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## Contemporary Moscow Art And Cultural Discontinuity

By Gregory Feifer

DECEMBER 2000

MOSCOW—The Moscow art scene is arguing about money. Some say that means it's come a long way in the past ten years; others that that's not necessarily a good thing.

An article in *Afisha* magazine, a Moscow glossy about art, music, theater and film popular because of its extensive listings, sparked the latest spat. One short article—written by the critic Konstantin Agunovich—announced the opening, on December 7, of the fifth "Art-Manezh" fair. The annual six-day event is held to showcase Russian artists in the hope of grabbing the attention of potential buyers and investors. The affair's motto, aping avant-garde declarations and Soviet exhortations to do this or that (i.e. "build communism") is: "Isskustvo — Pokupat'!" (Roughly: "Buy Art!")

The exhibition was housed in the sprawling, columned neoclassical Manezh gallery adjacent to Red Square, built in 1817 (to commemorate victory over Napoleon—as so many structures were in Russia) for military horseback exercises. An entire regiment could gallop around inside.

The building now contains several galleries. "Art-Manezh" was the idea of Manezh director Stanislav Karakash. But it was *Afisha's* paragraph about an-



*The Manezh building next to Red Square, lit up at night on the Art-Manezh fair's opening night*



*The Art-Manezh logo. The exhibit took up most of the interior of the massive Manezh building.*

other co-organizer that had people up in arms. It concerned the dealer Vladimir Ovcharenko—he calls himself a “trader”—who came up with “*Iz pervykh ruk*” (“From first hands,” i.e. from the artists themselves). The idea was to cut out gallery owners and other middlemen to promote individual artists. For an opening-night trick on that theme, Ovcharenko had assistants stand behind a false wall on one side of the exhibition space, their arms through glory holes of sorts, holding various paintings.

This is what *Afisha* had to say about the idea: “To this day, contemporary art galleries in Moscow have known two paths: ‘Marat’s path’ and ‘Aidan’s path,’ sponsorship and free-riding. Now it will be possible to talk about ‘Ovcharenko’s trope.’ (Marat—Guelman—and Aidan Salakhova are perhaps Moscow’s most prominent gallery owners. In essence, the article criticized them for leeching off artists in their own ways, and lauded Ovcharenko for trying to get rid of such unnecessary types—even though Ovcharenko’s own gallery, Regina, was represented at the Art-Manezh show.)

Marat Guelman certainly has a lot of enemies in the country’s art world. But the latest criticism rallied artists and art dealers around him. I spoke to Irina Filatova, curator of the Fine Art gallery—one of the city’s most prestigious contemporary art galleries—just before the Art-Manezh opening.

“I’m going there right away, and we’re going to get together a group of people and we’re going to write a letter in support of Guelman and Aidan,” Filatova said. “We may not like some of the things Guelman does, but he’s an honest gallery owner, and it’s outrageous to say something like that about him.”

The determination wore off during the exhibit’s open-

ing, doused by self-congratulatory hype, the presence of big names and Versace-and-leather-clad patrons, and finally washed away with cheap champagne. But the need to earn money is providing a constraint that is pushing Russian art in a new direction. It is moving away from the polemics of totalitarianism’s socialist realism and the post-totalitarianism that followed and toward a less politicized aestheticism. It is looking to the West, not only because major Russian artists live and exhibit abroad, but also because that is where the big money currently lies. The debate over dealers and their roles illustrates just how depoliticized the actual art is becoming in a country in which art and politics have seemed to be inextricably combined for so long.

But there are those who say while most Russian art has become detached from political statements, it has also floated away from itself. That is, the thread of discourse has been lost and painters, sculptors, multi-media artists and others create objects that are sheer fantasy and kitsch.

### **Totalitarian and Post-Totalitarian Art**

To talk about contemporary Russian art, it is necessary first to discuss the basic direction of its ancestor, Soviet art, which has left behind a massive legacy. Contrary to common conception, its realist forms actually grew out of the pre-Revolutionary avant-garde, whose artists loudly trumpeted totalizing visions in didactic creeds.

Kasimir Malevich’s idea for his “black square”—one of the most prominent symbols of the avant-garde—for example, described an irreducible aesthetic atom, the purest of forms. According to the suprematist Malevich, however, the harmony his square represented should also be extended to all endeavors in life—even if such a total project was a matter solely of artistic imagination. Other avant-garde artists also created aesthetic worlds of their own, and in doing so, denigrated everything that came before them. To do so, they had to proclaim their own artistic projects as total and endless.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, a majority of avant-garde artists supported the communist state, which represented an opportunity to put totalizing theories into practice, something seriously envisioned by those who came after Malevich. To do so, artists had to have the political power to reorganize the physical world to realize their revolutionary artistic projects. Constructivist artists such as Rodchenko even denounced Malevich for his “contemplativism,” when in fact action was necessary.

