

# WE'RE LIVING TOO LATE

THOMAS  
CAMPBELL

*If you have a skeptical friend (a foreigner, perhaps) who says that here in Russia we don't have this, this, this, and that, then you should reply to him, "But on the other hand we have that, that, that, and this!"*

—Collegium D.P. (Vadim Ovchinnikov)

By the time I first arrived in Petersburg, in September 1994, Marta Volkova and Slava Shevelenko were long gone from the scene. This would be unremarkable were it not for the fact that, through a combination of circumstances, I soon wound up in the same company of artists and artists of life that they had left behind when they immigrated to the Netherlands. Among these strange new friends was Vadim Ovchinnikov, the painter, poet, musician, and mysterious provocateur. It is no accident that Vadim figures so prominently in Marta and Slava's new project: for several years, the three artists shared studio space at a cultural center on ulitsa Rubinshteina where they also taught art to children. And it was no doubt Vadim who first told me about Marta and Slava, although I would hear them mentioned, in conversation and in print, many times thereafter. Because of certain peculiarities of the alternative arts scene in Petersburg—peculiarities that I will describe below and that are relevant to the project on display here—I began to suspect that Marta and Slava were fictional characters. You can imagine my relief when, not so long ago, I met them and discovered they are real people. It is to these real people that I dedicate the following lines, in which I attempt to sketch briefly what I learned from Vadim and Company about art, life, and the art of living, as well as a few things that Marta and Slava missed during the Petersburg nineties, a period that they reimagine and recreate here.

In this same series of essays, Ekatarina Andreeva and Andrey Khlobystin have provided the right framework for understanding this exhibition from the art-historical viewpoint. The problem, however, with the history of recent art in Petersburg is that it is so bound up with the emergence and persistence of a peculiar milieu that it cannot be reduced to actual works, lists of exhibitions, manifestos, and names of movements. This milieu has been given a number of

names—from “Leningrad second culture” to the “Leningrad underground”—and has been labeled everything from a form of escapism to a revival of the historical Russian/Soviet avant-gardes. This is all to the point as well, but the real point, I'm afraid, lies slightly to the left (or right) of these well-trodden paths.

As a professional translator, I am paid to pretend that there is no such thing as an untranslatable text, but in my own practice I time and again run into words and notions that defy easy translation. One of these is the word *obshchenie*, which we might variously translate as “intercourse” (the non-sexual kind), “conversation,” “personal interchange,” and so forth. These near-equivalents, however, are poor substitutes for the Russian *obshchenie*, which we might say constitutes the Russian universe—a universe less of things (which have often been in short supply or poorly made) than of words. A better English translation would be “conviviality”—the joyous art and craft of living (and talking) together. *Obshchenie* derives from the adjective *obshchii*—“common”—and so Russian conviviality is about creating a commons, a common space, at very least in those places and circles where one has the power to do so. In Russian social history, this power has often been exercised away from or against the powers-that-be, who have tended to impose deadening, repressive grand narratives on the grassroots. The recent “Russian art boom” (in reality, a speculative capitalist bubble) is one such narrative. In any case, even if the speculators touch in their transactions on the works of Ovchinnikov and other masters of the Leningrad underground, these deals have nothing to do with the world that Vadim and his friends tried to create.

Among artists, however, especially artists as furtive, sly, and (alternately) lively as Petersburg's belated avant-gardists, there can be no question of immediate conviviality: art is always about mediation. In my own case, *obshchenie* with Vadim was made possible through a series of fortunate mediations. Back in those days (the mid-nineties) exhibitions at the gigantic Pushkinskaya-10 squat that he and hundreds of other artists and bohemians inhabited or frequented were less a matter of coherent artistic statement (though that happened), more a means

of continuing to construct this common space. Vadim often initiated and inspired such events, especially at Gallery 103. When our friend Igor grew tired of writing texts for these shows, Vadim enlisted me to the cause. I was uniquely unqualified for the task, so I invented a fictional character—the Reverend Cholmondeley Thompson, S.J.—to do the job for me. This good Jesuit priest (so I imagined) had come to Pushkinskaya to convert local artists to the right-hand path, but in view of his mission's unfeasibility he had become mired in a kind of ecclesiastical-lyrical heresy (somewhat like his prototype, the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins). And so his sermons issued forth—absurdly, addressed to no one—from the untidy walls of Pushkinskaya. They were a hit with gallerygoers, and especially with Vadim. The reason, I would discover later, is that he and his comrades had long been engaged in a “vast conspiracy” involving made-up front organizations and fictitious characters who were in turn churning out dubious texts and even more absurd correspondence. Vadim was a master of this genre, which sometimes took the form of his now-famous mail art artifacts. Among the titles he assumed was that of “Senior Accountant,” who on November 30, 1987, issued the following statement: “I request that certain things that I have said about art, which became known to the public during the third and fourth quarters of this year, be considered erroneous.”

