ALTERNATIVE MUSEUM

EKATARINA ANDREEVA

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Two Russian Futurists, the poet and translator Benedikt Lifshitz and the poet and artist David Burliuk, were traveling together by train one day in 1913. Lifshitz was reading and translating aloud to Burliuk a book of Rimbaud he had with him. From time to time Burliuk would ask Lifshitz to pause while he pulled a notebook from his pocket and hastily scribbled something in it. It turned out that the notes he was making were poems in which, according to Lifshitz, "the debris of Rimbaud's images floated liked undissolved particles." Lifshitz describes this scene vividly:

> David juggled before Rimbaud the debris of his own poems. And this was no sacrilege. On the contrary, it was more like totemism. Before my very eyes Burliuk devoured his own god, his idol of the moment. […] And how seductive this predation is! Wherever you look, the world lies before you in utter nakedness; it appears to you as steaming hunks of freshly slaughtered meat. Grab it, tear it, sink your teeth into it, make a hash of it, create it anew—it is all yours, all of it!

Twentieth-century art treated the preceding artistic tradition in different ways. There was the sensual, expressive manner with which Picasso approached Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*. Bacon's relationship to Velasquez was just as cannibalistic, although no longer as joyful. Duchamp's attitude to his predecessors was implicitly sensual, reflective, and distanced, and his travesties inspired a whole series of fictitious postmodernist artists. Marta Volkova and Slava Shevelenko have entered these ranks by conceiving a museum and an exhibition in which they present works produced in the manner of Russian artists of the eighties and nineties (Ilya Kabakov, Timur Novikov, Sergei Bugaev Afrika, Vadim Ovchinnikov et al.).

In Petersburg/Leningrad (one of the focuses of Volkova and Shevelenko's project), artists in the eighties preferred an ecstatic approach to the masterpieces of painting—the same approach that Lifshitz ascribes to Burliuk. The artists appropriated everything they liked and made it their own. This process of assimilation involved an energetic fusion of culture and life. Modernist art, which had already been relegated to the museums, revealed its latent "virulence." When it ended up—like a stray biological weapon—in the hands of the young experimenters from the New Artists group, it infected them with the avant-garde's spirit of boldness. In the late eighties, Volkova and Shevelenko participated in the group's shows along with their characters Afrika, Ovchinnikov, Inal Savchenkov, and Andrei Khlobystin. (The group was founded by Timur Novikov in 1982, during a harsh political cold snap in the USSR.) In Novikov's rendition, Malevich's sublime Suprematist geometry was produced by sewing together two pieces of ordinary cloth. Novikov thus revealed, in a Zen Buddhist manner, that the purity of metaphysics could be incarnated in any material as long as it was chosen by an artist who had preserved the vigor of the avant-garde—the spirit of anarchy.

In his book *Modern Science and Anarchism*, Prince Peter Kropotkin, the leader of the Russian anarchists, explained the goal of his movement as follows:

> The question, then, which Anarchism puts to itself may be stated thus: "What forms of social life assure to a given society, and then to mankind generally, the greatest amount of happiness, and hence also of vitality?" […] ([F]rom this, let us note in passing, a definition of *progress* is derived). The desire to promote evolution in this direction determines the scientific as well as the social and artistic activity of the Anarchist.

The amount of happiness and vitality can be increased once it has been demonstrated that any artist is at liberty to begin the world anew, not by deleting the past from his memory, but by adapting it to his own life. This was the approach adopted by the New Artists, in Leningrad, and the titans of the New Wave, in New York. And one could also speculate on a fall by showing that, in a world without originals, any beginning whatsoever would do: what mattered was to keep moving somehow, to simulate signs of life. The strict hierarchy of Soviet culture was undermined, in the eighties, by avant-garde holy foolishness, absurd play, and mockery. In Leningrad and Moscow, this game was played in the two ways I have described above.

The New Artists rebroadcast the historic Russian avant-garde's semi-forbidden ideas of life-construction. Their ideology consisted in following Mikhail Larionov's principle of "everythingism" (*vsechestvo*), which argued that we should see art everywhere, not only in the sites—art schools, academies, museums—specially reserved for it. Moreover, this "everything" was not equivalent to the expression "anything goes" insofar as the artist's function—to make an aesthetic choice—remained. The artist could exercise this choice in cooking or the art of war, but he could not avoid making a choice. If he didn't make a choice, he would turn into something like an unfrocked priest—that is, he would leave behind the society of enlightened people endowed with a special talent and become an ordinary "layman" beset by the narrow practical cares of survival. This is the principal difference between Novikov's theory of "recomposition" and Nicolas Bourriaud's much later notion of "postproduction." Soviet visual art of the eighties made its ideological choice under the sign of ideology. First and foremost, it served the interests of propaganda, and there was practically nothing that connected it with real everyday life. The New Artists accepted as their own the avant-garde's choice to aestheticize life. Using every means at their disposal, they achieved unprecedented success by creating a totally new space full of energy and joy on the streets, in communal flats, and in the squats they inhabited. We can still enter this space via Marta Volkova and Slava Shevelenko's paintings from the late eighties—*Morning Star*, *The fascinated wanderer*, *Dream of the sentry* and *From mass-scale to mastership!*.