Such artists wanted to use the Bolsheviks to realize their projects, some of which called for the organization of society to the tiniest detail to reflect aesthetic theories. Some, for example, designed buildings and intricate plans for communal living that would create perfect communities. Of



*The Lenin propaganda train contained a library and a printing press to help make peasants into model Soviet citizens.*

course, it was the Bolsheviks who quickly subjected the artists to their own designs, not the other way around. In 1932, Stalin disbanded all artistic groups and formed new artistic unions. Indeed, Boris Groys writes that Stalin became the heir to the avant-garde artistic project because he had precisely the political power they lacked.<sup>1</sup>

The socialist realism that then emerged did not—as traditionally viewed—reflect a regressive movement. It was actually created by well-educated élites who came out of the avant-garde and used its logic. Socialist realism may have been kitsch, but it was produced by specialists who knew what they were doing by claiming the same “will to power” so desired by the avant-garde.

As I’ve said, Groys writes that the totalizing dream of the avant-garde was actually fulfilled under Stalin, when its propaganda contributed to organizing society into monolithic forms—even if those forms were different than the ones envisioned by the avant-garde.<sup>2</sup>

Fast forward to the 1970s, when post-utopian postmodernist art first emerged in Moscow. Those forms, which came almost two decades after the onset of de-Stalinization, “quoted” socialist realism, juxtaposing socialist realist images with others in an effort to undermine them. Perhaps the brightest example is called “sots art,” deriving from both socialist realism and pop art. As with

other forms, it was a part of the socialist realism from which it sprang, a logical extension.

Two artists who have worked together for decades, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, first coined the term “sots art,” as they wanted their work to be called. Groys writes that their aesthetic derives from the central notion that all art is power.<sup>3</sup> Komar and Melamid proceeded by accepting that art cannot therefore resist power. Their twist is to candidly show that the myth of power, both political and artistic, also pervades their own art. They painted seemingly realist pictures—many of them including Stalin—and turned their subjects into surreal objects, not by attempting to demythologize the objects, but rather by juxtaposing the myths represented by different objects in the same painting.

In *The Yalta Conference*, for example, a realist Stalin sits next to a realist E.T., an example of Hollywood utopianism. Komar and Melamid did not reject both images of utopianism, but admitted that similar forms exist in every artistic endeavor. In doing so, they pushed the Stalinist myth to a new level—a level on which it stands with all other myths. Their realist depiction of Stalin no longer eulogizes Stalin the man, but appropriates Stalin the myth and exposes the socialist realist project (as well as all artistic projects, including, of



*E.T., Stalin and Hitler in a detail of Komar and Melamid's Yalta Conference from a History Textbook, 1984.*

<sup>1</sup> Groys, Boris, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Charles Rougle, trans. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p.34.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.91.



*An example of Tseretelli's kitsch. A statue of a fisherman from a Russian folk tale, a series of similar travesties at the Manezh Square, part of an underground shopping center built by Moscow mayor Luzhkov. Such work panders to the masses' tastes as part of an attempt to build to an "official culture."*

course, the avant-garde) by showing their similarities.

### Filling the Avant-garde's Shoes

Twenty years later, two figures best illustrate the role politics plays in contemporary art. One is the aforementioned Marat Guelman, the gallery owner and lately political public-relations man who claims to be defending culture from censorship. The other is the Georgian painter and sculptor Zurab Tseretelli, whose officially commissioned statues, monuments and architectural designs are ubiquitous throughout Moscow.

Tseretelli's official culture is a direct descendant of that of the Soviet period. Under the Soviet regime, the artist began creating public monuments in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, and then for the Soviet central apparatus. That brought him to Moscow, where after the Soviet collapse, the powerful Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov made him his so-called "court artist."

Tseretelli's most controversial work is a massive statue on the central banks of the Moscow River. Erected to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Russian Navy, it shows Peter the Great standing on an 18th-century ship. The small-scale vessel's above-deck structure consists of St. Petersburg buildings. It was Guelman, who, earlier in the 1990s, spearheaded a failed campaign to remove the statue.

More than simply kitsch, Tseretelli's statue actually damages public awareness of Peter and indeed Russian

culture itself by ignoring another bronze image of Peter—Etienne Falconet's 1782 St. Petersburg statue of Peter as The Bronze Horseman and Alexander Pushkin's epic poem of the same name. For reasons explained in a previous newsletter, the Bronze Horseman stands at the center of Russian literary imagery, and to ignore it by building a \$25 million new bronze Peter in Moscow to glorify the Moscow mayor is tantamount to cultural suicide.

As I've said, Guelman dug trenches on the opposite side of the Moscow official art scene. In 1999, he converted his white-walled basement gallery in a fashionable old part of town into a press center to hold briefings about social, political and economic problems in the city in the run-up to mayoral elections in December of that year. I talked to him during that bustling time, in his car shuttling between various offices. During our interviews, he often whipped out his laptop and played solitaire while talking, at the same time fingering a mini-mini cell phone and reading from a beeper. One couldn't mistake that he wanted to be seen as a man of action as well as one of "culture."

"It's right to compare us to Soviet dissidents," he told me. "It seemed that for nine years or so, power in Russia wasn't so all-consuming as it had been before. Dissidence wasn't deemed possible then.