This and other such gems (many of which are probably lost) are not only parodies of Soviet bureaucratism and “good Communist” confessional culture, but also Zen koans designed to confuse the uninitiated (including the speculators who have now come to dominate the scene) and delight dwellers of the Leningrad underground's common space. We should relate Vadim's ten counsels to would-be painters (on display here) to this series of koans. On their face, they are both absurd and banal.

In reality, they point to another vital component in the sensibility of Leningrad's New Artists and their ragged band of allies: amateurism. Here, again, we encounter a problem in translation because the Russian original—*liubitelstvo*—is not as distanced and derogatory as the English word, whose notion of “love” is mediated by its Latin origins. (In this connection, I recall

a conversation with Vadim in which he criticized me for my insufficiently “soft” pronunciation of the word *liubliu*—“I love.” “Since you can't pronounce your soft l's correctly,” he told me, “that means you do not love.”)

By invoking amateurism I don't mean that Vadim and his friends were “amateur artists”—although right up until the onset of perestroika or afterwards this is what many of them were because they often had no formal artistic education and hence could not join the Soviet Artists Union, whose members were the only “real” professional artists in the country. On the contrary, Vadim's amateurism—whose inverted mirror image we find in his jocular advice to artists—is a liberating humility, an openness to failure, error, stupidity, and (most importantly) belatedness that lets the world and life, so to speak, into the picture. Art was not invented yesterday, Vadim tells us, and it was not invented by us: people have made and will make art everywhere, even in Chukotka (in the world of Soviet anecdotes, the land of congenital idiots). The viewer is your friend—you should do your best to reach him—but he is also your potential enemy because he might be fishing for your secrets (your soul). The best way to avoid giving them away is to give them away, but in a form obscure enough that only those able to appreciate them will ever discover them.

This would seem to be a kind of dialectical paranoia, but as later events proved, this paranoia was justified. One of those events was Vadim's death, by suicide, in 1996. While it is futile to speculate on his personal motives, my belief is that he was mortally frightened by the visible shrinking of the convivial space that he had done so much to create, albeit in his own peculiar manner. Artists are nothing if not vain creatures (like all of us), and it is possible to imagine that if he had lived past the “lean years” of the nineties and on into the “boom times” of the “zeroes” (which now also seem on the verge of ending), everything would have been all right. But it is much harder to imagine him operating in the present environment, and not only because that environment celebrates “professionalism” at the expense, often, of common sense and decency. What I have in mind is the failure pre-programmed into all attempts to revive and reconstruct avant-gardes,

be they Russian Futurism of the early twentieth century or the Wanderer movement of the mid-nineteenth century. When we acknowledge this belatedness, we can do one of three things. We can exit the scene at some point, as Vadim did. We can persist in our reinvention of the past, but in a way that makes no concession to fashion, political or cultural. This was the path taken by Vadim's friend Boris "Bob" Koshelokhov, the guru of the "left wing" of the Leningrad underground who, in the mid-seventies, began reinventing himself as an artist by setting off into a deep journey into the history of art and philosophy, and thus inspired his younger comrades in the New Artists movement. In either case (maybe they are the same case), this deliberate embrace of belatedness and failure does not produce failure in the broader sense. When confronted with Vadim's and Bob's stunning, vital, alternately ironically distant and immediately affecting canvases, we are hardly tempted to speak of the "death of art"; if anything, we will be inclined, following Vadim, to say that the artist sees us as friend, comrade, brother (or sister), and accomplice. We are invited into *obshchenie*, into a common space that assumes nothing about what we have in common. The only assumption is that we all want to have something in common, and art is one very good (complicated) way of finding that common ground.

The third possible response to our predicament as late arrivals is exemplified by the recent winner of the Kandinsky Prize. Here, the space of conviviality is collapsed into a lockstep march back into the nightmares of the past, which are reimagined as a superhighway into a triumphant collective future (but not for everyone). And it is not just a matter of the winner's wretched ultrarightwing politics; the previous winner—nominally left wing—wowed the jury with solid-metal replicas of tanks.

Where does this leave us here and now, in the space of conviviality/*obshchenie* reconstructed and reimagined by Marta and Slava? As I was puzzling over their project, I came across this published fragment of a letter to them from Vadim, dated July 24, 1988:

*...this short voyage has stood me in good stead: my mind is clearer; the*

*movement of my arms and legs has become more fluid and sensible.*

*Contact [obshchenie] with nature is a great thing. Preserve nature! It is our treasure. The outlines of the mountains resemble a woman's breasts, and the air is clean. True, the roar of the tides seems a bit artificial, but so be it! At the end of the day, you can always plug your ears with seaweed.*

*Allow me to wish you all the best.*

What you see in these halls is, if you like, a long, oblique, belated response to Vadim's letter. In keeping with the spirit of the original, I can only wish you success in reading it and making it your own. The artists really have told you everything, but they are not giving away any secrets.

Thomas Campbell

Researcher, writer, translator based in Saint Petersburg.

This essay is a prepublication of the catalogue of the exhibition *The Russian Schizorevolution: an exhibition that might have been* at Marres, Centre for Contemporary Culture, March-May 2009.