The Moscow conceptualists and Sots Artists played the holy fool in a fundamentally different way. They preferred to simulate humble acceptance of the role of the unknown lumpens who produced and consumed the mass-produced ideological visual products of the Soviet Union—that is, the people who designed posters and official announcements, collected postcards, and so on. Moscow Sots Art and conceptualism thus "domesticated" the uncomfortable, uninhabitable space of a country that had been turned into a mausoleum, that had been designed for a dead ideology, not for human life; they demystified ideological art's zeal for advertising. In Leningrad, this strategy was reduced to absurdity by several artists—in particular, Kirill Miller, who figures in Volkova and Shevelenko's project under the name "M. Killer." He is credited with two works, *The Young Pioneer Girl's Oath* and *Flight of the Migratory Birds*. The first work reprises the composition of *Youth Leader* (1949), by the forgotten Soviet artist Vyacheslav Mariupolsky. In 1950, this painting was reproduced on a postcard that was printed in an edition of 25,000 copies. Painted at the height of the ferocious Stalinist regime, *Youth Leader* depicts a young blonde woman giving a speech; she stands under a portrait of Stalin and behind a table covered with the red cloth typical of Party offices and meeting rooms. As was always the case in Soviet painting of the thirties and forties (which, in essence, was an art of sociopolitical cosmetology), surrealistic evidence of the grim reality off screen emerges in the painting against the painter's will. In Mariupolsky's original, this is the mocking shadow behind the young woman; in their version, Volkova and Shevelenko allow this shadow to metastasize, thus turning the Stalinist painting into a black comedy. A second specimen of the Sots Art method reduced to absurdity is the collage *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, which is attributed to Sergei Afrika Bugaev. Here, Volkova and Shevelenko cross two of Afrika's masterpieces from the early nineties. The first of these is the performance "The Birth of the Agent," during which Afrika and Sergei Anufriev "deflowered" the body of the woman in Vera Mukhina's monumental sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* (which was the centerpiece of the Soviet pavilion at the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris) by breaking open the hatch that leads inside her body. The second work is a series of embroidered flags entitled *Aphasia: Man's Best Friend*. Afrika symbolically represents this condition (which paralyzes both speech and memory) via the collapse of Soviet visual culture. Embroidered sea parasites crawl over genuine crimson Soviet banners bearing portraits of Lenin and Stalin; cartoon characters pop up among stars and communist slogans stitched on silk and velvet. Volkova and Shevelenko offer their viewers a baroque apotheosis of Soviet glamour: their nude *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* sprawl on an oriental rug, holding aloft the symbols of power—a hammer and

sickle fashioned from silver foil.

In the early nineties, Volkova and Shevelenko relocated to the Netherlands. Meanwhile, back in Russia, private property was finally permitted and the first private and commercial galleries were opened. Artists began to compare state power with the pressures of the market. Modernist art had devised two ways of battling the market: anti-art and design in the widest sense of this practice—that is, the production of a new, total environment. In the early nineties, anti-art held sway in Moscow: actionism became the main trend. Volkova and Shevelenko identify not with the zealous radicals of the Moscow scene, but with the modest artist Alexander Petrelli, who in 1996 founded the Overcoat Gallery, which consisted of tiny objects and pictures housed in a myriad of pockets sewn to the lining of his clothing. The work of the Overcoat Gallery, which would suddenly open for business amidst a sumptuous capitalist vernissage, resembled the incursion of the black market onto the closed territory of the high-stakes money laundering operation known as capitalism. In Volkova and Shevelenko's project, the Overcoat Gallery is reimagined and exhibited along with other specimens of art by the "New Wanderers." (The original Wanderers were Russian artists who, in the 1850s, broke with the Imperial Academy of Arts over ideological differences. They advocated a socially critical art that would be accessible to popular, democratic audiences.)

The most complicated part of this show—the drowned museum—is an homage to the principal hero of Russian art of the last three decades, Ilya Kabakov, who emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1988. One of his "total installations" from the early nineties was entitled *Incident in the Museum, or Water Music*. In this installation, water dripping from a leaky ceiling into basins arranged on the floor becomes the centerpiece of a museum space, overshadowing the pictures on display. Kabakov thus ironically continues the destruction of the museum-qua-temple, of the museum as an entryway into eternity. Hard on the heels of Marcel Broodthaers, Kabakov deflates the metaphysical wealth of the museum. In September 2008, Kabakov opened his installation *Gates* at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow's premiere collection of foreign art. The installation consists of monotonous depictions of gates reminiscent of the portals in Egyptian temples and ordinary doorframes surrounded by museum barriers. The viewer exits the *Gates* and immediately winds up in a hall filled with De Chirico's metaphysical paintings and Kandinsky's abstract compositions. Kabakov thus attaches his name to imitations of artistic practice, imitations that point, allegedly, to the consummated death of art. But the masterpieces of art in that same museum witness to the fact that this speculation is baseless: as we leave behind the *Gates* and encounter the Kandinskys and De Chiricos, we physically experience this transition as the passage from non-being into life. Marta Volkova and Slava Shevelenko's project reminds us that each artist needs to think hard about the choice he makes. Does his alternative museum assure the greatest amount of happiness and vitality?

Ekaterina Andreeva
Dr. phil., Senior Curator, State Russian Museum,
Department of Contemporary Art,
St. Petersburg.

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