"But in Moscow especially, times of fear have returned. When I was organizing protests against Tseretelli, tens of thousands of people wanted to help me, but anonymously. No one would speak out in the open."

Later, he said, "Of course I see myself as a mover of today's avant-garde. When I was told, 'You're a cultural figure, why are you dealing with politics?' I said that as long as Luzhkov deals with culture and art, I'm going to deal with politics. When he stops distributing his personal tastes in the city's cultural policies, I'll stop dealing with politics, I'll deal only with culture."

The lines of this battle are drawn and clear—but the debate over Tseretelli's work doesn't occupy the central place in Moscow's artistic life. It's the clearest fallout from the breakup of the Soviet Union, and certainly affects the forging of a new cultural identity, but remains only a side-show. What interested me were the hordes of artists filling the cavernous space of the Art-Manezh exhibit. Before heading there, I spoke to the Fine Art Gallery's Filatova, who has her own clear notions about the real direction of contemporary art.

### The Fine Art Gallery

The Fine Art Gallery, like the Guelman Gallery, is one of a small handful of similar establishments at the cutting edge of Moscow contemporary art. It also has an uncanny resemblance to the Guelman Gallery: it is a tiny, one-room affair—with simple, well-lit, white walls—in a central Moscow basement. Located in a building standing at the end of a narrow alley, it's difficult to find the first time. Begun in

1993 by curator Filatova and director Marina Obraztsova, the gallery set as its guiding mission displaying artists working in what it calls the “actual” direction of contemporary art.

The gallery shows painting, sculpture, photography, multi-media installations and other forms from the 1960s to the present.

Filatova became a little offended when I began by asking about her interpretation of the fate of post-totalitarian art. “We judge art by global standards, and not only by what’s done here in Moscow. Our art has the aroma of our people and our area, but art has no geographical borders, no ethnicity.

“Conceptualism has come to its own natural death,” she continued, speaking of Moscow’s most prevalent art form of the 1970s and 1980s, which often involved large installations that juxtaposed everyday objects to undermine common conceptions as Komar and Melamid did with everyday propaganda images. “That kind of art became too politicized and it lost its social relevance. The person was no longer interesting. The ‘little man’ it strove so hard to protect was buried alive.

“We’re not interested in visual language per se,” Filatova said of her gallery. “We’re concerned with the individuality of the artist. We’re building an ivory tower and we’re inviting people to join us.” How does that inevitably translate into the visual language (through which, of course, visual art speaks)? “It’s art for people. That is, it’s art that makes people feel good.”

I still didn’t quite follow.

“Film, video, sculpture, painting—it should serve people. If it does that, old values will return. Art cannot



*Irina Filatova in the Fine Art Gallery in front of December’s exhibition of Volkov’s painting*

compete with television in shocking its audience into awareness. The avant-garde cannot compete with the terrible images of earthquakes, murders, and so on. Art cannot compete with the corpses of small children.

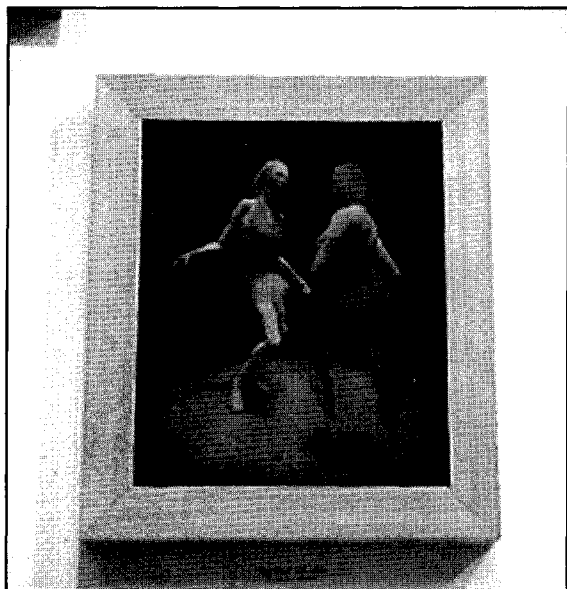
“So art has to fight those images. In the past, beauty was always seen as ‘poshlost,’” Filatova said, using an eminently untranslatable but crucially central aesthetic term roughly meaning *bad taste*. “Art always had to ‘say something.’ But now the opposite is happening. Artists are seeking harmony. Art is entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century by bringing good.”

In other words, Russian artists—or at least those the Fine Art Gallery backs—are decisively turning their backs on past traditions, breaking with the politicized cycles of avant-garde, totalitarianist and post-totalitarianist art. They are seeking to produce more relative, aesthetically pleasing images of beauty. Filatova calls that the search for “eternal values.” That is also part of the movement of art away from its Russian background toward a global context.

Filatova also disagrees with a number of Moscow critics who say painting is on the way out and plastic art—sculpture and other three-dimensional forms—is on the rise.

