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Kunstkammer

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The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Vladimir Perts & Andrey Fomenko

Kunstkammer

1.

In any discussion of Petersburg¹ culture, there is a tendency to emphasize the specific nature of the Place in which that culture was fated to grow, and which appears at the intersection of History and Geography, Time and Space. Yet in some paradoxical way this place - topos - proves to be u-topos: St. Petersburg is a city without a place, a mythical city, an idea, yet at the same time it is a misunderstanding, a city *out of place* (an inappropriate city). The embodiment of this Utopia (like any Utopia) is fraught with violence, with the distortion of Locality, which forces the suffering material to contort itself in the vice-like grip of the form prepared for it.

The description of St. Petersburg as a continuous quotation “from the classics” - from Classical and Baroque architecture or Russian 19th-century architecture - has long been trite. In Petersburg as nowhere else the artist is an ape imitating the Creator, for this city itself is the work of the hands of the imitator and epigone, who was himself “aping” when he built a brilliant European capital in the middle of the Karelian marshes.

St. Petersburg culture is often described as derivative and epigonic; as Boris Groys wrote, however, “epigonism is often quite innovatory, but this innovation is perceived usually post factum, retrospectively, when the inevitable unlikeness to the original is recognised not as unsuccessful imitation but as independent aesthetic value”.² Indeed, much in Petersburg culture has the character of retrospective novelty, in particular when we

¹ The city of St. Petersburg has been renamed several times. In 1914 it became Petrograd, then in 1924 Leningrad, by which name it was known until 1991, when it reverted to its original name of St. Petersburg.

² B. Groys: 'Imena gorodov' [The Names of Towns], in *Utopia i obmen* [Utopia and Exchange], Moscow, 1993, p. 364

speak of alternative culture. At its roots in the 1950s and 1960s - ignored by the critics, deprived of exhibitions and earnings - were the students of Malevich, Filonov, Tatlin and Matyushin, and surviving eyewitnesses of the discussions at GINKhUK and the Institute of Art History³. Suffice it to recall the names of Vladimir Sterligov and Tatyana Glebova, Pavel Kondratyev and Ilya Chashnik, Anna Leporskaya and Alexander Ender. In those years they were still creating their 'formalist' canvases and in the quiet of their studios passed on the artistic and theoretical heritage of the Petersburg avant garde from hand to hand - like some esoteric rite of induction - and as a rule from eye to eye, to their few pupils. It was during these years that the excellent masters of the 1930s (Solomon Gershov, Boris Ermolaev, Yury Vasnetsov, Valentin Kurdov), squeezed out onto the periphery of the artistic process by the Stalinist era, began to show their works to a narrow circle of friends and acquaintances, reminding them of the existence of a truly plastic culture.

In Sterligov and Glebova's "school", the experience of the 1920s was brought up to date. This group (Gennady Zubkov, Mikhail Tserush, Alexander Kozhin, A. Baturin etc) was united and yet at the same time isolated. Teaching over at the Theater Institute was Nikolay Akimov, an outstanding scenery designer and director, and studying under him were Oleg Tselkov, Mikhail Kulakov, Igor Tyulpanov. In the circle around Yakov Dlugach, who created the 'Hermitage school', the principles of the practical analysis of composition and an original kind of painterly Constructivism were laid down in the process of copying works of classical art. In the art studio of the Kapranov Palace of Culture, Osip Sidlin, pupil of Alexander Osmyorkin, was developing the ideas of Russian Cezannisme. Here the students included Igor Ivanov, Anatoly Basin and Evgeny Goryunov. In the 1950s the Boltayka groups of artists took shape, including Alexander Arefyev, Vladimir Shagin, