growing increasingly predictable, their main content being photo games with elements of stripping and imitations of coitus. As the art critic Catherine Millet remembers in her autobiographical book *The Sexual Life of Catherine M*, at a young age, when unable to come up with anything clever to say, would usually proceed with oral sex.

The Defenders

A number of renowned human rights activists spoke at the Winzavod public discussion on the 29th of May. Surprisingly, they sounded equally bewildered and despondent. Sergey Kovalev and Lev Ponomarev talked at length about the freedom of art, so important to their system of liberal beliefs in the 70s. They saw the freedom of the artist as a metaphor for human freedom in general, creativity as the antithesis of conformity to ruling ideology. Given all that, they struggled to understand why artists themselves are reluctant to unite under these slogans today. Could it simply be that artists and curators are hoping to endear themselves to the regime? Have they succumbed to commercialism?

Yes, they are. And yes, they have. But it is those associated with the state and art commerce who are the most ardent defenders of the idea of freedom. It is both surprising and typical that calls for art to be absolutely autonomous often rise up from the business camp: art dealers profit from artists' freedom – a freedom that is circumscribed to the territory of art, never crossing over into society.

Take the example of Aidan Salakhova. A gallery owner, artist and member of the Civic Chamber of Russia, she thinks that art cannot possibly be the subject of a court hearing, unless an artist kills someone, but then it will no longer be art. "Why, we don't prosecute Repin for his *Ivan the Terrible Killing His Son*[2] – he isn't the one who killed him!" Her views are radical: an artist has the absolute right to say whatever he or she wants, in whatever form, his rights being different in this sense from those of ordinary folk because art is the only zone of absolute freedom. Further, it even serves to strengthen public morals: "Let him speak him mind through his artworks instead of demonstrating with the crowds."

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[1] Blue Noses is an art group founded in 1999 ; *PG* decoded as Prestupnaya Gruppa (Criminal Group), Protivotankovaya Granata (Antitank Bomb), Pozharnyi Gidrant (Fire Plug), is an artist group was founded in 2000; *Voina* group is a street art group known for its politically charged works, active in Moscow and St. Petersburg. See this volume Alek D. Epstein *The Voina Group: Radical Actionist Protest as a Phenomenon in the Present-Day Russia*, p.....

When it comes to a protest situation, Leonid Bazhanov, the artistic director of the National Center for Contemporary Art (NCCA), is in his element. Indeed, raising an alarm suits him well. Art is in danger, he warns. The danger is coming from our society, which is not ready to be exposed to anything new or experimental. That's why art is vulnerable and needs to be protected, to be treated as a special zone of some kind.

Leonid Bazhanov has already, to an extent, created such a zone in his centre, - one has to wonder whether its door has ever been darkened by anyone from outside of his circle of friends. Consciously or otherwise, it seems this institution does not really welcome the general public. As someone formerly close to underground art circles, to an artistic elite opposing itself to the "power of the people", Bazhanov seems to have, deep inside him, a need to resist the masses, to despise their philistine tastes, otherwise he doesn't feel that what he does would qualify as real art. On the other hand, it seems to be a message to the current powers that be: "we don't gather in huge numbers here – there is no danger whatsoever".

The Artists

Bazhanov, Salakhova, Ponomarev and Samodurov all think that artists have to stand up for their rights to creative freedom. For whatever reason, the artists don't seem to be interested in this task.

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[2] Ilya Repin (1844–1930), painter of the Peredvizhniki [The Itinerants] artistic group of Russian realists. During the Soviet Union his work served as a model for progressive, realist painting recommended within a doctrine of social realism. *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on November 16th*, 1581 (1885) is held in Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

The state of affairs likely has little to do with cowardice. It's just that none of my interlocutors were willing to admit to having any special rights that would make them different from the rest of the world. None of the artists could identify with this "freedom-of-expression" argument, which is modernist by its very nature. That the art dealers insist upon it isn't surprising (self-expression sells). The same applies to public servants (there is a noble ring to it). But artists themselves know that art rejected such ideas/ideals more than half a century ago. They have all long stopped "expressing themselves". Contemporary art simply has a very different *raison d'être*. It does see itself as a transgression zone, where moral rules - and sometimes the law (concerning copyright, for instance) – are being broken, all of which is justified by an artist's critical stance.

The irony is that art would like to be protected by the very same law it wishes to transgress. But violations of the law can never enjoy legislative protection. Stepping over regulations is only if the artist and the curator are prepared to go to prison for their actions. As one artist jokingly put it, "You open the Penal Code and you see this: killing your mother-in-law means 15 years inside, pricking her arse with a needle means 15 days. So you choose accordingly."

Some people never open the Penal Code, though Avdey Ter-Ogan'yan had to flee the country in 1998, after destroying several cheap icon reproductions in public, and acquired the status of a "prisoner of consciousness", but to the same extent he is the prisoner of his own, purely artistic, concept. In essence, his act was not a critique of fundamentalism, religion, image or anything else – it was a parody of a gesture made by another artist, Alexander Brener. While hacking those pieces of paper, Avdey sincerely believed that he remained on art's territory, still protected by this fact. He didn't think for a moment that his gesture could exist not just in art but also in society. The idea of going to an open trial and making a statement about his anticlerical and antifundamentalist views (if any) never even crossed his mind.

When asked about the difference between the state of affairs in Russia and in Germany, Kerstin Holm, a German journalist, told me that their society was freer and less infantile. In Germany, you can't be "prosecuted for criticism" in the same medieval, obscurantist manner; you can't be denied professional expertise; but equally, there is no room for irresponsible teenage gestures and senseless jokes which merely echo the official regime, doing a poor service to art and, more generally, to society.

Myself

What do we do next? What is to be done if you are a curator or an artist? Or anything else, for that matter – a human being curating your own life? The answers to these questions can be summarised as follows:

1. Definitely do not be "more careful". Silence is not in the interests of society. "Political correctness" serves the cause of the ruling class - in this particular case, the fundamentalist circle of the Orthodox Church, whose intention is to assume full control over secular culture and to appropriate the voice of Orthodox Christians all over the world.

2. Stop using freedom of art as a premise for your arguments. As Lenin used to quite rightly say, freedom is "only a masked dependence on the money bag". Freedom of art, at any price, makes no sense.

Also, and this is very important, it is fascists who insist that art must be free. Oleg Kassin, the co-chairman of the People's Assembly [Narodnyj Sobor] and the director of the People's Defence, told me quite firmly that an artist can create whatever he likes, he can go as far as to show his works to his friends at home, but when they hang in a public space, even with all the necessary provisos (the Sakharov Museum put up notices reading "Not recommended for under-16s"), the organisers (not the artists!) can -and must - face criminal proceedings.

What's dangerous is not creative freedom – it's a political gesture. All involved, first of all, curators, but also artists, finally have to understand that their gesture is political. And they have to act accordingly. As far as the exhibition "Forbidden Art 2006" is concerned, instead of being shown in a museum, I think it should have been circulated as an online bulletin.

3. Think about others. Again, this doesn't mean being more careful – it means accepting that public activities are more important than art. It means understanding an event's political context. For instance, the fact that "insult by art" offences are investigated under the aegis of criminal rather than civil justice (even though it might all end in a fine). What it means is that the state wants to establish its role in this field and is reluctant to allow its citizens to resolve problems between themselves.

4. Break taboos only if you are prepared to face the consequences. This includes a speech at an open trial, potentially leading to changes in society. The problem with a provocation is not that it provokes, but that it stops there. You can and must break taboos for the sake of a great public goal. If you have to leave art for this, you have to leave it. This is what Hans Haacke[3] did in his famous investigative projects exposing sponsors' policies in American museums - that was a purely journalistic endeavour. It was also a great work of an artist. Even if we lived in the US, in order to have the right to be protected by the First Amendment, art must see itself as a freedom-of-speech gesture, as a factory of meaning, and as a critical activity.By contrast, imitating a sexual act in a museum is not a critique of the regime. It is a bit of fun.

5. Artists and curators must establish contact with their society and, instead of striking a haughty pose, bring up those few crumbs of public protest that are still there. What I found astounding in the "Beware: Religion" trial was a class gap between

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[3] Hans Haacke (b. 1936) is a German and American conceptual artist. In 1970 he proposed an installation *MoMA Poll* for the exhibition *Information* held in Museum of Modern Art in New York. It consisted of two transparent Plexiglas ballot boxes and the question to which visitors were answering by depositing their ballots. Haacke's query was: " "Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina Policy be a reason for your not voting for him in November?" – a direct comment to the political involvements of a major donor and a board member at MOMA, Nelson Rockefeller.
The other work titled *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* quickly became known as a landmark in institutional critique. It was to be exposed at Haacke's solo exhibition in Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum together with other works questioning business and personal connections of the museum trustees. The show was cancelled six weeks before the opening and the curator Edward Fry was fired for his support of the work. Haacke lives and works in New York.

the parties: on the one hand, there were artists and solicitors, well-educated and well-dressed, on the other, female prosecutors, looking distinctively working class and wearing ill-fitting uniforms. Unfortunately, the artists and their solicitors were happy to highlight this gap, which didn't help their case. As for the prosecutors, they reminded me of those girls at Russian passport control who, not being able or allowed to travel abroad themselves, take their frustration out on you.

So the claim that "our exhibition does not have a mass audience" will not work as an argument or defence. An exhibition has to be for a mass audience. It has to put social weapons into their hands.

6. Not only do art institutions have to protect their members, they also have to produce public intellectuals who would speak both from a university chair and in print. Underpaid research and museum staffs are currently made up of losers who failed to find a job in journalism or in a gallery. Until this changes, the above-cited Eneevas will continue to act as experts.

7. To be able to successfully resist fascism and fundamentalism we all have to stand on a particular system of values, which must be announced and openly formulated. Having murdered its royalty to the last man and woman, France firmly sticks to the principles of the French Revolution: those of equality, secular state, and the primacy of citizenship over ethnicity. And this does help; whatever the situation, if a reminder is needed, you can bang your hand on the table, and no one will dare to object. However, we've had all that before. And unless we remind ourselves of the idealistic values of the October Revolution (distinguishing them from the Stalinist terror) others will be imposed on us. It was the October rather than the February Revolution that introduced gender equality, abolished death penalty and, last but not least, separated the Church from the state; the Assembly where the patriarchy was reinstated, after 200 years of the Synod's existence, took place in early 1918. Ardent supporters of this separation included not only Bolsheviks, but also members of the Church's progressive wing (Father Pavel Florensky among them).

8. Finally: discuss, discuss, discuss. Within the art community and outside of it.

June 2008

David Riff (b. 1975) is a curator, contemporary art critic and a member of the group ***Chto Delat? /What is to be done?*** He served as co-editor of the newspaper of the same name from 2003 to 2008. He teaches art history at the Rodchenko School of Photography and Multimedia in Moscow. Likewise, he has published two monographs on late Soviet artists, ***Vadim Sidur*** (2000) and ***Vladimir Yankilevsky*** (2002). and written on post-Soviet contemporary art in publications such as ***Documenta*** 12, ***Flash Art***, ***Moscow Art Magazine***, ***Rethinking Marxism***, and ***Springerin***. He worked extensively as a translator in the field of contemporary art. Moreover, he is active in artistic collaborations. Together with Dimitry Gutov, he contributed to 52nd Venice Biennale (2007) with the long-term project "The Karl Marx School of the English Language". He lives and works in Berlin and Moscow.

DAVID RIFF

THE DUBAIZATION OF URAL, REPORTAGE FROM ART ZAVOD FESTIVAL

Arseniy Zhilyaev (b. 1984) is an artist, curator, political activist, and the editor of *Moscow Art Magazine*. He graduated with an MA in International Programs from the Valand School of Fine Arts, Goteborg. Zhiluaev has held a number of solo shows, including: ***Museum of Proletarian Culture. The Industrialization of Bohemia***, Tretyakov State Gallery, Moscow (2012), ***Pedagogical poem***, Presnya Museum, Moscow (2012), ***Radio October***, Project Fabric, Moscow (2011). He has also participated in numerous group exhibitions,: ***The Way of Enthusiasts***, Casa dei Tre Oci, Venice (2012), ***Practice everyday life,*** Calvert 22, London (2011), ***Phantom monuments,*** Art Centre Garage, Moscow (2011). In 2010, he was awarded an "Innovation 2010" state prize. He lives and works in Moscow and Voronezh.

PARADISE FOR KIDS, ELDERLY AND ARTISTS

At present, Voronezh reminds me of 19th century Paris. The yellow factory windows have been replaced by the neon lights of advertisements targeting round-the-clock revellers. Former industrial zones are awaiting the arrival of contemporary artists, or someone like them: someone whose immaterial labour could free local property prices from the spell of magic.

Ride the number seven tram
To our local paradise,
Our brick-and-tyre paradise

From a song by Nesmeyana

As a child, I always had to wake up at seven or earlier. Our whole family used to get up before sunrise. And if for some reason I couldn't follow everyone's example, I would suffer from pangs of conscience all day long. Waking in the darkness of an industrial city hurrying off to work remains one of the most vivid scenes from my childhood memories. I loved those last hours of the night: the strange happiness that they induced in making you feel you were ahead of time. It was as if the hours of darkness were my own private life, an extra allotment of timeinto which I could fit whatever couldn't be managed in the daytime. Then my mum would take me to a nursery school in Vareikis Street. Our house on Labour Avenue was built a few years before the war, and it was designed as a residence for workers and their families, which meant that the nursery was just around the corner. Miraculously, the house survived the Nazi occupation. Its red brick walls still showed the scars left by shells, a fact about which I was particularly proud as a child. On our way to the nursery, the only thing breaking the morning silence was a steady hum. It was the sound of aircraft engines, whichhad to be tested, for some unknown reason, during the night shift. When going out for a walk in the middle of the night, I sometimes think I can hear it again, even though the Voronezh Aircraft Plant has long lost the need to operate round the clock.

My family wasn't, strictly speaking, entirely working class. The only factory workers were my grandparents. Despite their technical backgrounds, my parents hardly ever worked at factories, having chosen teaching careers instead. My mother, a mathematician and programmer, decided to work with small children. And my father, who was an engineer by training, went on to teach technical drawing at school. Instead of plain paper, I used drawings of hubs and punched cards for my childhood watercolours.

If anything, my family didn't like workers very much. This must have influenced my the life choices of my parents. Working-class districts, including the one we lived in, were characterised by a high level of crime. Due to being fully occupied in their jobs, it was assumed that people simply had no time left for their children. Grim industrial landscapes served as perfect scenery for so-called fear areas, as described by the situationist Chtcheglov.[1] By the 80s, the only people still able to enjoy the simple pleasures of living in

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[1] Ivan Chtcheglov (1933–1998) was a poet, political theorist and a member of Lettrist International, a Paris-based collective lead by Guy Debord. Author of the *Formulary for New Urbanism*, a Parisian "psychogeography" written after travelling through the city in a free-associative drift.

districts designed as workers' paradises must have been small children and the elderly. I was also happy, just like young characters in Gaidar's[2] books were at the realisation that their intuitive choice had fallen on the Bolshevik communist party, the best in the world. Our favourite pastime as children was to play cossacks and bandits on an industrial estate, no longer well-guarded. To hide behind a giant heap of spalls, to put the enemy off your trail in a hangar under construction – what could be better?

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Toilets in the Winzavod Centre for Contemporary Art[3]. There is a barrel and to the left a black-and-white sticker which reads "Torpedo Moscow – Labour Banner Orekhovo-Zuevo". It stands out among monotonous rows of colourful graffiti and trendy flyers. Torpedo Moscow is a famous Soviet football club based at the ZIL factory. They won the national cup many times and played in international championships. The history of Torpedo goes back to the post-revolutionary years, when the inhabitants of the city's southern suburbs, where a lot of industry was concentrated, created a sports ground. Now named after the famous footballer Streltsov, the club's stadium was later built at the site. After years of crisis, Torpedo is just starting to regain lost ground. The ZIL factory sold the club in the 90s, leaving the district without its famous team.

Torpedo is one of the monuments of a bygone era. The same can be said about Labour Banner, the oldest Russian football club founded in Orekhovo-Zuevo by English workers employed at the Morozov factory in 1909. Proletarian teams in proletarian districts, today with nothing but strange names to reflect their history. Sport, especially football, was and, in many ways, remains an outlet for this segment of the population. There was a time when you could find kids kicking a ball in nearly every courtyard. Stand-offs between professional athletes clearly served as a metaphor for real political struggle. Sometimes football became a heroic deed of unprecedented courage. For instance, we could read in the issue of the Kiev Pravda newspaper from the 17th of November 1943[4]: "A group of footballers, who had played for Dynamo Kiev and enjoyed nationwide fame, spent a long time in a concentration camp. An unforgettable scene lives in the memory of the people of Kiev: a game between a German team and workers from Bakery Plant No. 1, whose team included the above-mentioned comrades. The Germans made them play that match, hoping to impress the enemy with their unsurpassable skills and thereby demonstrate the primacy of the Aryan race... For the Dynamo players, it was their last match. The glorious footballers were promptly arrested and, on the 24th of February 1943, shot before the whole camp in a group of 42 people (all executed for the escape of two prisoners)."

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[2] Arkady Gaidar, real name Arkady Golikov (1904–1944) was a Soviet writer, the author of the very popular children books.

[3] The Winzavod Centre for Contemporary Art is a cluster of galleries of contemporary art, showrooms and boutiques opened on the terrain of a former winemaking enterprise in 2007.

It comes as no surprise that football is where aggression is accumulated today, including its nationalist varient. In this sense, it hasn't lost its significance in society, with the hopes of wide strata of the population still being expressed through the psycho-political dynamics of sport. The difference is that workers' teams have been replaced by oligarchs' super-clubs. And as a product of pure competition, this gleeful rage, its national connotations subdued in favour of the beauty of the fight, often gives way to openly fascist battle-cries. Thus a sphere of human activity which used to bea formalised space of engagement that was confined to clearly delineated limits, has imperceptibly acquired right-wing political hues.

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The early days of the second decade of the 21st century. Moscow. A cafe on Tverskaya[5] that overlooks a huge advert displaying new properties being built in the Olympic town of Sochi. The giant banner completely hides the ascetic constructivist facade of

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[4] Pravda ("The Truth") is a daily Russian newspaper, owned since 1997 by Communist Party of the Russian Federation. From 1912–1991, it was the official paper of Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

[5] Tverskaya Street is one of the main streets in Moscow.

the former Izvestiya building.[6] A young man, with an Aryan appearance, poses against a classical portico and gazes beyond, his sky-blue eyes seemingly full of thought. He has large sunglasses on his head. The edge of a red skateboard at the bottom of the picture looks almost like the handle of a laser sword. This is clearly the future come to life: we have a hero before us. A Space Force colonel, for example. Next to his head, a little flock of seagulls is frozen. There is also a statue: a skateboarder caught mid-air. The scene seems to be taken from a Star Wars chronicle. And the idyllic picture has a caption, "The future is beautiful". "The investments attracted by the Olympics provided an opportunity to start building world-class infrastructure in the region, including transport and technology infrastructure, alongside resorts and sports facilities. Gorki Gorod means contemporary living with astounding mountain views, hotels run by leading hospitality specialists, boutiques and spas, nice cafes and restaurants, trendy night clubs, and mountain resorts open year round."

This is what Russian modernisation looks like today. A quote from Leni Riefenstahl (who also shot the Olympics) and retro-futurist paraphernalia. Art in service.

Each new step of development sees capitalism produce images as a means of propaganda that hides a traumatic reality. It was true when America was being colonised, and it was true in the fourth decade of the last century. It is also true now. However, after seeing the events at Manezhnaya Square and related images, widely circulated online where an ecstatic crowd is combined with a statue of Zhukov's raised hand (another echo of Riefenstahl), you begin to think that Russia could perhaps do without high-tech methods and complicated mechanisms designed to build a democratic facade with the agency of contemporary art.

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The 4th of November is National Unity Day in Russia. This tradition is relatively new: it was not until 2005 that the day became a national holiday. In fact, it was introduced as a replacement for the Great October Socialist Revolution Day, which used to be celebrated on the 7th of November. The idea to change the holiday came from the church and was supported by leaders of several parliamentary groups. The revolutionary ideas of 1917, which the old November celebrations evoked with such reminiscence, denied that the concept of nation was a bourgeois relic. Eventually this came to divide the nation. The November 7th celebrations were cancelled.

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[6] The Izvestiya building was built in 1927 to house offices and printing presses of Izvestia – the official daily newspaper of the Soviet government and the newspaper of record in the Soviet Union.

An explanatory note that accompanied the draft bill to introduce the new holiday read as follows: "On the 4th of November 1612, a people's volunteer army led by Kozma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky stormed Kitay Gorod, thereby liberating Moscow from the Polish invaders and showing an example of heroic behaviour and the unity of the whole nation, regardless of class, religion or social status." In February of 1613, the Assembly of the Land elected Mikhail Romanov to be the Tsar, the first of the Romanov dynasty to rule Russia. The 4th of November remained a national holiday in the Russian Empire until 1917. Back then, it was there to celebrate the icon of Our Lady of Kazan.

Currently, the day is celebrated in a rather pompous manner. By tradition, it is on this day that the head of the state bestows memorial awards on Russia's foreign friends. The capital hosts numerous patriotic concerts, and a grand Orthodox exhibition is opened in Manezh[7]. However, the most impressive of the festivities are perhaps the Russian March organised by nationalists all over the country. Every year, thousands and thousands of people go out into the streets of their cities to march in close ranks, chanting slogans in support of the Slavic nation. 2010 was no exception – that year the celebrations attracted a record number of participants. According to organisers, between 10 and 15 thousand people gathered for a procession in Moscow, which took place near the Lyublino metro station. The procession culminated in a meeting followed by a festive concert. They chose Bolotnaya Square as their 2009 venue, and this time they opted to stage the ballad performance of the nationalist rock group Kolovrat and Kruger, a Voronezh-based collective, in Lyublino itself, to make sure that the crowds didn't disperse.

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[7] Manezh, now: Central Exhibition Hall Manege, was built in 1917 to house parades of horsemen, training school for officers and to host exhibition.

National Unity Day celebrations last year coincided with the exhibition *Workers and Philosophers* that took place on the site of the Skolkovo Moscow School of Management[8]. At first glance, the name seemed to evoke nation-dividing sentiments, associated as it was with proletarian revolutionary rhetoric. But don't be deluded. The Russo-French tandem curators might have hinted at the past, but what they produced wasn't, in fact, revolutionary.Instead, , the idea of their project was linked to the tradition of the Russian avant-garde, out of which grew both contemporary art and contemporary design, as well as the contemporary Russian avant garde. Indeed, the exhibited artists often repeated or creatively enriched the formal vocabulary of their great ancestors. Workers-cum-artists created a new international gauge for an object, while philosophers-cum-artists asserted the idea of a dreamy distance separating themselves from life, without which the latter could not be successfully observed. Contemporary creative labourers have a nearly religious faith in the autonomous nature of artwork, a faith that provides the energy allowing them to keep going against all odds. The exhibition was accompanied by a text which proclaimed:

"The exhibition's curators have selected two themes, "Workers" and "Philosophers", to highlight two of the most vibrant creative standpoints chosen by young artists: to be actively involved in life, to build it – or to observe and analyse it. Each part features a diverse group of artists. Thus, the viewer can see the differences between French and Russian "constructivists" as well as the things French and Russian "philosophers of art" have in common. Moreover, in deliberately refraining from dividing artists by nationality, the curators stress once again that Russia is a fully-fledged member of the international art movement, recognised in it as the birthplace of avant garde, both historic and present-day, rather than simply "the land of matryoshka dolls".

It seems that the exhibition will soon be shown in the city of Perm[9]. So the battle between two different versions of modernisation – one equipped with quotes from Leni Riefenstahl andthe other based on the formal tradition of Russian avant-garde – will go on.

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[8] *Workers and Philosophers* was an exhibition of Russian and French contemporary Art that took place in Skolkovo Moscow School of Management (4.11.2010–7.12.2010).

[9] This text was first published on 15 . 02 . 2011. Since then, the exhibition *Workers and Philosophers* has not been mentioned on the PERMM museum website.

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By night, Voronezh currently reminds me of the 19th century Paris. The yellow factory windows have been replaced by the neon lights of advertisements targeting round-the-clock revellers. Sacco and Vanzetti Street beckons, its seductive pull equally strong in Chelyabinsk, Yekaterinburg, Izhevsk, Nizhny Novgotrod, Novorossiysk, Novosibirsk, Orel, Perm, Pyatigorsk, Rostov-on-Don, Samara, Saratov, Tobolsk, Tula, Vladimir and Voronezh. Most factories are either closed down completely or being restructured. Since the Black Earth region has neither the natural resources nor processing plants that are necessary, the former industrial estate has been fully handed over to the service industry. A handful of surviving factories had to relinquish their entire social infrastructure. Former nurseries have been converted into leisure facilities, while places labelled as fear areas and therefore deprived of such possibilities are awaiting the arrival of contemporary artists, or someone like them: someone whose immaterial labour could free local property prices from the spell of magic.

Those of my fellow artists who chose to stay in our native city have, almost without exception, subscribed to the doctrine of formalism, concentrating on their own art with its purely aesthetic problems. Despite being gradually institutionalised and accumulating links with power structures, they continue to be driven by bare enthusiasm in their work. My other colleagues, those who have opted for metropolitan life, have denounced their native place. These artists stigmatise those who have stayed behind as fascists, at the very least for their love of the provincial quagmire. Those who have left, as befits citizens of the world, diligently follow world affairs via social networks, study books criticising global capitalism and search for an exit from the dead end of activist art. Those who have stayed prefer to forget those who have left altogether. Whenever those who have left speak about those who have stayed, it is either to criticise their naivety, which is manifested in their attempts to find sponsors

among local capitalists willing to fund art development, or to mock their immature views both in politics and aesthetics.

February 2011

A POLITICAL GUIDE TO CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA POETRY

All we can do is wait for the left-winger poets to get their own equivalent of Yemelin or Bykov, their own "literary populist" who would take up this vacant position. That might happen any day now, but some of the left's peculiarities are clearly in the way, hindering the emergence of such a "poet for the masses".

The commercial media, cinema and even advertising each play greater roles than literature, let alone poetry, in creating the ideological atmosphere of contemporary society. However, the lowly and marginal status of poetry in a market society inevitably politicises poets, turning them into the discontented, those who disagree and protest. When a poet lends his voice to a social group which he regards as the most important in historical terms, that is, the one linked to the version of the common future the poet wants to see realised, a particular political dimension emerges in poetry. This is when his poems start reflecting, with all sincerity, political differences along the lines of "us and them". And as the poet enters the space of war, its front lines are bound to cross his heart.

From the late Soviet period onwards, circles of the intelligentsia regarded poetry as a non-political affair, an attempt to avoid the language of power and that of the opposition, an escape into the private and the personal. With marked contrast, the situation has recently been changing. I have a good view of these changes, working as I do at a bookshop specialising in intellectual publications, specifically with a broad range of contemporary poetry and a programme of poetry readings and launches taking place almost daily.

One of the examples of these changes are the so-called Mayakovsky Readings, street events organised by a citizen activist named The Scythian, a member of The Other Russia, a banned political party. During the last two years, over a hundred people writing political poetry have been reading in public by the monument of the great revolutionary poet Mayakovsky in Moscow. These readings resulted in a published collection that borrows its title from one of Mayakovsky's works, *Nate* (*Take That*).[1] The most frequently cited of its authors are the liberal Ars–Pegasus[2] and socialist Daniil Poltoratsky.[3]

Mayakovsky Readings is a series that continues an old anti-Soviet tradition. Soon after Stalin's death in 1953, poets who were not published in the USSR began gathering by the monument to read their poems to the public. During the so called "Krushchev thaw" these poetic meetings in the square became a democratic ritual for intellectuals with a humanities background. They went on, with an ever-increasing draw of participants, until the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which signalled the beginning of Brezhnev "stagnation". Over the next 40 years, such gatherings were remembered as purely historical events, but this tradition of poetry performances open to all has now been resumed. In contemporary Russia, poets and their audiences are usually accompanied by several police vans full of special force officers, given that the authorities think that such amateur performances must be a smokescreen for non-sanctioned opposition meetings.

And yet, the poetry of Mayakovsky Readings, action and activist oriented, remains part of a "protest subculture". For this reason, it would be interesting to trace the political engagement of different poets in a wider, less meeting-related context.

Liberals

The first characteristic of a liberal poet is his self-professed apolitical stance. An individualist shunning both the "crowd" and "state" with equal measures of disdain, he is reluctant to draw on common experience in his works, and, given the opportunity, he stresses the fact that a personality tends to maintain maximal independence from social the conditions that have produced it. He often presents himself as an eccentric who, contriving to fly outside any ideologies, serves as a medium through whom "the language as such" demonstrates its potential. Such a poet easily reveals his liberalism by answering indirect questions. He has no doubt that a certain order of things – completely "natural", "normal", "human" and "accepted in civilised countries" – dictates that ballots be secret, responsibility (like emotions) strictly individual and property immune from seizure.

At the same time, the liberal makes the point of ignoring private and individual property and agrees that while having a shop-bought lighter in your pocket may be natural for some people, it may be just as "natural" for others to own a factory with a hundred staff members. Economics has long been happily separated from politics inside the liberal conscience, and with this separation in place "normal people" involved in creative activities stop needing politics. In the liberal's view, society doesn't consists of classes or other competing groups – it consists of separate personalities with different levels of development, the highest being that of bourgeois liberalism with its sacred cult of privacy.

The social drama frustrating a liberal poet usually lies in the fact that his ambient political reality – in other words, the very same "state" and the very same "crowd" – constantly misbehaves, outrageously transgressing against the above-mentioned orders of the natural and normal. The poet is often further shocked by a visit abroad, to the west of our barbarian frontiers, when he finds out that, first of all, life there is even further removed from his ideal and, secondly, that the majority of Western intellectuals and bohemians do not support the liberal verdict on "society's natural ways".To the contrary, they insult this value system by calling it the ideological camouflage for capital's dictatorship.

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[1] *Nate*, Free Marxist Publishing, 2011; http://fmbooks.wordpress.com/2011/08/28/nate/; date of access September 2012.

[2] Arseny Molchanov (b. 1987) is a poet who acts under the pseudonym of Ars-Pegasus. From 2006 to the present, he has performed poetry at recitals, music festivals, poetry readings, and related events across Russia. He is a founder and a member of the group "Immoral Saucer".

[3] Daniil Poltoratsky (b. 1991) is a member of the Russian Socialist Movement. He began a hunger strike on the 4th of June 2009 to protest against arrest of Artem Loskutov. He was kidnapped and beaten by unknown persons. He presently lives and works in Moscow. Personal website: http://vk.com/poltoratsky; date of access September 2012.

In the past, poets themselves or their elder predecessors used to argue a great deal about who was more revealing for the times, Pasternak[4] or Mandelstam[5]. Later they honoured Brodsky[6] as an ideal "archetype". Another ideal poet figure, if you count those who sang, was Okudzhava[7], who publicly went down a route symptomatic for liberals by passing from romantic Leninism to the total denial of all forms of "totalitarianism". As for the "apolitical" Brodsky, he has an interesting episode in *Embankment of the Incurable*, in which he describes his visit to Ezra Pound's widow that reveals once more that there is no difference between fascism and communism – and moreover, that there never has been. Needless to say, such a difference doesn't exist only from the liberal viewpoint (and therefore, it is not unique). The liberal pathos consists in this alone – in avoiding all forms of "totalitarianism", with the exclusion of "financial totalitarianism", which is preferred as the least evil of available options. The liberal poet escapes totalitarianism of the state and the ignorant crowd throwing himself into the arms of the enlightened bourgeois. The word itself, "totalitarianism", is a purely liberal term, equally unacceptable to both the left and the right.

In the 2000s, as the phantom pains of the Soviet trauma subsided and the idea of poetic practices expanded, Brodsky's stock went down slightly. At the same time, the amount of variety increased in such circles, so liberal poets started using a new yardstick, such authorities of non-censored Soviet poetry as Gennady Aygi, Viktor Sosnora or Igor Kholin, [8] with each representing a completely different school of the "literary underground" of the past. Still, sometimes they would abandon their conveniently "apolitical" stance and allow themselves to make a direct civic statement. At the end of the 90s they used to publish anti-Chechen war collections or run literary festivals in support of Grigory Yavlinsky[9]. That having been said, no one cared about poetry in the 90s, apart from the poets and their girlfriends. But with the arrival of a new era in the 2000s, one of the most consistent and deep literary gurus of this school, the poet and philologist Dmitry Kuz'min[10], who notably supported American military action in Iraq, went so far as to have a public row with the talented vers-librist Kitrill Medvedev[11], who has since become a Marxist.

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[4] Boris Pasternak (1890–1960) was a poet, writer, and member of the Centryfuga group of poets. Perceived as the most significant post-revolutionary poet in Russia. Author of the novel *Dr. Zyvago*. In 1958 he received the Nobel Prize for literature. It was refused because of the political pressure imposed on him. He wasxcluded from the Writers' Association until his death.

[5] Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938) was a poet, writer, and member of the Acmeist school of poets. He was arrested during the repressions of the 1930s and sent into internal exile. After a release, he was arrested again in 1938 and sentenced to a camp in Siberia, where he eventually died. His name was deleted from the history of Russian literature in 1933, and only gradually acknowledged after 1956. His poetry was based on rhythm and sound effects paying tribute to the classic canon of poetry and culture.

[6] Josif Brodski (1940–1996) was a poet, essayist, and translator. In 1964 he was sentenced to 5-years of labor under the charge of "parasitism" – the refusal to perform social works. After 1977, he heldAmerican citizenship, and received a noble prize in literature in 1978. This provided him with acknowledgement in Russia as a writer, but not as a citizen. His poetry is inspired by classical literature. It is predominately apolitical and metaphysical in character.

[7] Bułat Okudzhava (1924–1997) was a poet, writer, and singer. As a member of the Communist Party (1955), he gave support to the persecuted writers. In 1957 he started to sing his poems accompanied by guitar. His texts are based on religious motifs and on his war experience.

[8] Gennady Aygi (1934–2006) was a poet, literary critic, and translator; Viktor Sosnora (b. 1936) is awriter, and poet. He lives and works in St. Petersburg; Igor Kholin (1920–1999) is a poet and member of the Lianosovo group of poets and painters;

[9] Grigory Yavlinsky (b. 1952) is a leader of the Russian Democratic Party *Yabloko* (*The Apple*).

[10] Dmitry Kuz'min (b. 1968) is a poet, critic and publisher. He is the founder of the Vavilon Union of Young Poets, a hub for Moscow's experimental poetry scene (1989), and head of ARGO-RISK Publishers and *Vozdukh* (*Air*), a quarterly poetry magazine. He runs the first Russian magazine for gay writing "Risk". Personal website: http://dkuzmin.livejournal.com/; date of access September 2012.

[11] Kirill Medvedev (b. 1975) is a poet, translator, publisher, founder of the Free Marxist Press, and a member of the Russian Socialist Movement. He lives and works in Moscow.

To cite only a few stars of the contemporary poetry scene: Stanislav L'vovsky, Elena Fanaylova, Tatyana Shcherbina, Grigory Dashevsky, Mariya Stepanova, Linor Goralik, etc.[12] Historically, local liberalism has been lucky with its poets. For them, liberalism has become the ideological mainstream; seen as the air breathed by bohemians, it is taken for granted. I think it would be fair to say that the majority of the contributors to the magazine and publishing house Air[13] subscribe to political liberalism – the supreme cult of abstract human rights – of different hues. For example, this is precisely what you encounter at the annual festival of civic lyrical poetry, which has already been run by the magazine three times. There are some difficult situations, too. Take, for instance, Dmitry Vodennikov,[14] most frequently mentioned in various glossies and elected "King of Poets" at a national competition. He possesses all the aforementioned qualities of a liberal poet, even showing them off in an exaggerated manner (for the press). In recent years he has constantly admitted to his fondness for all things "imperial", speaking with coquettish horror about uncovering a "patriotic monster" in his political unconscious. Believe it or not, perhaps the reasons for such inner discoveries lies outside in the societal context of the 2000s, when political liberalism lost the better part of its former popularity among "a wide readership", becoming reprehensible in the eyes of "the masses" and thereby giving way to the pro-nation and empire views of entirely different degrees of acerbity. When aiming beyond his guild, a sensitive poet can't ignore such ideological changes and may well experience any outer transformations as inner discoveries.

Mass involvement nevertheless requires genuine literary populism. It was provided by Dmitry Bykov,[15] a literary biographer, critic and essayist, who is extremely popular in Russia and has always considered poetry the most adequate form for expressing his thoughts. No wonder he is very good at being understood by everyone – 20 years ago he belonged to Courteous Mannerists, the most popular poetry group of the late 80s and early 90s. Mannerists used to mix together erotics, which were previously banned, with Soviet clichés that everyone was fed up with and scenes from the life of young people. Their articulate and ironic style made them the first representatives of a post-Soviet "pop poetry", many of them later going into the entertainment business to write lyrics for pop and rock bands.

Bykov's current project, *Citizen Poet*,[16] voices the opinions of a liberal frondeur. The immensely popular actor Efremov recites Bykov's poetry written in the manner of some famous poet of the past; the verses are composed once a week and dedicated to an event which, in Bykov's view, is the most topical and outrageous thing to have happened in Russia. *Citizen Poet* is produced by Andrey Vasilyev, one of the best known Russian journalists, a co-founder of the Moscow-based daily *Kommersant*,. Through the transparent film of literary stylisation, in the manner of various poets, from Nekrasov and Tvardovsky[17] to Viktor Tsoy and Vladimir Vysotsky,[18] one can always clearly distinguish the political face of Bykov himself. According to his theory, our country's social history keeps going around in some circle, and therefore it is akin to nature, bearing no resemblance to the linear history of Western or "normal" countries. Occasionally, if only for a short time, our society accumulates a stratum of freedom-loving and educated people and tries to use their influence to break through this Russian circle of negative selection. But in a fatal twist, this sprint turns out to be programmed into a pointless circular movement, along with its consequences, which are known in advance. *Citizen Poet* is infused with this sense of fatality and despair that is ground into its own wit.

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[12] Stanislav L'vovsky (b. 1972) is a poet, culture manager, journalist, and co-editor of the literature section on opensapace.ru; Elena Fanaylova (b. 1962) is a poet and lecturer in journalism. She lives and works in Moscow; Tatyana Shcherbina (b. 1954) is a poet, writer, and journalist. She worked for Radio Freedom, the *Kommersant* daily, and edited the magazine *Aesthete*. She lives and works in Moscow; Grigory Dashevsky (b. 1964) is a poet and literary critic; Mariya Stepanova (b. 1972) is a poet. She lives and works in Moscow; Linor Goralik (b. 1975) is a poet, writer, journalist and artist. She lives and works in Moscow.

[13] *Air* is a quarterly magazine of contemporary poetry lead by Dimitri Kuz'min and designed by Yury Gordon. It has published a series of poetry books since 2005. See http://www.litkarta.ru/projects/vozdukh/; date of access September 2012.

[14] Dmitry Vodennikov (b. 1968) is a poet and essayist. He hosts two radio shows on Russian poetry: "Free entry" on Radio Kultura and "Poetic Minimum" on Radio Rossii. He lives and works in Moscow. Personal website: http://www.vodennikov.ru/index; date of access September 2012.

[15] Dimitri Bykov (b. 1967) is a writer, poet, journalist, member of Courtouaznye Manierysty group of poets (Courteous Mannerists). He is an author of the bestseller biography of Boris Pasternak (2005) and regularly contributes to the *Ogoniok* magazine. Being well known for his political engagement, he became a popular speaker during the protest rallies in Moscowa in December 2011–March 2012.

[16] See http://www.youtube.com/user/GrazhdaninPoet; date of access September 2012.

[17] Wsiewold Nikolajewicz Nekrasov (b. 1934) is a poet, a member of the Lianosovo group of poets and painters. He lives and works in Moscow; Aleksandr Tvardovsky (1910–1971) was a writer, poet, and editor of the *Noviy mir* (*New world*), the most influential magazine for the Soviet 60s. In this magazine, for example, Solzhenitsyn was published for the first time. His writing refers to folklore poetry and Russian classics, ex. Aleksander Pushkin.

[18] Viktor Tsoy (1962–1990) was a Soviet musician and leader of the rock band Kino; Vladimir Vysotsky (1938–1980) was a poet, singer, and actor at the avant-garde Moscow Art Theatre. He gained enormous popularity performing his songs in films, theatres and during concerts. His songs were dedicated to monotonous elements of Soviet life, especially religion and the denial of war and aggression. They were distributed in millions of copies.

The Putin era of "soft totalitarianism" has given Bykov a unique opportunity to be a a kind of "court jester", mocking without encountering serious problems. The worst incident being a scandal with the liberal TV channel Rain, which stopped broadcasting the programme in March of 2012 because it was too biting and critical towards the Kremlin. The management of the online broadcaster decided that jeopardising the future of the whole channel for the sake of mere verses, no matter how talented, would be an excessive luxury that could not be justified in the shrunken realities of the liberal opposition's media space. *Citizen Poet* allowed the author to shed a quarter of a century, to feel transported back to the late 80s, as if he was doing a public performance on the perestroika-swept Arbat, reciting some "truth", funny and revealing, in the spirit of street poetry fashionable in those days: "Better have a drunken Yeltsin than a sober Gorbachev!"

Of course, literary populism does oblige you to rely on feedback from wider audiences, to take collective experience into account. This may explain why, unlike many other liberals, Bykov – or his poetic self – remembers the 90s mainly as a social tragedy marked by the decay of previous cultural connections, rather than the happy days of maximum opportunities provided by spontaneous capitalism. Although the last generation of the Soviet intelligentsia was at the cusp of the perestroika-induced denial of "*sovok*" (a derogatory term used for all things Soviet), it was this group that, following the destruction of this very *sovok* in the 90s, lost its former societal status, gaining nothing in return. Bykov, despite being so successful, perceives this disappointment as his own, as a loss of his closest target group.

Things most frequently bought from our bookshop together with *Citizen Poet* include *Love of History* by Boris Akunin, *The Other Day* by Leonid Parfyonov and Steve Jobs' biography. The art department sells editions of René Magritte, Francis Bacon and Salvador Dali.