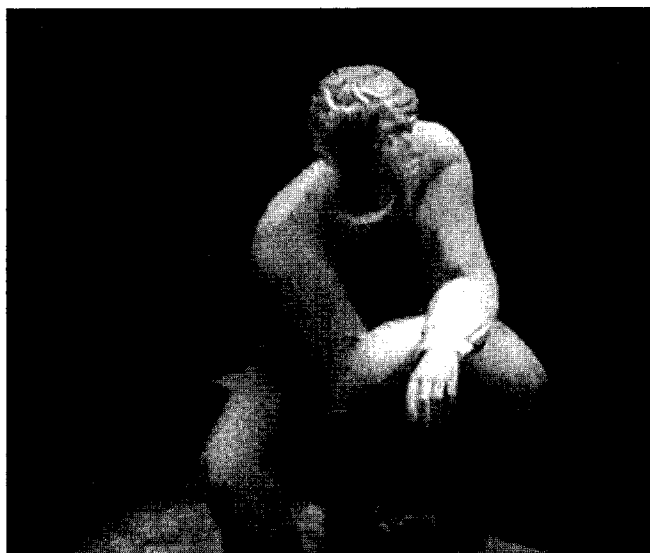
In December, the gallery displayed works by Sergei Volkov. Like many others, Volkov has also displayed his work abroad, in Paris, Berne, Boston, Venice and many other cities. Part of a highly visible group called the Furman artists (from Furman Lane, where they had studios in the 1980s), Volkov’s latest works are a series of around 20 computer prints painted over in oil on canvas. The paintings are small with black backgrounds. In the center stand human figures with large limbs and heads, a throwback to the monumental style of socialist realist art.

The figures are stereotypical and taken from society, isolated and frozen in their work. Some are whimsical. “Green People” shows two figures covered in grass. Empty pill bottles surround “Medicine Man.” Some figures are dressed in business suits. “Thinking Man,” a large-fore-



*One of Volkov’s works at the Fine Art Gallery called Pink Floyd*





*Volkov's Thinking Man*

armed figure sitting on a chair, is reminiscent of socialist-realist depictions of model communists. I found myself remembering the Polish film "Man of Marble," directed in the 1970s by Andrzej Wajda, which explored the myth of the socialist hero and the mind-boggling postmodernist emptiness behind such images.

It's perhaps no mistake that Filatova does not agree with Guelman's self-described avant-gardist "declarative" actions. "He thinks one artist at a time is number one and that all others are nothing," Guelman's actions, Filatova says, are helping to split apart the artistic community.

But Filatova nonetheless says she respects Guelman. "He's done a lot for contemporary art." So when *Afisha* criticized her rival, Filatova rushed to protect him, disagreeing with the magazine's claim that gallery owners are only in it for the money. "We all began with nothing. No one is helping us. We've done everything ourselves."

Fittingly, Obratzsova, the gallery director, talks about one thing: money, which is another driving force pushing



*Crowds at the opening of Volkov's exhibit at Fine Art*

art out of its local context. "What's going on now is just the beginning. It's only been ten years, and we're still searching for our art forms. But no one is putting money into art. That's why our artists are living in the West and taking part in western exhibits. But we're moving ahead, taking big steps from a bazaar to a real market," she added. "That's natural. We were born in one society and have entered another, with a different psychology. But we have a lot of talent."

### The Art-Manezh Exhibit

It's perhaps no mistake that the Art-Manezh fair is a commercial event. Artists and gallery owners paced around each stall, waiting for potential buyers. Rather than the cold disdain exuded by many western dealers, they jumped on every dallying passerby with pamphlets and business cards.

"It's a good idea," said one gallery's representative at the fair. "Bringing different art together lets people compare styles. Of course, there are others who don't like it."

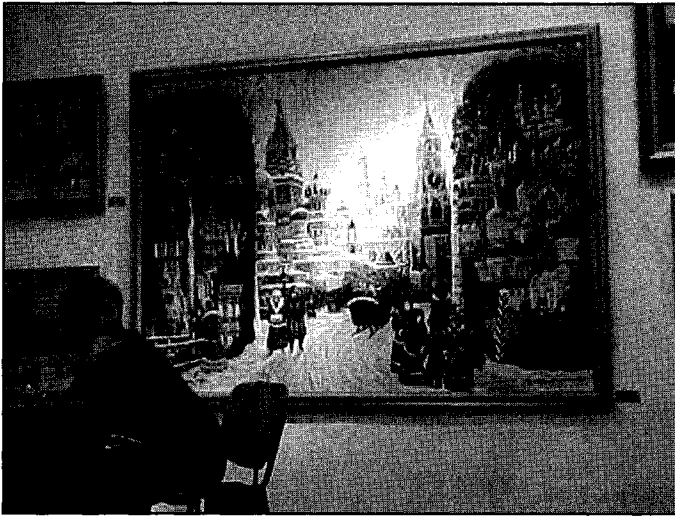


*Fine Art Gallery director Obratzsova*

I asked him how he liked it himself and got a look that roughly conveyed "How the Hell would you like sitting here for days talking to idiots like you who aren't even remotely interested in buying anything." His stall had particularly garish offerings—including paintings of one artist's "universe," literally—which depicted a bunch of stars.

