THE RUSSIAN SCHIZOREVOLUTION

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The Russian Schizorevolution: Cultural Transformation in Saint Petersburg during the Eighties and Nineties

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There are magnitudes whose alteration causes the blue color of the cornflower—continuously changing, transiting through regions of discontinuity unknown to us humans—to turn into the sound of the cuckoo or the bawling of a baby.
— Velimir Khlebnikov, 1904

When we exhibit contemporary Petersburg art outside its "natural environment" we run into serious problems. The first problem has to do with historical conditions and traditions: for many years Soviet officialdom hindered contacts between independent culture and the greater public. Writers wrote "for the desk," while artists could show their works only to their friends. There even emerged an attitude of contempt towards the desire to show off at an exhibition. Underground veteran Rikhard Vasmi once said, "For some people, an exhibition is an object of pride; for me, it's a disgrace." Petersburg art has traditionally been interwoven with everyday life; it is not an industry, and this in turn contributes to the underdevelopment of the local art market. Here, we should speak rather of life-creation—that is, when the artist is first and foremost a human being who abides in a condition of heightened creativity. His life acquires totality, itself becoming a work of art. The second problem is that curators tend to view Russian art as a version of one or another tendency within western art. They forget that the forms of western art were adopted in Russia only in the eighteenth century. Secular genres were superimposed on the sacred genres of Eastern Orthodoxy. This tradition values spiritual beauty and mysticism more than reality and the splendors of the material world. When it is torn out of context and exhibited on the abstract walls of museums and galleries, Petersburg art is thus hard to understand. It requires either mountains of commentary or the recreation of an "authentic environment."

Local artists have traditionally inscribed their work into the milieu and myth of Petersburg. Saint Petersburg was founded in 1703 in a wild, nearly uninhabited place through the will of a single tyrant, Peter the Great. From the moment of its foundation Petersburg was contrasted with old Russia, which cursed it as the city of Antichrist. The empire's new capital was an ideological text in stone, a vast theater set where the residents felt like actors in some strange production. From the very beginning the city began to accrete gloomy legends and mystical tales that would in turn influence all of classical Russian literature—Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Bely, Kharms, and others. Petersburg is an ideal habitat for eccentrics, originals, and madmen of all stripes. Literary characters and ghosts exist side by side here with the living. The city's successive police regimes have been opposed by absurdism, anarchy, terrorism, and revolution, while the magnificence of its palaces, temples, and museums contrasts with its unhealthy climate, gloomy winter, frequent floods, and the miserable existence of its "little people." Late twentieth-century Petersburg artists contributed to their own particular chapter to this shocking mystery play.

In the early eighties, the Soviet Union was overtaken by the latest "ice age": it appeared that life had again submerged into a depressing eternal stasis, that people were fast asleep, dreaming dull, gray dreams. No one could have predicted that within a few short years dizzying events would occur that would radically change life in the Soviet Union and alter the entire map of the contemporary world. What is more shocking is that this revolution was carried out by a small group of creative young people. The subsequent economic and political transformations would have been impossible were it not for spiritual changes based on a revival of the dignity and honor that springs from artistic creativity. In the dismal communal flats and depressed outskirts of this city of five million (then called Leningrad) a community of young artists emerged: these irrepressibly cheerful young people believed in miracles and had taught themselves how to perform these miracles. For a young person with heart, wit, and talent who did not belong to the privileged classes of Soviet society, there were only two roads to independence—the criminal world and bohemian life. Unlike the previous generation of the underground, who (like officialdom) saw art as a weapon of social struggle, the younger bohemians were not interested in politics. They did not attack head on, instead entwining the obstacles in their path like bindweed. They realized that a change in power had taken place: the previous repressive regime had imperceptibly been pushed aside by a regime of seduction that reigned through pop culture and the mass media. By initiating themselves in these energies (and thus simultaneously inoculating themselves against their effects), they were able to effect fantastic changes not only in themselves, but also in the world around them. A small "strike force" prepared and carried out this insurrection in the consciousness of Soviet youth—an event we might term, in the manner of the French critical theorists, a schizorevolution. This event was soon followed by the dissolution of the state, a criminal revolution, and economic collapse. First and foremost, however, this was a massive semiotic catastrophe: ideology, outdated narratives, signs, and symbols collapsed, exposing the Zen-like emptiness of social reality. A total crisis of self-identification ensued. Ordinary people, who floundered amidst this emergent chaos, regarded this state of affairs with horror. Only creative people, who did not react to this chaos by once again killing everything with labels and newfound hierarchies, remember this period with nostalgia. For them it was a time of great opportunity and the flowering of art.