Right-Wingers

This ideology was far less successful with its poets in post-Soviet society. Long gone are the days of the famous "peasant" poets and talented traditionalists: those *yesenins*, *klyuevs* and *rubtsovs*. So it happened that in the 90s right-wingers of all hues had to make do with rather flat and short-lived verses, devoid of a second layer, about young wolfhounds, the sleeves of their black shirts rolled. Alina Vitukhnovskaya,[19] an eccentric poet (her godfather in literature, her first publisher, was the well-know liberal poet Kedrov)[20] who defected from the liberal camp to flirt with the fascist decadent aesthetic, was an isolated case. Critics and the public saw it all as a curious salon incident, a post-modern idea of playing with the "forbidden". Having spent about a year in prison on charges of drug-dealing, Vitukhnovskaya immediately changed her "support group" when she was released. Many youngsters hypnotised by the "big style of the Third Reich" now counted themselves among her admirers, while she herself posed for posters, her image copying a style adopted by the far right.

Evgeny Golovin's[21] neo-symbolist poetry remained too baroque and hermetic for anyone outside the narrow circle of the "occult underground". A "new right"-style polyglot and intellectual,

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[19] Alina Vitukhnovskaya (b. 1973) is a poet, journalist, and member of Transnational Radical Party. In 1990, she was imprisoned for a year for charges of drug dealing.

[20] Konstantin Kedrov (b. 1942) is a poet, essayist, and philosopher. Founder of the DOOS group of poets and editor of *Zhurnal Poetov* (*Poets' Magazine*). He lives and works in Moscow.

[21] Evgeny Golovin (1938–2010) was a poet, philosopher and literary critic. Personal website: http://golovinfond.ru/; date of access September 2012.

Golovin "created an atmosphere" for a small group of esoteric adepts and aryosophists in the Soviet-era underground. For the new post-Soviet generation of right-wingers his poems proved too complex and "dark", too overloaded with hidden quotations from hermetic and alchemical literature.

A real breakthrough, in the sense of allowing a poet to reach out to the people and get on stage, came 10 years ago, with the discovery of Vsevolod Yemelin.[22] It took him literally two years to go from being a self-publishing author writing online to a winner of numerous prizes, whose books continue to enjoy record-breaking print runs.

He managed to efficiently create his own recognisable poetic world, with its constantly suffering Russian "*posad*" (an archaic version of the suburb) populated by lovely skinheads, severe men in padded jackets and not so lovely "bosses" of all varieties. At the same time, Yemelin never ignored literary history – almost all his quatrains harbour a literary reference visible only to a narrower readership. For this reason, no one can doubt the fact that he is well read. Those unable to decode the camouflaged quotes are left with a readable text and folk humour.

Appearing in most of his work, Yemelin's lyrical hero uses alcohol as a means of reconciling with reality and is nostalgic about the imperial grandeur of the state while not forgetting about a slightly terrible, traumatic aspect typical for any empire. He feels an outsider at this life-long glam party, and he has vague issues with the Jews and very particular fears regarding ethnic groups from the Caucasus. He is extremely intolerant towards "the coppers". In my case, the key to Yemelin's political optics was provided by a poem about a "Soviet science-fiction collection", in which a schoolboy dreams: "I'll study to be a progressor… / I'll serve as a Don Rumata",[23] but none of this comes true in the end. The irony is that today's reality has a lot more to do with the atmosphere surrounding Don Rumata, a fighter for progress from the cult novel by Strugatsky brothers, than the reality in which their book was written and became successful. Of course, there is presently no support coming from a "different" and more "decent" planet, but then Don Rumata didn't have much support either. That is to say, now is the time to be a wise observer, a secret reformer and a open fighter, all to your heart's content. Yet the lyrical self in Yemelin's poems is passive, prone to grumbling and expecting to be supported from the outside. It is this paternalism, deeply rooted in his psychological core, that (apart from the author's obvious gifts) gives him an air of "electability", i.e., understandable and close to people from all walks of life. With no invisible wings of a "messenger" behind your back, your life becomes pointless, trampled over by cosmopolitan "Ikea commodes". It's typical that Don Rumata, in Yemelin's version, "serves" rather than "works" or "investigates". Yemelin's hero is politically frustrated by the fact that there is no empire in sight, not one that would make sense to him and to which he would make sense, so that, despite all his cultural self-irony, he dreams of a military coup in favour of the people, in "working-class areas with no work".[24] His lyrical hero is, apparently, almost indistinguishable from the author – even beyond his lines of poetry, Yemelin participates in a campaign to free young people responsible for nationalist riots in Manezh Square, supports the most far-right of parliamentary parties, led by Zhirinovsky, and is happy to be on friendly terms with *Zavtra* (*Tomorrow*), a conservative paper of the imperial persuasion.

Yemelin's audience is much wider than that of the political right-wing and their sympathisers. In the last decade, he has been more successful than anyone else in the role as the "people's poet", in the same way that Bykov has served in his role as the "intelligentsia's poet". Although it's impossible to prove, I'd venture that it was Yemelin's mass success that stimulated Bykov to launch *Citizen Poet*. The right had its own, widely popular poet capable of expressing in his lines, in a humorous and simple way, what he had just read online, while the liberals had no one similar.

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[22] Vsevolod Ymelin (b. 1959) is a poet and fiction writer, who lives and works in Moscow. He recently published *Blatnye Pesni*, a lyrical report on recent protests in Russia. Personal website: http://emelind.livejournal.com/; date of access September 2012.

[23] See http://Yemelind.livejournal.com/18862.html; date of access September 2012.

[24] See http://nbp-info.ru/nbart/Yemelin/93.html; date of access September 2012.

The items most frequently cited alongside Yemelin's collections are books by Zakhar Prilepin and Mikhail Elizarov,[25] as well as works on geopolitics and the history of the army. On the art front, we have Hans Giger, antique pre-revolutionary postcards and illustrated editions of pictures from bygone times in Moscow.

Left-Wingers

Cosmopolitans and collectivists eager to demonetise everything and extend public access in every direction, the left-wingers are accordingly against any private privileges. When it comes to poetry, they had it hardest, despite having the pathos of the century-old Russian literary avant-garde behind them, including the formal experiments of the 20s, and, if certain selective criteria are applied, the experience of the most creative and sincere figures of Soviet political poetry.

The fact that the left remained mute for so long was a consequence of the post-Soviet allergic reaction, at least amongst educated people, to Soviet vocabulary, which was an extremely vulgar and schematic version of linguistic Marxism. Its vigorous denial meant that a whole generation of creative people suffered blocked access to any expressions of leftist or socialist thought. Perhaps a few isolated exceptions to this rule could be cited from the 90s: the hell-raiser Alexander Brener and Alexander Skidan,[26] a philologist, translator and public intellectual (in the most general sense of the word). Brener put the fighting, punk aspects of the leftist project into his poetry, whereas Skidan's contribution was academic, high-brow, and accessible only to attentive readers of Deleuze and Adorno.

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[25] Zakhar Prilepin (b. 1975) is a writer, journalist, and political activist on behalf of the Other Russia, and member of the National Bolshevik Party. He is the editor of the independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta in Nizhny Novgorod, where he lives and works; Mikhail Elizarov (b. 1973) is a writer. His novel *The Librarian* received the Russian Booker Prize in 2008. He lives and studies film direction in Berlin.

[26] Alexander Brener (b. 1957) is an artist and political activist. He is one of the most important figures of Moscow activism along with Oleg Kulik; Alexander Skidan (b. 1965) is a poet, literary critic, journalist, editor of *New Literary Observer*, and member of the group *Chto delat?* He lives and works in St. Petersburg. See http://www.vavilon.ru/texts/skidan0.html; date of access September 2012.

A new generation of leftist poets emerged in the mid-2000s. Apart from the already mentioned Daniil Poltoratsky and Kirill Medvedev, who has left the liberal literary camp to become a fervent Marxist, this generation included Keti Chukhrov, Paver Arsenyev, Anton Ochirov and Roman Osminkin.[27] What they do in poetry may often be witty and topical, but has generated zero popularity, perhaps because the form doesn't lend itself to the stage.

This group of young anti-bourgeios poets is growing quickly around their permanent anthology, *Translit*, and the eponymous publishing venture,[28] as well as a series entitled Kraft. Despite all their interest in the language of the exploited, various forms of alienation and the prospects of social liberation for the oppressed classes, these new leftist poets all gravitate towards complex forms and rely on a primed readership, familiar with critical theory, well versed in conceptualism and vers-libre. In other words, they have now managed to create a literary subculture marked by high intellectual standards, one of a neo-Marxist variety: their own version of leftist and small-print-run salon culture. These authors, who take ubiquitous inequality as an opportunity for striking new human relationships, are exceptionally well read, but their success with the public is still out of question – and perhaps it was never in the cards.

All we can do is wait for the left-winger poets to get their own equivalent of Yemelin or Bykov, their own "literary populist" who would take up this vacant position. That might happen any day now. Perhaps they are at the same stage of development today as the post-Soviet liberals and the right-wingers were before Bykov's and Yemelin's arrival. But then again, some of the left's peculiarities are clearly in the way, hindering the emergence of such a "poet for the masses".. In their poetry, non-traditional in form and critical in content, the majority of these radical vers-librists are trying to demonstrate how an old "bourgeois" identity is collapsing, right before our eyes, inside a poem, and to show us where a new, alternative, competing and even revolutionary subjectivity might emerge. Can one describe this kind of experience in poetry that would be mass-oriented and "accessible to all"? In theory, yes, but in practice, until someone has done that, it's hard to think of a "popular" method applicable to such a specific problem.

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[27] Keti Chukhrov is an art theoretician and philosopher. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature and is an associate professor at the Russian State University for Humanities, Department of Art Theory and Cultural Studies. She is likewise head of the theory department at the National Center for Contemporary Art, and contributes to *Moscow Art Magazine*. She lives and works in Moscow; Pavel Arsenyev (b. 1986) is apoet, activist at Street University, a member of Laboratory for Political Action, and editor-in-chief of *Translit* magazine. He collaborates regularly with the group *Chto Delat?* He lives and works in St. Petersburg; Roman Osminkin (b. 1979) is apoet andone of the founders of '*Translit* magazine. He lives and works in St. Petersburg; Anton Ochirov (b. 1978),is a poet who lives and works in Moscow.

[28] See http://www.trans-lit.info/; date of access September 2012.

Poetry from the Kraft series is most often bought together with books by the philosopher Žižek, Trotsky's memoirs and issues of *Khudozhestvenny Zhurnal* (*Art Magazine*). It is this category of readers that are the main consumers of art books, from Paul McCarthy's and Marina Abramović's illustrated editions to the theoretical works of Boris Groys or Gerald Raunig.

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Ilya Budraitskis (b. 1981) is a historian, activist, and collaborator with the group *Chto Delat?/What is to be done?* He is a postgraduate student at the Institute for the World History, Russian Academy of Science. He has been a political activist since 1997, organizing the Russian protests against the G8, European and World Forums and is currently the spokesperson for the Russian Socialist movement. Between 1996-1999 he was a participant in Avdey Ter-Oganyan's project School of Contemporary Art, and he participated in Anatoly Osmolovsky's seminars on critical theory from 1998–2000. He has worked on collective art-projects and exhibitions with David Ter-Oganyan and Alexandra Galkina since 2005. Their collaborative works are in the collections of the Moscow Museum of Contemporary Art and the Luigi Pecci Museum (Prato, Italy). Budraitskis is a member of the editorial board of *Moscow Art Magazine*. He lives and works in Moscow.

Maria Chekhonadskikh (b. 1985) is a theorist, curator, editor of *Moscow Art Magazine,* and a project assistant for Maybe Education and Public Programs, *Documenta* 13 (2012). As of 2013, she is a postgraduate student at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University, London. Her dissertation research concerns precarious labor and artistic subjectivity. She was a curator of the "Arthouse Squat Forum" (24.09–22.10.201) in the Arthouse Residential Complex, Moscow. She lives and works in Moscow.

Yegor Koshelev (b. 1980) is an artist and author of various texts on contemporary art. He studied in the Department of Monumental Painting at the Stroganov University of Arts and Industry in Moscow (1997-2003). After graduation, he studied the history of art. His own work combines large-scale paintings with site specific murals. His exhibition "Underground Monuments/Astro-Hipster Domine" in Regina Gallery (London) and contributed to group exhibitions such as "Space" at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art (2007), "Checkpoint" at Project Fabric, Moscow (2012) and the Moscow Biennale of Young Art (2010, 2012). He lives and works in Moscow.

Arseny Zhilyaev XX

ILYA BUDRAJTSKIS
MARIA CHEKHONADSKIKH
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ARSENY ZHILYAEV

THE LESSONS OF THE BIENNALE SEASON

The city is covered with a network of trade paths whose intersection nodes are innumerable and represent private economic interests. We can enter this relationship with the biennale project, possibly benefiting from it. But we might just as easily run into problems, particularly the community being corrupted from the inside.

The Second Wave of Privatisation

MC: It has been two years since the art community first detected a number of trends signifying the neoconservative policy set by the Third Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, entitled "Against Exclusion"[1]. This was indicated by the fact that the project had a single curator, Jean-Hubert Martin, along with its decidedly conservative theme, employment of populist rhetoric and the general tendency to try and hold the developments of culture within a single centre. The current biennale logically follows in these footsteps[2]. With its wide scope, the theme allows curators to force a diverse array of artistic project – from high-tech installations, in line with Medvedev's modernisation agenda, to social works – into a single exhibition. Given this situation, the way the biennale is actually organised appears to be interesting. I think that this is what we have to look at if we want to find out more about new symptomatic features.

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[1] The Third Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (25 .09–25 .10. 2010), Garage Centre for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, titled *Against Exclusion* is curated by Jean-Hubert Martin in reference to his 1989 project *Magicians of the Earth*.

There were some rumours about a tender for the biennale contract this autumn, in which several companies, at least that is what is said, took part. Needless to say, no official information can be found about this. We happened to notice that Joseph Backstein's office[3] received the contract in the end. The model used to organise "the big project", together with its conceptual basis, will only be considered justified if the running costs indicate an attractive investment environment and help to reduce the total expenditure.[4] To remain a viable competitor, the organisers had to cut their budget in half.[5] As a result of this "optimisation", the walls were still being painted during the opening of the main project, there were prominent joints in plasterboard, and the entire exposition somehow felt unseemly or sketchy. We have been told, quite directly, that the next biennale will be "put on the market", whatever that might mean. These processes are not afeature peculiar to local capitalism. Similar things result from belt-tightening rhetoric and austerity regimes in Western Europe, but in our case, with oil prices still strong, this policy seems rather bewildering. In such circumstances, our discussion ought to first address the second wave of culture privatisation.

YK: Over the last few years, the idea of culture being handed over to private ownership at all levels has been widely promoted. They are trying to make culture self-sufficient. This official policy is fairly transparent, and recently it has no longer been camouflaged – cultural institutions must look for funding elsewhere.

First and foremost, the first three biennales were political events that were designed to demonstrate a number of important things: yes, we do have contemporary art here, the state is willing to support it, and we are open to cultural dialogue with other countries. They had to create, in a more or less convincing way, a platform from which to demonstrate Russian ambitions. Later, the political meaning of this unwieldy event began to evaporate: we seem to have convinced everyone already, so why not cut down on investments now. Better yet, let's outsource this expensive trifle to private investors.

AZ: It is more complicated in my view. We can't categorically say that the state has chosen to fully withdraw from the contemporary art sector. It wouldn't be quite correct to see these processes as something radically new. In particular, I'm talking about the collapse of established art hierarchies, which are to be replaced by a free, tender-based biennale. Previously, biennale budgets were only partially funded by the state. Private foundations, from both Russia and abroad, always played a large role. Many of the tendencies in question demonstrate that an attempt to devise a new way of interacting with contemporary art is being made at the government level. Prime Minister Putin has said that as the gap between the people and authorities has recently broadened some elements of direct democracy need to be introduced. Now more than ever, the authorities need a liberal facade to put up the appearance of democratic transformations. Contemporary art is a relatively cheap way of criticising the system. This tendency is most apparent in Marat Guelman's new project "Cultural Alliance": controlled regional centres of contemporary art are being created under the aegis of the state, to broadcast the pathos of patriotism and modernisation. This is no longer Ilya Glazunov[6] with monumental canvases featuring warrior swords – this alternative exists in the shape of critically-minded jesters, à la Blue Noses or Belyaev-Gintovt[7], but it looks equally unconvincing to everyone. Liberal foundations are virtually defunct in Russia today, so there is hardly any danger of criticism being drowned in omnivorous capitalist discourse.

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[2] The Fourth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (23.09–30.10.2011) TsUM, Aartplay, Moscow, titled *Rewriting Worlds* was curated by Peter Weibel.

[3] Joseph Backstein (b. 1945) the Art Director of the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art since 2003. He holds a PhD in philosophy from the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology and is a member of the International Association of Art Critics. He has been a Director of the Moscow Institute of Contemporary Art since 1991.

[4] See Ekaterina Degot's interview with Joseph Backstein touching upon tender-related issues: http://os.colta.ru/art/projects/8865/details/31955/?print=yes&attempt=1

[5] The budget of the Fourth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art was 62 million roubles (2 040 000 USD), of which 52 million (1 708 000 USD) was provided by the Ministry of Culture. See http://lenta.ru/articles/2011/09/23/biannual/

IB: When discussing the last biennale, we said that it was a vertical, nontransparent, unmanageable structure accumulating both government resources and commissions. One is tempted to say that the state corporation model is beginning to be reassessed, not simply at the level of art but at the level of the state. The declared modernisation process logically implies maximising the efficiency of any projects affected by constantly decreasing government investments. The same logic dominates everything: competition for the best use of government resources is getting ever tighter. Agents offer their projects as involving maximum innovation and minimum costs, but at the end of the day, only one of them wins, intercepting the thin stream of targeted financing.

Peter Weibel's project was astonishing in its size, with a large number of works demonstrating, quite unambiguously, their utilitarian meaning. One could press a button and get something in response, or look into a peephole and see something. These are objects that can be used according to their purpose, and they claim to be inventions. The annual camp of the Nashi movement, run by United Russia at Lake Seliger, also has a project entitled "Kulibin"[8]. It lasts for a month, about a third of the camp's entire duration, and involves various people inventing things. A man comes from Tula, he invites you to press a single button to bake a pie. Similar associations with the "shod flea" were also present in Weibel's project. In this sense, you can obviously talk about a transition to the regime of maximum efficiency.

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[6] Ilya Glazunov (b. 1930) is an artist based in Saint Petersburg. He holds the title of People's Artist of Russia and serves as a rector at the Fine Arts Academy in Moscow.

[7] Blue Noses, see p. _, Alexey Belyaev-Gintovt (b. 1965) is artist based in Moscow.

[8] Seliger camp is an annual youth camp of the pro-Putin movement « Nashi » run by the United Russia party at the lake situated to the north of Moscow. Ivan Petrovich Kulibin (1735 – 1818) was a Russian mechanic and inventor.

Given a more developed and aggravated neoliberal logic, this biennale is different in that we have heard a lot more critical voices, and we have seen a fairly large number of discussion platforms ("Auditorium Moscow"[9] and "Media Blow"[10], for example), specially created to maintain the mode of constant reflection, to keep discussions and responses going. Apart from this, there were many artworks that could be seen as critical, particularly those included in the main project. This combination of neoliberal optimisation and gutsy critical spirit seems to be emblematic of the latest biennale. How has the balance of power changed? It was previously clear that we had, on the one hand, Martin's project, on the other, things imperviously and radically opposed to what he was doing – but this biennale didn't enforce a similarly strict division. That is why we had to face a variety of problems throughout the biennale season, some burning and awkward – and some scandalous – situations where a choice had to be made.

MC: There were never any limitations, ideological or conceptual, imposed on the biennale. To take part in the programme of special projects you simply had to submit an application. That no one wanted to fund such projects was a different matter. Still, it's always easier to find a sponsor if you mention the biennale. And the fact that this year critical art suddenly became a rival to the main project was linked to the growth of the art mileu and critical art boom. When it comes to ideology, private capital, as compared to the state, is definitely less demanding towards exhibitions. However, the other side of this coin is that the very same logic of budget optimisation applies: exploitation increases, the process is badly organised, and working conditions are terrible. The question is how far we (as biennale participants) are prepared to go to make sure important social problems are represented, at least on the surface. It is this issue that is at the root of the conflict. While resolving it, the community itself split into clans – groups that either stood up for "the purity of principles" or, conversely, tried to prove the necessity of putting an end to this ideology of "purity".

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[9] "Auditorium Moscow", curated by Ekaterina Degot, David Riff and Joanna Mytkowska, was part of the biennale. See the project site: http://auditorium-moscow.org/

[10] "Media Blow": International Festival of Activist Art was a special project at the Fourth Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art curated by Tatyana Volkova. It presented works and media projects by activists and artists, as well as a broad programme of discussions.

AZ: To be honest, I entirely disagree with the statement about the critical art boom. Trying to link these things – people's disjointed attempts at creating an alternative to the biennale and the ability of "critically-minded" Russian artists to get along with small businesses as opposed to state oligarchs – seems even more blasphemous to me. Although it fits well into the logic of liberal opposition values, this stance has no further significance. The question is, what are we going to do next? Pretend that nothing happened, that we are all hostages of our environment – or try to make solidarity possible? It is as hard to find money for a project during a biennale period as at other times. All talk of audiences makes sense in relative terms alone – the main project is the only one that enjoys a fairly large number of visitors. The programme of events is so intensive, people simply have no time to see everything. I myself decided to miss the biennale. Instead, together with a team of fitter, we did "Radio October"[11], an exhibition opened on the eve of the 98th anniversary of the proletarian revolution, that is, just after the opening week, and I didn't feel any lack of attention from the public. Rather, it gave people more time to reflect on things at their own pace.

YK: Let's look at the projects we tentatively call "socially engaged" and compare them to the main bulk of biennale projects. Even a cursory glance through the catalogue of special projects tells us that there is no real indication of any measurable increase in critical responses. The tendency is not there – it's just that anything can emerge from the chaos we've got around us. And I am not happy about it. The biennale is becoming fragmented, it can't succeed as an entity.

AZ: Early biennale projects, before Jean-Hubert Martin stepped in, were far more interesting, bristling, experimental. Now we only witness decay. If the biennale has indeed turned into a festival which has only political interests, ones we don't share, and no funds, why does it still remain an attractive offering for its stakeholders?

IB: Exhibitions normally don't attract seventy thousand visitors a month. This is the main source of the interest that we – as critical artists in particular – have in such events. We are not in a position to set the rules of the game. We can either use this situation, or not . Critical artists must determine where they stand according to their current analysis of the balance of power: their stance is either one of boycott (boycott is a position of power, extreme confidence, and of being able to counter other offers with something more or less comparable), or one of inclusion (this, on the other hand, is a position where you analyse the situation, while being more modest in estimating your own power). It is along this line that the camps of participants and nonparticipants have been split: those feeling more confident and ready to brave the future are likely to boycott the biennale, while those looking into the future with a kind of doubtful squint are likely to participate.

No one says that this biennale has caused a surge of enthusiasm. We are just stating that the past ones didn't have similar platforms where one could discuss – earnestly, for a whole month – critical projects, whereas this time we had several platforms, each running a series of discussions. It wouldn't be true to say this experience was a success. It showed a certain amount of confusion within the community, some signs of an inner crisis, some problems of an ethical as well as strategic nature. However, whether we like it or not, reflection as a format has begun to grow into the very structure of the biennale.

An Impossible Community

MC: Projects such as "Auditorium Moscow", while formally being part of the biennale, claimed to be alternative in some way, refusing to produce art as a matter of principle and choosing instead to produce discourse – or, in this particular instance, "a sketch of a public space". However, they failed to create a space that was communal and shared by everyone – so I'd like to discuss why. Over the recent years, we have seen the critical community grow and widen.

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[11] "Radio October" (PROEKT_FABRIKA, 2008) is a project by Arseniy Zhilayev, in which he tried to activate a radio station in the Red October factory for the remaining employees. It is located in the centre of Moscow and serves nowadays as a cultural and entertaiment space.

Individual members of this community, those with symbolic or financial resources, have emerged and begun lobbying critical projects of this kind. Instead of working in solidarity, they increasingly agonised, argued and fought over the purity of views and positions.[12] The community started following small rival companies in their course of action. While there was an attempt in the early 2000s to transcend the community's boundaries by making it more political, thus gradually widening it, by the beginning of this decade we have come to a counterintuitive result: within this leftist community, which was being created for years, small groups and clans have again appeared. It was against this background that Viktor Misiano's exhibition "An Impossible Community" was shown. At first glance, it appeared to summarise the historical results of the era of decay and communities' transformations, taking into account their conflictual, individualist nature, and their pathos of tension and confrontation. But in the context of what was happening, it acquired a new range of meanings, probably not attributed to it by the curator.

YK: Splits and conflicts over the purity of positions and related matters are predictable and unavoidable, especially amongst contemporary leftists. With social issues rapidly acquiring a new urgency, their contradictions keep multiplying, the competition between them growing ever tougher. The question of different critically-minded groups strengthening their solidarity, which had been raised from time to time, only nurtured false expectations. It seemed as if we were getting there: another effort, and the long-awaited union would be achieved, past contradictions forgotten. In my opinion, given today's circumstances, even hoping for something similar would be an unforgivably rosy-eyed view, worthy of a young optimist and lacking in historical foresight. Most of the members of this, nominally speaking, creative community are integrated into the market, the system of art institutions, and successfully pursue their commercial and institutional careers under the smokescreen of leftist rhetoric. All of us understand that ornamental leftism and the ability to exploit social issues are only the trump card for many – as soon as other contenders start making claims, a carefully built career and even a creative future are iendangered. To create a safety net some are willing to behave in an unsavoury manner. Many of the initiatives of recent years, including the idea of an artists trade union, demonstrated that the community is more akin to a ghostly presence from the realm of the desired. In many cases, the actual reaction went something like this: "Trade union… Yeah, why not? Not a bad idea in principle… Who is involved in all this? So-and-so? I see… M-m, I don't have a lot of trust in these guys. What is it they are proposing? … Is it really? OK, and what do people say about it? So Openspace has written about it too? Degot herself said something? And Gutov? How interesting… All right then, got to go – I've got a show in three weeks time – loads of work!"

MC: A trade union is just this, a rejection of the idea of a community. Because unlike a community, a trade union has very particular emancipatory aims – it's a tool used to apply pressure or change the balance of power in the system of relationships between employers and employees, it's a union intended to overcome the "group" logic typical for an art community and the "in-crowd" logic described by Viktor Misiano.

AZ: It's primarily exhibitions such as "Art House Squat Forum", which was all about the Russian art community, that left many with the impression that a community is now turning into a commodity. In this sense, Misiano proved extremely shrewd with regard to the 2000s. Despite the acutely felt absence of a platform which could be shared by everyone, in political or even existential terms, real attempts to create it have been unsuccessful. All this in spite of the fact that even talking about the subject, as it turns out, can be seen as an attractive marketing move! Unfortunately, the friendship and respect our art practitioners feel for each other has so far failed to grow into something more substantial. The "sketch of a public space" has remained locked in its avant-garde cell. Excluding the orevolutionary ambitions of the organisers of the Auditorium Moscow to establish a political platform and new art.

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[12] The conversation keeps referring to a number of conflict situations. It is concerned, first of all, with the scandal around the project "Art House Squat Forum". Part of the art community boycotted the curators' agreement to exhibit in the unfinished luxury residential compound Art House. The protesters objected to the developers' attempts to make art, as well as the very idea of squatting, instrumental. That was the reason for the group What Is To Be Done? to remove their work 2+2: *Practising Godard* (misattributed to the Learning Film Group at the opening) from the exhibition "Insecure Life", curated by Maria Chekhonadskikh. The artists who, in their turn, supported the exhibition asked for "nonparticipation" rules to be formulated, demanding that the members of Chto Delat?/What Is To Be Done? pull out from other biennale projects as well.

IB: Indeed, the real problem of this biennale season was the complete absence of political solidarity, since this community hasn't yet built any political relationship between its own members. Hidden relationships based on individual or group competition still define the behaviour of artists. One of the important lessons of the biennale, which the community would be wise to learn, is the importance of political solidarity. One day we'll be ready to rise above group or individual preferences, to submit – possibly by an act of will – to the logic of political inclusion, achieving a state where we'll feel solidarity and recognise the progressive nature of those art phenomena, groups and artists to which we don't relate, personally or even aesthetically. I am trying to cultivate this kind of attitude in myself. On the one hand, there are a number of phenomena that I don't relate to, but on the other hand, I realise their progressive significance for the situation as a whole. So this "progressive significance for the situation as a whole" is what informs my view in this regard.

Facing Ideological Choices

MC: As many have pointed out, private funding only became possible for contemporary art projects shown at the biennale as the investors tried to get a foothold in new venues, such as Artplay, a factory complex, and Art House, a luxury residential compound currently under construction. Is it appropriate to talk about a conscious gentrification strategy in this case? Gentrification means projects whose aim is to revitalise urban spaces, upgrading economically unprofitable or depressed areas. A revitalisation project usually starts with the arrival of creative professionals, who make the social and economic atmosphere of the place advantageous for future buyers and tenants. The whole cycle typically takes years. "Thorough overhaul", the dispersion of the bohemians and the locals comes next. In the case of Art House, before the exhibition was launched 80% of apartments in this unfinished building had already been sold, while the building itself was in a well-developed part of the city where rents had been high from the start. In the context of our conversation, I therefore think that the support given to contemporary art by the new middle class is linked to the desire of this class to self-advertise, its aristocratic pretensions; at best, it may be done with a view to promoting a particular business project, which allows PR costs to be cut significantly.

AZ: Judging by our conversation today, the contradictions intrinsic to local institutions have now become extremely acute. An artist faces a choice virtually every time he takes part in an exhibition. Where once you had to simply stifle your own voice, now you find yourself in a situation that makes you agree, for the sake of mere survival, to participate in what is actually political propaganda in support of the official Russian regime! You used to be able to find some modes of interacting with institutions, but today it's almost impossible to find a niche for yourself within them. In my opinion, creating alternative institutions is the only positive programme, as well as one of the most topical points of this decade's agenda.

IB: All things have their own logic in a market economy. If it weren't for contemporary art, no one would think of opening boutiques and expensive restaurants at such marginal venues as Winzavod or Artplay. As it is, you can have a pricey cafe trading on a factory waste site at a minimal cost – all you need to do is a bit of refurbishing. If artists move to an area it's obvious that it will, after a while, be filled with young people who will take their customs to its shops and restaurants. The potential for attracting larger audiences to unusual places is an argument that makes a lot of sense to both property owners and biennale organisers. This really is a relatively cheap marketing and advertising strategy, which can also be financed from outside sources. When agreeing to take part in a biennale we have to bear in mind that the city is being covered with a network of new trade paths whose intersection nodes are innumerable and represent various private economic interests. We can enter this relationship with the biennale project as a whole, possibly benefiting from it. But we might just as easily run into problems, particularly the community being corrupted from the inside. Given the situation today, we have to think about models that would bring us closer to such tendencies, while trying at the same time to minimise our losses.

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BETWEEN REVISITED HISTORICAL SOCIALISM AND THE IMPORTED WESTERN DISCOURSES

Instead of revisiting Soviet experiences that we have simply inherited, younger generations of artists and intellectuals have become increasingly integrated into the global mainstream of leftist critical art. They have moved beyond the experience of non-capitalism, and find themselves in a reality that necessitates the criticism of capitalism. As one of my friends once said: “Now that we have capitalism, we shall practice gender theory, feminism, and leftist criticism”.

1. Is the Post-Soviet Condition Finished?

According to a number of recent writings, the post-communist or post-socialist condition is over. At the very least, such a stance tries to avoid any simplistic over-identification of Eastern Europe with its local “communist” past, as juxtaposed with the de-ideologized “non-space” of the West (B. Buden). Setting aside a monolithic communist backdrop has, in part, opened the path for integration into Western democracy. In this sense, even though the Western model of democracy happens to be capitalist/liberal democracy, it still holds out the promise of more fertile ground for the left resisting practices than the former socialist spaces. What is more, this project of assimilation holds out the promise of liberating the region from post-socialist rhetoric, be it apologetic or condemnatory, and thereby enabling the region to catch up with the project of the Western (or heretofore Western) modernity.

In Russia, this new point of departure is shared by a generation of intellectuals and cultural actors who have come of age without direct memories of the socialist past. But the issue is not so much a nostalgic reference to the socialist past or post-socialist traumatic identifications. In general, it is true that the post-socialist condition, characterized by criminal and primitive accumulation, social anomia, quasi-feudal business relationships, and the grey economy, is gradually being overtaken over by taxed capital and its legitimization by way of considerable investments into culture and public space. And yet, the more civilized and self-reflexive capitalism becomes, the more capitalism becomes aggressively visible.

Bidding farewell to socialism as an out-dated or failed identity, conjoined with integration into Western modernity, likewise means acknowledging that the communist alternative for modernity and modernization just happened to be a local identity that was defeated for its non-progressive policy. And then the question remains as to whether socialism or communism, despite local implementations might be regarded as identity discourse.

Even when the remains of the Soviet anthropology are involuntarily or forcefully evacuated, the former Soviet territory continues to speak through the palimpsest of capitalist surfaces.[1] In quite a few of her works, the Russian artist Olga Chernysheva refers to such palimpsest confusions between former Soviet ethics and social life and new quasi-capitalist palimpsest covers.[2]

[1] There are many examples of such forceful evacuations – in architecture, institutions, positions, and professions, with the lustration of employees with labor experience in Soviet times – in various former Soviet republics. Perhaps the most serious case is Georgia.

[2] See the video-works "Train" (2001), "Steamboat 'Dionysos'" (2003), and "March" (2005).

Therefore, the question of whether or not contemporary Russian social space happens to be beyond post-soviet experience is dependent on whether or not the Soviet experience is regarded as an obsolete authoritarian past, or as an alternative modernity which, notwithstanding all its failings, contained valuable elements for building non-capitalist means of production and a post-class, if not classless, society

2. Power and Property in the Conditions of CapitalismandNon-Capitalism.

Efforts to rethink or reinterpret Soviet anthropological, ethical and political contexts are very often regarded as superfluous research towards something completely passé. But recomposing the remnants of the past that have not been researched or described is necessary for any archaeology of knowledge. And this kind of work seems tremendously valuable in light of the achievements of Foucault's archaeological analysis of the institutions and languages of pre-bourgeois and bourgeois Western societies, at least in terms of providing new grounds to dispute Western contemporaneity as reconstructed/reconceptualised via discourse power dispositions (it's a term, should be kept). Such theoretical work has not been duly undertaken in relation to the Soviet social experience.

Therefore, it is time to end any efforts to divide the Soviet social context into "bad" ideology and "good" everyday life, official and unofficial cultural production, the avant-garde 1910s and 1920s, and the "anti-avant-garde" or socialist realist 1960s and 1970s, and instead map the dispositions that could serve as the repository for emancipatory experience.

For example, the intellectual and cultural legacy of the Soviet 1960s and 1970s is only known in the West through dissident and non-conformist cultural products, while the general social products of this period actually contain many accomplishments that refer to the avant-garde's political aspirations. Quite a number of films from the cinematic mainstream of the 1960s and 1970s, although far removed from the formalist standpoints of the classical Russian avant-garde, still retain the avant-garde's ambition of "jisnestroenie"

- the idea of producing de-alienated forms of life. What is more, and perhaps unexpectedly, the B-class films and literary works of the late socialist period contain debates on emancipation that remain actual While many experiences from the non-conformist field actually happen to be out-of-date, primarily due to their metaphysical, esoteric hermeticism and solipsism. At the same time, the Moscow Conceptualism that was widely associated with dissident, non-conformist culture has been reinterpreted by some of its protagonists (I. Kabakov, A. Monastyrski, B. Groys, and others) as a valuable social study of ideology that could only have taken place in the conditions of the socialism and in the absence of a market economy.

The existential experience of living in a non-consumerist (shortage), and non-libidinal economy, lacking capitalist means of production became especially acute rather in the post-stalinist thaw-period, rather than during the early post-revolutionary avant-garde years, when there was not yet a stable social experience of living without private property. This is the period when there were already two generations of intelligentsia whose origins rested either in the peasantry or the working class. So on the one hand, the debates of the 1960s mark the tendency of turning part of intelligentsia into a new enlightened elite, on the other – they bring forth self-criticism of the society, manifested in theory, film, literature, to evade the social and cultural segregation and the elements of gentrification.

Usually the 1960s and the 1970s are not considered representative of avant-garde periods of Soviet culture, as opposed to the West, which underwent a second phase of the avant-garde during the same era. If we regard the avant-garde, broadly speaking, as the invention of new languages, forms, and aesthetic methodologies, then the Soviet 60s could hardly be recognized as an avant-garde period. But if we take avant-garde poetics in terms of the production of new ethics, new modes of communication, de-alienating economic conditions, inventing constellations for such de-alienated existential experiences, and supplying real examples of non-class consciousness, then the 60s and 70s happen to be the extension of the Soviet avant-garde's anti-bourgeois program.

But strangely enough, this production of a de-alienated social order, an ethical deed, of tragic *metanoya* in Soviet art[3] is often interpreted in Western Slavic studies as a supplement to ideology, or an out-of date humanist idealism, etc. This is quite understandable, given that the same period in the West confronted capitalism and bourgeois ideology through different paradigm. Here, resistance to capitalism and the conditions of capitalism was generated via subversion, lines of flight, various deviations, and even perversion, characteristic for the art of the 60s and 70s.

But again, to identify why resistance practices worked so differently in capitalist and non-capitalist societies we have to understand the difference in dispositions between power and liberation, power and resistance in these two societies.

In the post-disciplinary neoliberal state of the West power is constructed in a flexible grid, infrastructure, or perhaps even network. So strategies of confronting power must reside in subverting, evading or profaning those infrastructures – sometimes even attempting sacrilege, which works through the confirmation of freedom. (In fact, this would be probably the previous paradigm. Today, resistance or critical attitudes in art do not function very subversively, rather aspiring to be alternative institutions or quasi-governing endeavours – much in the vein of inheriting the achievements of institutional critique and relational aesthetics).

In very general terms, the difference between the power structures of the Soviet and capitalist power infrastructures could be defined in the following manner. First of all, the stereotypical attitude to socialist power – that it was just a classical disciplinary society with an authoritarian centre, personified by its government and indoctrinated masses, who otherwise wanted to be normal consumers and petty bourgeoisie – is wholly inadequate. In the Soviet state the power was not simply located in managing, administering, and governing – as in a post-disciplinary liberal or neoliberal state.

[3] See films by Larisa Shepitko 'Wings" , 1964, "You and I", 1972, plays by Alexander Vampilov "Duck Hunt", 1968, "Elder Son", 1964, play by Alla Sokolova "Fantasies of Farjatiev" later filmed by Ilya Avarbach (1979), philosophic studies on the general and the ideal by Evald Ilienkov

The real power belonged to the idea, and the idea belonged to all. So the power belonged, let's say for shorthand, to the idea of communism. As for government – governing power was just the mediation of the idea. But the government (or even the party) could never be identified completely with communism. Moreover, the government was often suspected of being the perverse, falsification of communist governance (hence the purges as the paranoiac exaggeration of such doubts.) Therefore, the striving of the society was not only to perform the *deed* that would overcome all possible deviations and confirm one as a socialist and a communist (not just implement it formally), but to *pass the idea through consciousness* – i.e. undergo an irreversible change of consciousness via the idea in an almost religious procedure of conversion.[4] A conflict can occur in such transformations, particularly if such a metanoia of the mind is not effective, or does not transform or convert the person. It is interesting to note that a great deal of Soviet philosophical research in the 1960s concerning Marx was dedicated to the issue of consciousness in Marxist theory.[5] In direct contrast, for example, to the Western focus on organizational and economic matters in later Marx.

In other words, the goal in such society could not simply be implementing certain Marxist prescriptions externally, on the level of infrastructure, but to make them function as the internal, voluntary desires and aspirations.

In post-disciplinary and post-structuralist paradigms the initial rigidity of structure should be traversed or subverted by the non-structural elements – series, flows, affects, physiological mixtures and mutations. In cases in which the government is not just concerned with regulation, but its own adequacy in relation to a regulative idea, any government might itself be considered subversive or a deviation in relation to the aforementioned idea, not to say anything about citizens or individuals. Therefore, deviations from the project/idea are considered the errors that impair the society and its potential for emancipation. Consequently, resistance in this case could be understood as the obsession of a citizen or social group to take pains in adhering to the program of communism, rather than subverting from within.

Returning to the aforementioned de-alienation practices in socialist cultural ethics, it should be said that this theme emerged in Soviet art and culture as the discovery that a non-capitalist economy and its productive forces could not fully overcome social alienation; alienation had to be overcome in every concrete situation, and this act of de-alienation is conditioned by the fact that just the proper correlation of productive forces ("technology") and the relations of production ("human relations", or the superstructure) are not enough to resist alienated relations in life and production. Therefore, de-alienation cannot take place without the transformation of consciousness, i.e. without an existential or ethical dimension. Many examples in film, literature and art from this period sought out concrete situations in objective reality in which the socialist and communist premises could find embodiment, not simply in economy and production, but in the life and thought of concrete persons.

Strangely, in many critical anti-capitalist variants of contemporary art one cannot escape the feeling that criticism of neoliberalism is preferred to the search for experiences beyond neoliberalism. It seems as if the permanent criticism of capitalism might be regarded as more emancipatory and counter-capitalist than producing the de-alienated, non-capitalist situations. One of the reasons for that is that inventing de-alienated constellations, or the modes of anthropology exceeding capitalism in the midst of capitalist production might be construed as unreal, essentialist, idealist, or metaphysical. Meanwhile, certain parts of the Soviet cultural, intellectual and social archive contain such non-capitalist anthropology, however "fantastic" some of it might seem today. One such "fantastic" and contradictory point of socialist anthropology was the rejection private property in favour of commonwealth.

Many contemporary leftist theorists, when asked about the social solution to the question of private property and practices of resistance, often forget to make a distinction between personal and private property (which is the means of production, not just something at one's disposal). Moreover, while criticizing capitalism they tend to preserve the notion of private property and locate problems only within uneven accumulation: e.g., 99% of world population are deprived because only 1% holds the vast majority of private property. In such a perspective, communism is the system that would allow those other 99% to own private property as well.[6] In this case, citizens are all potential private proprietors. The attitude towards private property in real socialism was quite different. The Russian philosopher Boris Mejuev clarified the distinction between private property and social property of the commonwealth as it was constructed in Soviet Marxist philosophy of the 1960s.[7] Private property can also be communalized, as was the case with cooperatives and corporations. But it was usually characterized by the border between something belonging to me or us and something belonging to the other. The principle of private property is found in its divisibility, whether equal or not. By contrast, the commonwealth was understood as owning its wealth in its indivisibility. In other words, each was the owner of all social or commonwealth property and not the owner of some material of an immaterial part. The category of social or commonwealth property was not an economic category; it was the condition of man as a social subject exceeding simple material production and its means. Thus, the commonwealth marked a cultural category that might be understood as generalizing the human intellect and creativity. Hence, it marks the transition of society not to a free economy (be it of market or any other mode of economic organization), but to the freedom from economy, a freedom that only persists beyond the logic of private property.