The "Art-Manezh" fair seemed less than underwhelming. I'm not a huge fan of contemporary Russian art, and the Manezh exhibit did nothing to sway me. The best of the pieces were whimsical. One untitled photomontage (made this year), by Oleg Kulik, showed the city's Christ the Savior Cathedral—a behemoth structure erected in the last decade—with a crashed BMW in front of it. The only color in the otherwise black-and-white picture was in the cathedral's gold domes. Both objects show the recklessness of the "New Russia"—reckless spending on the gold domes (while 90 percent of the population slid into poverty or close to it) and the recklessness of crashing a

## Seen at Art-Manezh



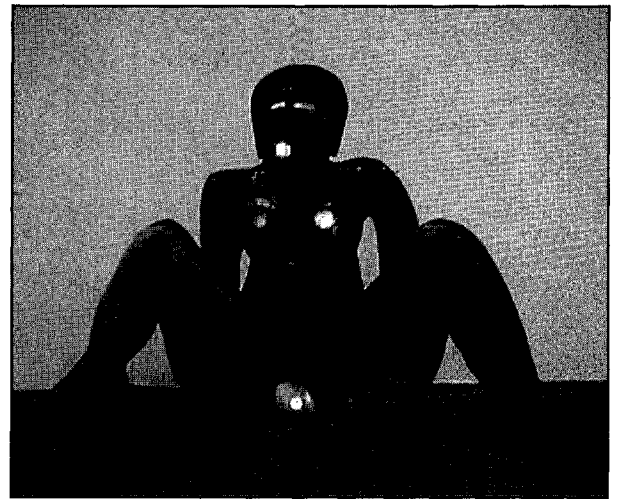
*Vladimir Smirnov provides an exemplary artifact:  
Moscow kitsch ca. 1997*



*Sergei Tsiklov's "iguana" motorcycle  
speaks for itself*



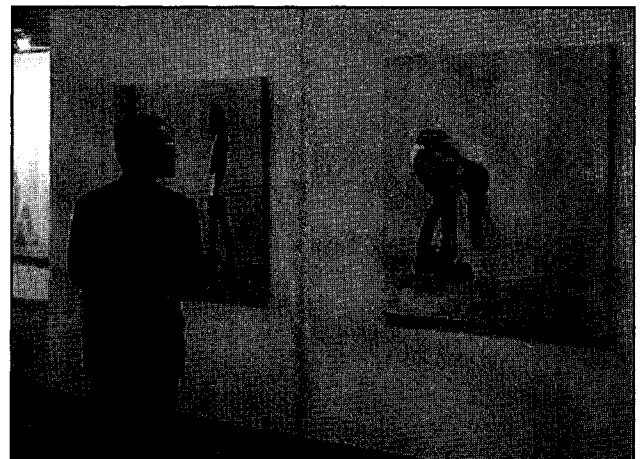
*A cut above actual motorcycles, Vladimir Ovchinnikov's  
motorcycle angels are simply confused pop-art wannabes.*



*Natasha Turnova's Sitting Woman*



*A potential buyer reading a leaflet  
surrounded by consumer possibilities*



*Vladimir Kozhuhar's Yellow Emptiness*

“Beemer”—a common sight on Moscow’s streets (perpetrated by the other ten percent).

Another piece, Vladimir Nemukhin’s collage “Composition with Circle” (1994), was interesting only because it looked like a warmed-over Rodchenko painting. It seemed to present nothing new, but at least it paid homage to the pure lines of the good old days.

Whatever was innovative went in a direction I didn’t like or simply can’t appreciate because the aesthetic argument has lost me. It all seemed like kitsch—and kitsch it must be because it’s so repetitive: grotesque figures in ghostly colors, lame attempts to update surrealism, meaningless abstractions. Perhaps it’s no mistake no one’s buying. To make matters worse for Art-Manezh, it has competition: the “Art-Moskva” fair, which aims to put its offerings in an “international” context. It has won over some artists for that claim alone, whatever it means.

### The Heart of the Matter

“Art-Manezh is a crying shame, it’s so bad,” Yuri Vaschenko told me. We were strolling down the Old Arbat, a pre-Revolutionary lane made into a walking street in the