An essential element of this new youth culture was playfulness. This was a generation that smiled and laughed. They irritated politically minded "nonconformists" (who loved bureaucratic meetings and the pose of prophets and victims) with their face pulling, hooliganism, dancing, and fondness for fashion. The "children of inner courtyards" did not have good educations for the most part, but contact with the traditions of the older intellectual underground encouraged in them a taste for self-education and a passion for philosophy, literature, and art history. This was a time when Bakhtin's "culture of laughter," Propp's studies of the Russian fairytale, and Huizinga's "ludic" theory were all the rage, and Hesse's *Glass Bead Game* and the *I Ching* were required reading.

The specific history of this movement was as follows. In 1982, the artist Timur Novikov and his friends formed the New Artists group, which included the most talented neo-expressionist painters of the period—Oleg Kotelnikov, Vadim Ovchinnikov, Evgenij Kozlov, Ivan Sotnikov, and others. The New Artists emerged in parallel with such phenomena as the East Village scene in the New York, Figuration Libre in France, the Neue Wilde in Germany, and the Transavanguardia in Italy. For the first time in many decades, the new art of Russia spontaneously coincided with international trends. At an exhibition of Leningrad nonconformists the young artists declared that a stand with a square aperture in it was their work. They entitled it the Zero Object, and this act provoked a scandal and caused the younger artists to break ranks with the older generation. The members of the newly emergent Zero Movement had the ambition to control cosmic energy, and they were aided in this task by various "magical plants" and chemical "prostheses." Just as in the sixties, these supplements were supposed to change the world for the better. The movement gave birth to zero art, zero literature, and zero music. This latter branch of the movement would subsequently grow into Sergei Kuriokhin's Pop Mechanics orchestra. Pop Mechanics concerts were multimedia happenings involving simultaneous performances by multiple rock groups, classical, military, and folk ensembles, dancers, animals, and the New Artists, who would assemble their works right on stage. Novikov appealed to the traditions of Russian Futurism by adopting Mikhail Larionov's principle of "everythingism" (*vsechestvo*). Everythingism declared that nearly everything—from face painting to avant-garde cooking—was art. The New Artists avoided specialization. One and the same artist would make paintings with whatever materials came to hand on any surface he could find—furniture, shower curtains, wallpaper (these works often began falling apart as soon as they were completed). He would play music and invent new musical instruments. He would make films and cartoons, create performances, write poetry, design clothing and avant-garde books, do mail art, and so on. Collective art making was also widespread. Exhibitions were held on beaches and playgrounds, in forests and squats. Inal Savchenkov simply set his works adrift on the Neva River.

This powerful whirlwind began to suck the most varied and talented people into its vortex. In the late eighties a veritable New Movement had formed, an entire culture with its own art, music,

theater, criticism, cinema, and samizdat literature. This movement included the necrorealists, the Folk Art Amateurs Club, the Mayakovsky Friends Club, the Ministry of War, the Friendship Club (in which Marta Volkova and Slava Shevelenko were members), the Collegium D.P., the Chapaev Club, the New Critics, the New Theater, and so on. Leningrad's youth underground reaffirmed the city's reputation as a "window on Europe." Leningrad's rock movement, underground cinema ("parallel cinema"), art squats, electronic music, rave and club culture, and psychedelic revolution spread to Moscow and the farthest corners of the USSR. Such manifestations of this subculture as the bands Kino, New Composers, and Pop Mechanics, and the film *ASSA* generated their own cults.

In the late eighties, the Iron Curtain opened up, and the artists triumphantly traveled abroad on the wave of popularity generated by "Gorby art." Leading lights of the western avant-garde and pop-culture stars—Warhol, Cage, Nam June Paik, Rauschenberg et al.—were eager to meet these exotic, uninhibited Russians. The artists returned from their travels wealthy and famous. They also brought back a new lifestyle that spurred the development of club and rave culture and set off a dance epidemic. Video art and Pirate Television moved to the forefront of the scene. Its star, Vlad Monroe, was the first transvestite artist in Russia; he had first gained renown for his habit of strolling the city dressed up as the most fantastic historical and pop-culture characters. A universal love of masks was one of the distinguishing marks of this time of change. The period's ludic element was matched by an art that favored simulationism and appropriationism, which were then effective techniques.

Many local artists soon became disenchanted with western art and its modes of functioning, and this disenchantment gave rise to the neoacademist movement. The fact that former punks had begun to paint in the academic manner was at first taken as a joke. Nevertheless, this neoclassical movement found followers amongst the younger generation of artists and allies in the west. Neoacademism declared Petersburg the last bulwark of traditional artistic culture amidst the barbaric destruction wrought by modernism, which had rejected its European roots and suppressed the classicism as a form of totalitarianism. The neoacademists sported frock coats and top hats, read their poems in old park pavilions to the accompaniment of harps, and set about reviving such outmoded techniques as silverless photo printing. This did not prevent them from also actively embracing the new media. Neoacademism went hand in hand with a ubiquitous disenchantment with wild radicalism and the onset of a New Moralism. Many artists rejected their former "excesses"; they turned to icon painting and became Hare Krishnas or Orthodox priests. The Museum of the New Academy of Fine Arts opened in the squat at Pushinskaya-10. Students from various countries practiced art in its classrooms, while almost weekly the museum presented new shows whose subjects ranged from Raphael to parodies of modernist "ugliness" in which originals were exhibited along with "Duchamps," "Maleviches," and "Kabakovs" produced specially for the occasion. The neoacademists took to an extreme the typical form of Petersburg narcissism: they transformed their own persons into works of art, and then proceeded to interact with the outside world via these personas, balancing on the thin line between dandyism and holy foolery. At the same time, we can view neoacademism as a version of post-punk. For example, on the five hundredth anniversary of Savonarola's burning at the stake, the neoacademists publicly burned their own old paintings, books, and films. The most "fanatical" among them called for the Hermitage to be closed because it shamelessly exhibited nudes.