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[4] See M. Ryklin. *Communism as Religion*. µ.: New Literary Review, 2009; O. Kharkhordin. *To Denounce and be Hypocrite*. SPb.: European Un-ty, 2002.

[5] E. Ilienkov, "The Ideal", in: Philosophy and Culture. Moscow: Political literature, 1991, pp. 203-275; M. Mamardashvili, "Analysis of Consciousness in works by Marx", in: How I understand Philosophy, Moscow: Progress, 1990, pp. 295-314

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[6] This was the standpoint of Peter Thomas at his talk at the Moscow Philosophy Institute, 24.04.2012

[7] B. Mejuev. "Socialism – the Space of Culture". In: *14 Texts of the Post School of Critical Marxism*. Ed. By A. Kolganov and A. Buzgalin. M.: Cultural Revolution, 2009. P. 113-165.

3. How to Deal with Imported Discourses.

Some time ago there was a clear tendency amongst the new generation of Russian intellectuals and artists to rethink the Soviet "text", but when presented at European venues these efforts were perceived as merely the whims of Russian intellectuals, referring back to the discourses of "empire", ideology, etc. Such reactions pressured those who craved for a breakthrough in the West to terminate their research as invalid and untranslatable. So instead of revisiting those sometimes emancipatory and often very contradictory inherited experiences, the younger generation of artists and intellectuals renounced them in favour of smoother integration into the global mainstream of leftist critical art, - some sort of left "salon". At the same time, it is precisely the unsolved social and political issues of the late Soviet and post-soviet period that sustain tense social antagonisms in contemporary Russia. Such amnesia towards the Soviet background might result in even graver social segregation, which the rhetoric of Western liberal democracy is able to deal with in post-Soviet spaces only via harsh "neoliberal" infrastructures labelled as civilized, democratic, and Western. Contemporary Georgia could be the classical case study for this state of affairs.

In some sense, former Soviet countries are forced to deny their experiences of non-capitalism in favour of *having* capitalism, precisely so as to criticize it. As one of my friends once said: "Now that we have capitalism, we shall practice gender theory, feminism, and leftism criticality". Hence the paradox: by installing Western discourses of critique in post-Soviet Russia we install a more developed, proper version of capitalism. This is an inevitable historical situation. However, just importing these discourses, without correlating them with present reality, may turn critical theory into the language of a new intellectual elite. Hence the gap between those who vote for Putin (and belong to the least prestigious labour groups), those who stand in the line in front of the Christ Savior Cathedral to touch the Virgin Mary's belt, and the educated left-liberal intellectuals with their condescension for the backward masses.

But while the majority of contemporary artists find it obligatory to conform to the global Esperanto of commissioned criticality – which often happens to be left in its original form and therefore in agreement with capitalist modes of production – there are the practices, mostly to be found in Russian cinema and theatre,[8] which reflect on the consequences of the evacuated socialist project and try to face the Real, teeming with concrete lives and fates.

May 2012

[8] See “Free Swimming”, 2006, “Crazy Help”, 2009, by Boris Khlebnikov, “Black Milk”, 2002, by Vasily Sigarev, “Shultes”, 2008, by Bakur Bakuradze. “Street Days” 2010, by Levan Koguashvili

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His many publications include the following books: *Total 'War': Art Activism in the Age of Tandemocracy,* Moscow (2012), *The Thought Police: Authorities, Experts and Anti-Extremism Campaign in Contemporary Russia*, co-authored with Oleg Vasiliev (Moscow 2011), *Russia and Israel: A Difficult Journey*, together with Stanislav Kozheurov, Moscow/Jerusalem, (2011) and *The Revitalization of the Jewish Statehood and the Unresolved Jewish Dilemma,* Kiev (2011). He has also contributed to many journals, including: *Journal of Human Rights, New Global Development: Journal of International and Comparative Social Welfare, Journal of International Migration and Integration, Jewish Political Science Review.* He lives and works in Ma'ale Adumim, Israel.

THE VOINA GROUP: RADICAL ACTIONIST PROTEST AS A PHENOMENON IN THE PRESENT-DAY RUSSIA

Staging various protests Voina acted against the police, FSB, prosecution service, courts, government, and bureaucratic privileges, thereby harvesting all the sympathy that any self-proclaimed Robin Hood, from Alexey Dymovsky to Alexey Navalny, could expect to receive in contemporary Russia .

Coming into existence in February of 2007, only two years later and with four young and publicly unknown members, the Voina group became nationally recognised newsmakers with their activities reported by all major Russian media outlets, from the popular *Komsomolskaya Pravda* to *Kavkaz Center*, a site run by Chechen separatists, without even mentioning sites dedicated to contemporary art. Simply put, Voina was the first successful activist art project in Russia. Following the high-profile case against two of the group's members, Oleg Vorotnikov and Leonid Nikolaev, who were arrested on the 15th of November 2010, and after the group was awarded the state-backed Innovation Prize on the 7th of April 2011, both events raising the public profile of the group and sparking nationwide debate, Voina became a household name.

"Voina was born out of a meeting between Peter Verzilov, Oleg Vorotnikov, Natalya Sokol and myself," said Nadezhda Tolokonnikova – later to become world-famous as the leader of the Pussy Riot group andsentenced by Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court to two years in a penal colony in September of 2012. – speaking in an interview with *The New Times* magazine. "When we got together we were able to keep up a certain degree of audacity and boldness, maintaining this spirit among ourselves and feeding it into our joint actions, thus making it possible for Voina to emerge as a contemporary political and art phenomenon. We had a common background, sharing our sympathetic views on rebel culture and reluctant to seek our niche among existing systems in art and politics. Voina was envisaged as a movement and, potentially, as a whole genre in art and politics. The style adopted by Voina has to become a genre available to those feeling the need to protest. That's the group's over arching objective: to set a course of action."[1] Asked about the group's choice name, Oleg Vorotnikov said: "We picked the angriest, the most aggressive name for ourselves to make sure we would go all the way."[2]

INTERTITLE : Cats and Teddies

Of particular importance to the group's emergence was Anton Nikolaev[3], the stepson of the well-known performance artist Oleg Kulik[4] and the founding member of the actionist group known

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[1] Stanislav Shatilov, "Cheating Cops and Corrupted Bureaucrats Must Be Forced to Live With a Family of 10 to 15 Hedgehogs", The New Times, 13, 11 April 2011, http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/37454/; see the full version of the interview on Nadezhda Tolokonnikova's blog, http://wisegizmo.livejournal.com/57735.html

[2] Valeria Potapova's interview with Oleg Vorotnikov, *The Third Channel*, 13 May 2011.

[3] Anton Nikolaev (b. 1976) is an artist, journalist, the founder of radical art-group Cabbies (Bombily). With Viktoria Lomasko he published a 158-page documentary graphic novel, which describes the legal trial of the organisers of "Forbidden Art 2006".

[4] Oleg Kulik (b. 1961) is one of the most influential figures in Moscow activism, known as a provocative performer. In his performances "Mad Dog" (1994), "Reservoir Dog" (1996), "I Bite America and America Bites me" (1996) he assumed a role of the dog, questioning the very nature of being human. He lives and works in Moscow.

as Cabbies (Bombila). He housed some of Voina's participants and was, to a certain extent, a role model for them. Initially, the future members of Voina took part in protests organised by Cabbies (for example, protest held on the 27th of April 2007 called "We Don't Know What We Want", during which a six-metre-long banner with these words was used to cordon off an alley in a city park). Nikolaev was the first to have written about Voina, announcing its debut protest and citing Verzilov, who was "interested in street events as platforms for self-expression, the only islands in the police-controlled bourgeois state still retaining the spirit of freedom."[5]

During another protest reported by Nikolaev ("Mordovian Hour", 1 May 2007),[6] Vorotnikov, Verzilov, Tolokonnikova and several of their friends went into a McDonald's in Moscow and while shouting "Checkout's free!" they began taking cats out of bags they brought along and throwing them over the counter, in the direction of the kitchen. The meaning of this protest, billed on the group's site as "May Day Greetings to the Working People",[7] was unclear for most observers. Oleg Vorotnikov admitted to the groups own uncertainty about the significance of the action in a later interview: "We never discussed the meaning of the cat protest among ourselves. We just wanted to go out in the streets on May Day".[8]

Like others organised during the group's first year, this protest remained unknown to most of the public. It was not until another protest, this time staged in Moscow's Timiryazev State Museum of Biology, a place that does not generally enjoy a large number of visitors, that the news of Voina spread all over the Internet in Russia. During the event, which took place on the 29th of February 2008, and was documented in detail, five heterosexual couples had sex under a banner with the title of the protest, "Fuck for the Teddy Bear Heir!" The coverage of the protest posted by Alexey Plutser-

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[5] Anton Nikolaev, "A Couple of Words About Voina", blog entry dated 22 April 2007, http://halfaman.livejournal.com/14210.html

[6] Anton Nikolaev, "Three Actions of the Union for Street Art", blog entry dated 1 May 2007, http://halfaman.livejournal.com/15712.html

[7] "About Voina", Free War website, http://free-voina.org/about

[8] "We Are an Art Band! Our Idol is Andrei Monastyrsky", interview published on Alexey Plutser-Sarno's blog, 25 October 2008, http://plucer.livejournal.com/65120.html

Sarno, a Russian philologist, on his blog[9] has been viewed thousands of times.

Plutser pointed out that the protest in the Museum of Biology had modest aims and "highlighted a number of ethical and moral problems existing in our society. High art doesn't really attract viewers, […] these days you can't hope to attract viewers with something lofty. What they want is either porn or scary chain-saw massacres."[10] However, the protest's title was topical and lent it a socio-political meaning. In his letter to the Federal Assembly, dated the 10th of May 2006, President Vladimir Putin urged Russians to increase the birth rate as a matter of vital national importance. The private question of how many children to have became state policy. The "teddy bear" motif came from the official symbol of the United Russia party, as well as from Dmitry Medvedev's surname.[11] The group's members "announced" their protest on at a United Russia's Young Guard meeting on the 23rd of February 2008, infiltrating the crowd and holding up a banner reading "Fuck for the Teddy Bear Heir!" – a strong argument in favour of a political reading of an event that was perceived by many as "pornographic".

Reportages from Viona's Protests

Plutser has been the key figure representing Voina in the media since 2008. Even though he did not take part in most of the protests, his blog became the group's main information platform.[12] Voina emerged at a time when public politics in Russia existed only on the Internet, and Plutser realised that the 2000s generation might be interested in a simulacrum no less than in a description of real-life processes, the latter simply being absent from Russia's socio-political sphere. As noted by Jean Baudrillard, "substituting the signs of the real for the real" is the emerging motto for contemporary culture, which in its evolution moves from the "reflection of reality" paradigm to attempts to camouflage its absence before going further and reaching its current state when signifiers are no longer related to any reality whatsoever. Plutser described Voina's protests in a way that made them look attractive in the internet space, which has its own communicative rules, regardless of how close his "reportage" was to the actual course of events. Keenly aware of his ability to captivate his potential audience, Plutser adjusted the content and style of his stories about the group's protests to satisfy societal demands.

Supported by several other activists, Oleg Vorotnikov carried out the protest "A Cop in a Priest's Robe" on the 3rd of July 2008. Dressed in a priest's robe and wearing a police uniform underneath, he went into a supermarket and filled his shopping basket with various items (including vodka, whisky and an erotic magazine). As he took the items out of the shop without paying, the staff and security officers did nothing to stop him. The protest, which clearly demonstrated that the country's strongmen and clerics are subject to a law unto themselves, was characterised by Plutser as anti-globalist, aimed against "Russia being absorbed by Western financial monsters", and "caused by the indignation at the way the Russian people are being robbed by fat cats."[13] Russia's problems, including the poverty of its population, were blamed not on the regime, based on the union between the Church and security forces, but on the aforementioned "financial monsters" and vague group of "fat cats".

"In Memory of the Decembrists", a protest which took place in one of Moscow's Ashan hypermarkets on City Day in 2008 (an official holiday celebrated with festivities all over the capital on the 7th of September), consisted in an imitation execution, in which five people were hanged. The famous Decembrists hanged on the Tsar's orders after the 1825 rebellion were replaced, as Plutser mentioned in his reportage, by "three migrant workers and two homosexuals,

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[9] Alexey Plutser-Sarno, "Horrific Orgy in the Museum of Biology, 29 February 2008. New Protest by the Art Group Voina", blog entry dated 2 March 2008, http://plucer.livejournal.com/55710.html

[10] Alexey Plutser-Sarno, "My Opinion of the 29th of February Protest by the Art Group Voina", blog entry dated 7 March 2008, http://plucer.livejournal.com/57956.html

[11] The name Medvedev originates from the Russian word 'medved', a bear. The "teddy bear" motif came from the official symbol of the United Russia party, as well as Dmitry Medvedev's surname.

[12] At the end of 2009, a conflict separated Verzilov and Tolokonnikova ("the Moscow faction") from the rest of the group: Vorotnikov, Sokol and Plutser ("the Petersburg faction").

[13] Alexey Plutser-Sarno, "'Mento Priest' Protest! Art Anarchist Punk Group Voina Are Dangerous Provocateurs Collaborating With State Security", blog entry dated 15 July 2008, http://plucer.livejournal.com/94884.html

one of whom [Oleg Vasilyev] was also a Jew."[14] The migrant workers were paid for this acting job, while the two Muscovites who impersonated the "homosexuals" belonged to the group and took part in the protest on ideological grounds. As ususal, Plutser's story was full of fiction: it mentioned "victims under the influence of drug intoxication". It also stated that "Oleg Vorotnikov, who possesses certain hypnotic powers, turns the unfortunates into zombies prior to the massacre". There were also descriptions of "clearly insane, helpless people, pumped up with drugs, being dragged onto stepladders." When confused readers asked if it was a mock hanging they were answered with the following: "Who knows. Looks like it was for real, although I'm not sure."[15] In fact, as Oleg Vasilyev wrote on the 22nd of October, they used "a climbing harness – everything was really held by it, the noose [was just] a decoration."[16]

The killing of innocent migrant workers was a theme that could not help but provoke societal response. A year before Voina's protest, the Russian Internet was shocked by a video entitled "Execution of a Tajik and a Dagestani", published online on the 12th of August 2007. It shows two young men, one of North Caucasian, the other of Central Asian appearance, their hands tied behind their backs, against the background of a red flag with a swastika. The former has his head cut off with a knife, the latter is shot. The video of this double murder was presented on behalf of the so-called Nationalist Socialist Party of Russia. Almost a year later – three months before Voina's protest – on the 5th of June 2008, Russia's Investigative Committee (at the time still reporting to the Prosecutor General's Office) said the video was genuine, and a murder case was launched.[17] As of the writing of this text, Russian law enforcement bodies have still not managed to identify the perpetrators of these hideous crimes.