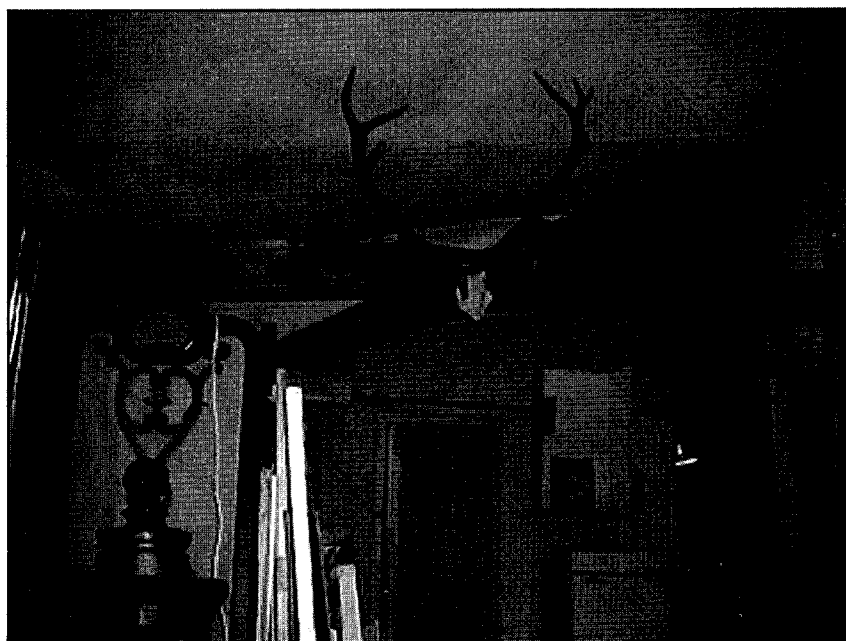


*Viewers confronting the Soviet past—or are they?—at Art-Manezh*

1980s. It is now lined with shops and restaurants, and the ubiquitous pushing crowds and souvenir stalls targeting similarly ubiquitous tourists make it an unpleasant place. Vaschenko hates the street with its Tseretelli-like statues of Pushkin and its hack painters hawking their wares. We had come only to buy a bottle of vodka and quickly turned onto a side street and back into old Moscow, a neighborhood of dark lanes with cracked and peeling gems of neoclassic buildings, Art Nouveau and other styles.

Half a block from the Old Arbat, we ducked through an arch, through a muddy courtyard and into an unlit, six-story building. Vaschenko, a Moscow painter, keeps a studio on the top floor. He lit our way up with a flashlight and fumbled with his keys in the darkness. It was cold inside the stairwell. The winter had been unusually warm so far, but one could sense it would snow that night.

Vaschenko’s warm and well-lit studio lay under sloping eaves. It seemed dusty, although it probably isn’t, and was crammed with canvases and still-life props such as reindeer antlers. It was also very cozy. An old sofa stood in one bohemian corner behind a large round coffee table and some chairs. There was a small electric stove and a refrigerator. The corner was lined with shelves and some photographs—the most prominent being of the poets Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak,



*The eaves of Yuri Vaschenko’s Moscow studio.*



symbols of understated resistance to the Soviet regime but also defiant modernists.

Vaschenko took out a jar of herring he had cut and marinated himself, some cold boiled beets, very dark Russian rye bread and stuck some potatoes in his tiny oven. It was the makings of a very basic but also very delicious meal, one that I hadn't had in many months despite its Russianness. We sat and talked and ate and drank vodka for six hours, well into the night. That was something I also hadn't done in a long time. Russia was once renowned for its "kitchen table discussions" when friends would meet and debate politics and metaphysics and anything else in very private gatherings away from the eyes of state authorities and a suspicious public. Now a work-intensive place, Muscovites—at least the ones I know—like to go out to bars and restaurants after leaving their offices and conversation has turned increasingly superficial.

Vaschenko has been part of the Moscow art scene for decades. The Fine Art Gallery's Filatova said he stands on the border of conceptualism and other forms—a title Vaschenko himself cannot believe. "Irina Filatova has done a lot of beneficial things for the art world," he said. "But my face turns red when I hear her describing my work. When she says post-utopianism is dead, I have no idea what she means and can only imagine what she wants to say."

Vaschenko's latest exhibit, last spring at the Fine Art Gallery, included collages using garbage and other everyday objects. Although Vaschenko was not the first to use garbage by a longshot, his aestheticization of refuse captivated. He presents it as humanity's archive, creating an encyclopedia that rescues what others have thrown away. His work is aesthetically pleasing in the whimsical choice of objects, such as roofing tiles, which he blends with intricate detail into subtle, light backgrounds.

Unlike so many Moscow artists, Vaschenko is concerned with meta-language. He presents the role of art as a cultural repository—a basic modernist idea. He, too, is concerned with a search for the eternal truths Filatova talks

about. Yet he draws his ideas from art's past, not new images divorced from the body of culture as it seems so many in Art-Manezh are doing.

Vaschenko spends a good part of the year living and exhibiting in Kent, a small town in northwestern Connecticut that once attracted writers and artists and now hosts increasing numbers of Manhattan weekenders. (I incidentally attended school in the same town and lived nearby, so we had no shortage of topics to discuss.) His time spent away gives Vaschenko the estrangement from his own culture that is central for understanding and analyzing it—and yet his absence draws him closer to his homeland. He is both tied to place and time—call it one's own culture. Even working deep in the Russian countryside—as opposed to Moscow—affects his work.

"I began working for a Moscow exhibit while in the country [in Connecticut] and did some things I liked. And then, back in Moscow, I couldn't for the life of me figure out what I was trying to say. It was a real change of values.

"I used to like going to Art-Manezh each year to see the artifacts there," Vaschenko said, responding to my first question. "I never liked what I saw, but for some reason, I'd feel inspired. I'd come back to my studio and feel the need to work on my own very different ideas. Not this year. I saw things that could have come from Africa—or another planet—they're so removed from reality." Vaschenko dismissed the flap over *Afisha's* criticism of gallery owners. "How could *Afisha* denigrate Guelman? It's a bulletin of happenings. It has no place criticizing, and there's no reason to react to it so strongly."