The revolutionary period in Petersburg lasted around ten years, from 1986 to 1996. It was followed by the crystallization of a new, wholly official ideology of greed. Not everyone withstood the harsh vibrations of the schizorevolution. Like the German Romantics, many artists took their own lives or died at an early age from other causes. 1996 in particular was marked by a wave of deaths. Sergei Kuriokhin succumbed to an unheard-of disease, myocardial sarcoma. Vadim Ovchinnikov committed suicide. Timur Novikov recovered from a coma, but would remain blind to the end of his days (in 2002). We might repeat the sad joke: a part of the jolly generation died of laughter. Several artists, who had been unfazed by the pressures of totalitarian society, cracked and even abandoned art under the new conditions of the "free market" that they had, allegedly, been fighting for. (It turned out that the attentions of the KGB had been an important impetus to their independence.) As the twenty-first century approached, former society lions and scenesters retreated into themselves, turning into ascetics and hermits.

Marta Volkova and Slava Shevelenko were witnesses and participants of the events in this time of change. Having experienced the "heroic," pivotal moment of perestroika's schizorevolution, they left for the west and since then have observed the development of their hometown's art from a distance. In their new project, the history of Petersburg contemporary art is replayed with a fantasy script that recalls the parodies of Swift, the metamorphoses of E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Musil's *Man Without Qualities* (another product of a collapsed empire). Volkova and Shevelenko have created an installation that depicts an exhibition of Petersburg avant-garde art. They have produced with their own hands the works of individual artists and art groups who arose in the eighties and exist to this day. Some of these artists are still alive, others are dead; some of them are fictitious. The museum (archive) within the museum and the museum as work of art are now promising genres: they create an intriguing space that is fruitful both artistically and intellectually. From the Petersburg point of view, this project refers us to the endless, abortive attempts to establish a museum of contemporary art in the city, which began when it was still called Leningrad. We might also see allusions to the above-mentioned Museum of the New Academy of Fine Arts, as well as the one-artist micromuseums that exist and have existed both at Pushkinskaya-10 and in the apartments and studios of such contemporary artists as Georgy Gurjanov, Timur Novikov, Sergei Bugaev Afrika, Oleg Kotelnikov, Gluklya, and others.

With its intense focus on the problems of authorship and stylization, postmodernism revived the genre that once gave us *The Works of Ossian* and *Les Chants de Maldoror*. Marta and Slava's project, however, is not such a heavily encoded mystification. It is akin to the question of how European history would have been different had Marshal Grouchy beat the Prussians at the battlefield at Waterloo. Or it comes near to modeling the lucid states of childhood. We might also resort to the simile of musical variations on a theme (in this case, the theme of Petersburg art). The Romantics "grafted" medieval-style sculptures of chimeras onto Gothic cathedrals. The Pre-Raphaelites attempted to relive the early Renaissance period. The aesthetes at the Abramtsevo and Talashkino estates drew inspiration for their arts and crafts from Russian fairytales. Volkova and Shevelenko fantasize about a period that is still "warm" and many of which heroes continue to lead active creative lives. The production of homunculi, golems, and Frankenstein's monsters was a characteristic passion of Romanticism that is also kindred to the spirit of Petersburg. In the Moscow writer Vladimir Sorokin's sarcastic novel *Blue Lard*, clones of the great Russian writers—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Nabokov et al.—are manufactured. Moreover, although these clones are able to write in the styles of their prototypes, they can outwardly resemble anything whatsoever: Pasternak looks like a lemur, while Platonov resembles a coffee table. One critic has written that Sorokin "persuades us that absolutely everything—literature, life, society, technology, the symbolic realm—is constructed, that there is no pre-existing basis to anything." Marta and Slava's remake is neither an idealistic utopia nor a cynical dystopia: it is not literary, but instead aspires to play with the real texture and mood of Petersburg. Existentially, we might speak here of a blend of irony and self-irony, of daydreaming and nostalgia for a "golden age." On the whole, we find in this project an attempt to maintain the atmosphere of playfulness, joy, love, and happiness that has characterized Petersburg during the past several decades—that is, the potential that art making and creativity have had in all times and places.

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