Describing the protest organised by Voina, Plutser made it sound as if it were naturally associated with the murder of the two innocent workers, a Tajik and a Dagestani: "The victims were forced to kneel down, their sentences read out loud, including quite transparent slogans: [...] 'Down With Queer Yids', 'Down With Slit-Eyed Chinks', 'Chinks Go to Chinkistan', 'Spades Go Home', 'Siberia for Siberians', 'Long Live Moscow' and so on".

In all probability, most of the readers of Plutser's blog do not in the least associate themselves with this kind of xenophobic neo-Nazi ideology. However, there were people who took his rhetoric seriously – for instance, some photos of the protest, captioned "A Tajik and a Gay Executed in Ashan", were published on the web forum of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (MAII), accompanied by comments claiming that "Ashan is notorious as a Chink shop".[18] The Volgograd section of MAII covered two of Voina's protests on its website under the headline "Some Anarchists Are Against Immigrants, Too!"[19]

Plutser's simulacrum game (in his replies to comments, he scornfully distanced himself from "repressive chauvinist xenophobes and homophobes who possess no artistic taste or abilities of reflection"[20]) clearly proved too complicated for some of his nationalist audience, those who saw the protest as carried out by like-minded friends.

Vorotnikov's statement, cited by Plutser, was clearly marked by anti-liberal rhetoric: "The migrants play the roles of slaves, or serfs, while the gays symbolise the Decembrists' liberal spirit, their vague desire, perhaps senseless in the context of Russia, to replace monarchy with constitutionalism. In some shape or another, monarchy is Russia's fate. Of course, apart from that, we wanted to defend traditional Russian moral and ethical values [sic!], which are quickly being destroyed today. TV is simply overflowing with morally degraded persons, rootless cosmopolitans [sic!] and pansies [sic!]. We have been accused of having an amoral stance, whereas in fact we represent and symbolically execute this very amoral society, the one that secretly approves of slave labour and pederasty. And we are happy to see the resurrection of the Russian Empire going at full speed. We greet the brother nations of Ossetia and Abkhazia! These nation needs a firm hand [sic!]. Liberalism, if we understand it in the same way as in the 1990s, brought nothing good to Russia".[21] Whether this tirade was made in sincerity or we are looking at yet another example of role-playing, it is impossible to say.

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[14] Alexey Plutser-Sarno, "Genocide in Ashan! Migrant Workers and Queers Executed in Supermarket: Monstrous Protest by Art Group Voina!", blog entry dated 9 September 2008, http://plucer.livejournal.com/97416.html

[15] Alexey Plutser-Sarno, reply to a comment on his blog entry dated 9 September 2008, http://plucer.livejournal.com/97416.html?thread=3519368#t3519368

[16] Oleg Vasilyev, reply to a comment on his blog entry dated 22 October 2008, http://lj.rossia.org/users/svintusoid/163703.html?thread=984951#t984951

[17] "High-Profile Story About Videoed Murder of Two Gets New Twist", *Ekho Moskvy (Echo of Moscow)*, 5 June 2008, http://www.echo.msk.ru/news/518942-echo.html

[18] On the 18th of April 2011 the Moscow City Court upheld the decision of the capital's public prosecutor to declare MAII extremist and ban its activities.

[19] Olga Malysh, "Some Anarchists Are Against Immigrants, Too!", MAII Volgograd, 21 November 2008, http://dpni34.org/2008/11/19.html

[20] Alexey Plutser-Sarno, reply to a comment on his blog entry dated 9 September 2008, http://plucer.livejournal.com/97416.html?thread=4225160#t4225160

Hopeless Revenge

The popularity Voina craved could only be achieved at the price of ideological amorphousness, a state allowing everyone to draw whatever image best reflected his or her hopes. In many ways, the protests organised by Voina attracted so much attention because hatred is more pronounced than any constructive principles in the Russia of today.

Expressions of hatred reached their apogee in the following protests staged by the group. "The Storm of the White House" took place on the eve of the 7th of November 2008, a date that marks the anniversary of the October Revolution. A 13-strong group of participants split in two: some of them tried to climb over the six-metre-tall fence of Russia's government building, while the others succeeded in getting onto the roof of the Ukraine hotel, situated directly opposite the White House, with a 50-kilogram laser generator. This allowed them to project a giant picture of skull and crossbones onto the government building. The image covered 12 storeys and stayed there for 22 seconds – long enough to be captured on camera, after which hotel security services switched off the laser's power supply.

The protest involved no slogans, left or right-wing. The only thing that was said – and then only by Plutser in his blog – was that the "skull and crossbones on the White House is there to warn

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[21] Alexey Plutser-Sarno, blog entry dated 9 September 2008.

the government about the Russian people dying while the new bourgeoisie are drowning in luxury". With its general hate towards the "overindulged" authorities, society saw this as an unprecedented demonstration of contempt for these authorities. *Kavkaz Center*, the organ of Chechen separatists, published a news story about Voina's protest, making a fair point: "People's responses mainly express 'sincere admiration and gratitude' for 'the indescribably large amount of positive emotions'".[22] In a way, this was just a dress rehearsal for the most widely discussed protest, "A Dick Held Prisoner at the FSB", organised by Voina on the 14th of June 2010, when an erect phallus was painted on a drawbridge in a matter of seconds. The image, rising proudly right in front of the FSB building in St. Petersburg, gained instant admiration among numerous bloggers and won the hearts of many members of the art community. It was in honour of this protest that the judges of the Innovation Prize, run by the National Centre for Contemporary Arts, awarded Voina with a nomination for the "Best Work of Visual Art".[23]

Early in the history of the movement the founders of Voina defined their political creed, stating that the path leading towards a goal is no less important than the goal itself. In the words of Vorotnikov, "In our view, one of the forms of castrated extremism, still quite vivid as an image, is the anti-globalist movement, whose activists behave like hooligans, breaking shop windows. This is seen as an ideological struggle in the West, so no one calls them hooligans. In Russia such wholesome wild behaviour is not popular with the young".[24] In an interview published on the 20th of March 2009, Voina activists (as far as is known, it was Verzilov who answered the questions, after which the transcript was edited by Vorotnikov with the help of other members of the group) said: "Art being taken from galleries and brought outside into the streets is the healthiest sign of the times. Voina is at the origin of a completely new type of actionism. Here emphasis is shifted from the abstract and symbolic mini-gesture made within the limits of gallery art, and onto specific, naked street action, made as close to the viewer as possible".[25]

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[22] "Storm Russia's Government Building, Urges Art Group", *Kavkaz Center* (*Caucasus Centre*), 7 November 2008, http://www.kavkazcenter.com/russ/content/2008/11/07/62032.shtml

[23] Maria Semendyaeva, "Voina Wins", *Kommersant*, 8 April 2011, http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1617222

[24] "We Are an Art Band!", interview published on Alexey Plutser-Sarno's blog, 23 March 2008.

That was the direction in which Voina developed, speaking not to the art community or even to the existing political opposition, but to their fellow citizens in general: "We have to show people what forms of possible self-organisation are available to them. [...] To inspire individuals to create their own band, to be autonomous and bold. Today this kind of art is mainly promoted and propagandised via the internet, since there are no other resources free from federal control".[26]

Voina's protests have undoubtedly struck a chord with thousands of people, they have been supported by human rights activists and radical culture practitioners. After the protest that saw Leonid Nikolaev, a blue bucket on his head, jump onto a Federal Protective Service car equipped with a special light signal, parked on the Kremlin Embankment, Lev Ponomarev, the head of a movement called For Human Rights, said: "He expressed the sentiment of hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of those who are appalled by the behaviour of these people driving their cars with flashing lights around Moscow, safe in the knowledge they are not going to be punished, as well as by the authorities' inadequate response to this."[27] "In this particular instance it's totally unimportant whether it's good or bad. It's NECESSARY, that's for sure," as noted by Lev Rubinstein, one of the founders of Moscow conceptualism, while talking about "A Cop in a Priest's Robe". Andrei Yerofeev, a well-known curator, compared Voina's activities to the most famous protests of Russian civil society in 2010. According to him, "Voina's performances give the passive, mellowed Russian bourgeoisie the joy of seeing acts of retribution, vivid, charged, and overheated with emotions, precisely the acts that the society itself would love to commit in response to the authorities' iniquities".[28] The data made public by the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in June of 2011 suggests that 34% of Russians (60% in Moscow) feel a constant urge "to shoot down all bribers and profiteers". Another 38% of the survey participants admit to dreaming, at least from time to time, about a similar revenge exacted on bureaucrats and corrupted strongmen. According to the sociologists in question, this study has provided only two conclusions: first, the delegitimisation of the authorities is ongoing; and secondly, levels of aggression are significantly increasing.[29]

Comparing Yerofeev's words to the aforementioned sociological data, one can conclude that Voina's protests, which actually demonstrated this delegitimisation of the authorities, provided perfect responses to the society's demands, albeit occasionally in an aggressive form (as was the case with "A Palace Coup", during which police cars were being turned over). The same point was made by Ekaterina Degot in April of 2011: "Hatred towards United Russia and, more generally, to the powers that be has now reached its highest apex, and this can only be compared to the hatred felt towards communists, for instance, in 1988. This hatred is boiling, it is corroding people from the inside and (in contrast to 1988) can find no constitutional means of escape. The only problem is that while blindly hating Putin and the FSB, people increasingly hate 'the blacks', 'the lefties', 'the Yanks', 'the Muscovites', 'the clever ones' , and so on. As a symptom, hatred is easily shifted. This hatred *is* Voina. A powerful symptom that cannot be ignored."[30] However, when two of the best known activists of the "St Petersburg faction", Vorotnikov, the leader of Voina, and Leonid Nikolaev, who joined the group less than a year earlier, were arrested on the 15th of November 2010 and ended up behind bars, not many were willing to act for the sake of their free-

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[25] Maria Semendyaeva, "New Faces of Contemporary Art: Voina Group", *In the City*, 20 March 2009, http://inthecity.ru/#/allarticles/i/Novye_o_novom/page=3

[26] Ibid.

[27] Lev Ponomarev, "The State Behaves like a Terrorist", *Grani* (*Facets*), 28 May 2010, http://www.grani.ru/blogs/free/entries/178419.html

[28] Andrei Yerofeev, "How to Judge Voina", *The Art Chronicle*, 1, January 2011.

[29] Full report: "20 Years of Reforms Through the Eyes of the Russians", Moscow: the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, 2011, pp. 60, 74; see also "Every Third Russian Wants to 'Shoot Down All Bribers'", Lenta (Tape), 23 June 201, http://www.lenta.ru/news/2011/06/23/reform/

[30] Ekaterina Degot, "Why I Voted for Voina", *Openspace*, 13 April 2011, http://www.openspace.ru/art/projects/89/details/21790/?expand=yes

dom. On the 18th of December, only approximately 200 sympathisers attended a solidarity protest in Moscow's Pushkin Square. And one cannot help but notice that all those people represent two very narrow segments of the society: they are either radical left-wing political activists or non-conformist artists. The only one to post bail money for the imprisoned activists was the British graffiti artist Banksy.[31] With some bitterness, one can only say that the situation was affected by the current mentality of the "advanced" part of the Russian society: enjoying a free ride is all very nice and well, but when your "enjoyment" is under threat you just drop it and find yourself a new toy – that's easier than doing something. The hope that the hipster generation might be able to launch a revolution has failed.

The ideologues of Voina used to say that instead of using the language of human rights activists and ideological fighters of past decades – which were, apparently, "hopelessly outdated" and "completely incomprehensible" to contemporary youngsters (and not only) – they were trying to shape a new, fresh language, capable of attracting many supporters from social strata that are totally disinterested with traditional social liberalism. This proved to be an illusion: after having a good laugh at the 60-metre picture of a male member opposite the FSB headquarters in the northern capital, the "drop it" generation carried on with its business, ignoring the arrest of those who had drawn the prick they admired so much. "According to Voina, their goal is to make sure that people are not afraid of cops in our country. Are they succeeding? Of course not. Humiliated, frightened, robbed of their rights, citizens look at Voina's phallus online as if it was an icon of a protector saint. They haven't grown less afraid or more knowledgeable," as Ekaterina Degot correctly noted with sadness.[32]

The fantastic success of Voina's protests resulted from the fact that the art group managed to say what hundreds of thousands wanted to say, but didn't know how. It would not be an overstatement to claim that, at a time when the political arena was cleared – by hook or crook – of any kind of protest groups, Voina emerged as the most widely heard voice of the independent civil society. Staging various protests Voina acted against the police, FSB, prosecution service, courts, government, and bureaucratic privileges, thereby harvesting all the sympathy that any self-proclaimed Robin Hood, from Alexey Dymovsky to Alexey Navalny, could expect to receive in contemporary Russia. Hatred towards the government, its power structures and judicial system, universally perceived as corrupt and definitely hostile towards the population, allowed the group to attract the sympathies of a significant number of Russians, while the absence of any meaningful doctrine allowed it to avoid schisms.

The first post-Soviet generation, now all grown up, could, as Anton Nikolaev shrewdly remarked, hold the slogan "We Don't Know What We Want" above their heads – all of them, almost without exception. The cynical "office plankton", dreaming of spitting into the faces of the state, police, priests, oligarchs, whatever the result, got the heroes whose lack they had felt so acutely, people devoid of pathos and unruly, in the shape of Voina. There was a demand for these kinds of heroes in society, and the art group Voina filled in this gap.

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[31] "Banksy Raises Four Million for Voina", *Gazeta* (*Gazette*), 14 December 2010, http://gazeta.ru/culture/2010/12/14/a_3465577.shtml

[32] Ekaterina Degot, "Why I Voted for Voina", *Openspace*, 13 April 2011.