Vaschenko says Filatova operates by attaching herself to "declarative" artists. "Declaration—what today's artists have to say about art—is the easiest thing to understand. Filatova has a good sense of what sells, and she reacts to that. She's interesting for that reason. But many artists have simply grabbed epitaphs that are quick and easy to come by, such as, 'Quality doesn't matter anymore, so I'll just produce crappy things.'"

Nonetheless, Vaschenko praises Russian artists in general for their craftsmanship. "Under the Soviet Union, there was a lot of talent, but artists were sleeping," he said. "They were exercising their muscles for no reason. Those who reacted to that asked why such craft was needed at all and decided having no rules was the best thing. Filatova aligned herself with the latter." Vaschenko doesn't dismiss the avant-garde act of crossing out everything that has come before. "Of course there's truth to that," he said. "But Filatova doesn't realize that if something is said today, tomorrow it will be something else entirely. To understand the changes, you have to be a real curator and she's only a neophyte."

However, Vaschenko does agree in general with the obituaries of post-utopian art, albeit in different terms. He says this of totalitarian art: "Russian art—not Soviet art—



*Yuri Vaschenko in his studio.*

was always deeply utopian. Most artists were dreamers. In their dreams, they tried to find eternal values, but they didn't really understand eternal things such as Henri Rousseau's sunsets or the Barbizon school. They wanted to add to that, but to do so requires sobriety. These artists didn't want to wake up from their dreams."

Waking up after the Stalin era was a very uncomfortable act, Vaschenko adds. "Waking up is a nightmare. Many didn't know what was going on, many died [metaphorically, of course], it was such a shock. But there were young artists who woke up well. A number of post-utopians met

changes. My question about the direction new forms will lead brought our conversation back to Vaschenko's own "eternal values," or what he calls "quality." In rhetoric alone, he sounds similar to Filatova. But unlike her, as I've said, Vaschenko sees quality not in art's movement away from the past, but the opposite. "Duchamps illustrated what the artist is and what art is. It's so cliché, it's funny to talk about that now."

The conversation also returned to a sense of place. "I'm in the West for six months and suddenly find myself wanting to return."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because in Russia, reality is different. In Russia I slumber, whereas the West imposes hard constraints that one has to respect to survive. I can't be divorced from my values. I and every other artist have tried to create a model [of the world] and a manner [a personal signature]. In Moscow slang, that's called a '*feniya*.'"

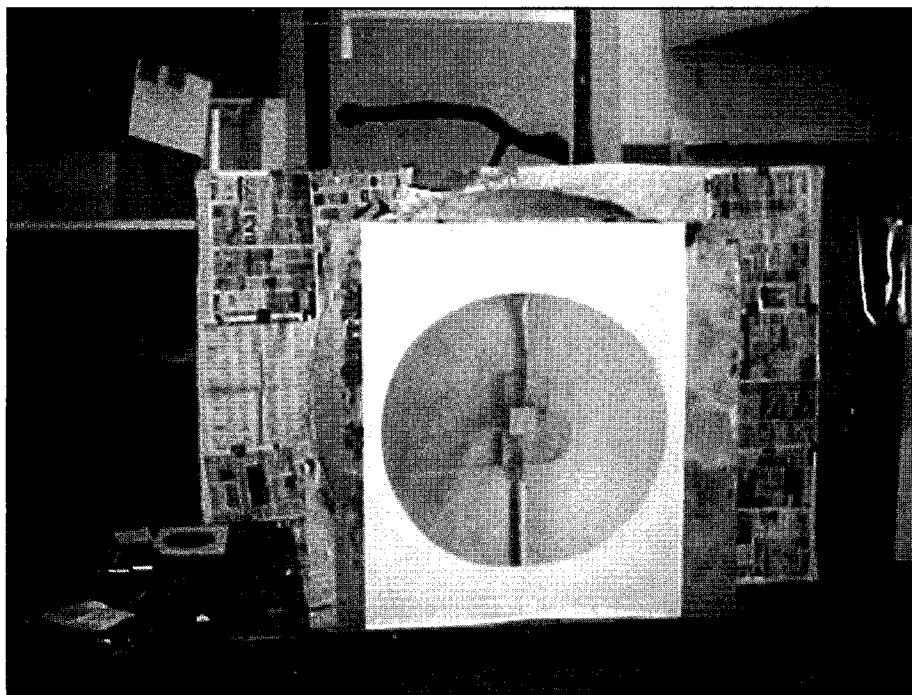
"At the same time, one's current idea had to be clean. I recently went to the Tretyakov Gallery and saw my own paintings in the permanent collection and it reflected what I then thought of as my values. And I felt it was an honest shame that I'd spent so much effort on nothing. I look at my work as a law of physics. There is a coefficient of beneficial action. It is a ratio of effort to result.

I'm like a steam engine in that analogy. I move forward but it requires too much energy and the result is too small. But I'm so used to it that I don't want to part with it. It's like a bad habit."

To interpret his words, I'd say inefficient Russia allows inefficient artistic work—alien to the bustling West. That may sound like a negative thing. But Vaschenko is a Russian artist—and his "bad habit" is to come from and contribute to his own culture.

### Cultural Amnesia

Vaschenko is clearly an anomaly. That's a paradox—but what isn't in Russia? He is deeply rooted in his culture. And yet Groys writes that as early as the early 18<sup>th</sup>-century reforms of Peter the Great, Russians were willing to abandon seemingly deep-rooted traditions for western innovations if they held the promise of rapid progress.<sup>4</sup> The old was associated with backwardness and denigrated—an aes-



*A canvas in Vaschenko's studio*

the morning soberly and they knew exactly where they'd come from." Vaschenko includes Komar and Melamid among the successful post-utopians. "They had some of the most brilliant reactions at the time. Their ironic imitation was excellent, and it also had good intonations."

Nonetheless, Komar and Melamid didn't fully wake up, Vaschenko adds. "It's possible to wake up, shave, get on the metro, switch on the computer, talk to the boss and only then really wake from a slumber. And so it was with Komar and Melamid. Theirs was a continuation of the slumber, a virtual reality because their effect was to use unreality to underscore their remembrance of the past. And so many people remain in that post-slumber. How good it is to loll around in bed! It continues and will continue and people will try to imagine how to react, but for that you need to really wake up."

That doesn't mean Vaschenko thinks things won't change. He says art will develop slowly, with few radical

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.5.

thetic distaste Groys says accounts for Russia's being more open than the West to new art forms. Russia was prone to revolutionary leaps because ideology was imported from the West. The West, on the other hand, had the tempering influence of its own homegrown traditions. Vaschenko today is one of the few tempered by Russia's traditions, even though that tradition is to be revolutionary.

Traditional Marxists say Russia was technologically and culturally backward, and therefore not theoretically ready for revolution. Groys argues that Russia was actually aesthetically much better prepared for revolution than the West—much more willing to submit to organizing life in new forms.

Judging by contemporary art, Russia must therefore have fundamentally changed recently. Revolution—or at least the first heady half of the cycle—consists in throwing out the past. So perhaps it's no mistake in these somewhat revolutionary times that art is greatly removed not only from political power, but also from its own discourse. It has jumped rails in a supposed search for decidedly nontotalizing beauty. At least one might tend to think that after hearing Filatova. Vaschenko, however, feels nothing of the sort has happened, and that most Russian artists are still languishing in a blanket of self-imposed delusion.

For a country in which art and politics have for so long been so closely associated—as I've mentioned—such revolution may be dangerous. The opposite of Art-Manezh contemporary art, the Tseretelli court sculpture, displays a similar kind of cultural amnesia. Tseretelli, of course, is very close to politics and power, but not in the traditional way. He does not spring from the avant-garde. Rather, he comes from the worst branch of socialist realism (even if not liter-

ally so, since his early colorful mosaics and paintings were more interesting than his current travesties). Tseretelli lionizes politicians by grabbing symbols indiscriminately from history for the sole goal of glorification. That, too, is dangerous because it is just as harmful to cultural self-awareness and is now feeding into the kind of nationalist myth-making prevalent throughout society today.

In a time in which Russia is economically crippled (oil prices might be high and the federal budget met, but increasing numbers are slipping into poverty), that nationalism is a last resort. It is not only allowing Russia to move steadily away from the West, but actually forcing Russia against the West (the "other" for whom nationalism, a simple creed of "us versus them," demands).

Russian artists may be living and working in the West. They may be more concerned with making a living than ever before, and that has perhaps helped turn art away from politics. But in doing so, it is turning Russian art away from its own roots and becoming an alien implant on Russian soil. (The tendency is also increasingly dissimilar to western art because the latter has that tempering influence of tradition.) There are truly precious few like Vaschenko left. His art is good because he understands Russia and descends from its centuries-old tradition (or perhaps it is the other way around). Paradoxically, the West and its point of view allows him the estrangement necessary to understand Russia—but then, paradoxically, Russia has always derived its aesthetic notions from the West.

Unfortunately, most contemporary art is the opposite. It is engulfed in a black hole, and that makes it little different from the economic, political, judicial and almost every other ruined system in Russia. □

# INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

### **Shelly Renae Browning** (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

### **Wendy Call** (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

### **Martha Farmelo** (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

### **Gregory Feifer** (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. Greg sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

### **Curt Gabrielson** (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing M.I.T. in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

### **Peter Keller** (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

### **Leena Khan** (April 2001-2002) • **PAKISTAN**

A lawyer dealing with immigration and international-business law with a firm in the Washington, DC area, Leena will study the status of women under the "islamization" of Pakistani law that began in the 1980s and continues to this day. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she is a Muslim herself and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

### **Whitney Mason** (January 1999-2001) • **TURKEY**

A freelance print and television journalist, Whitney began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

### **Jean Benoît Nadeau** (December 1999-2000) • **FRANCE**

A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

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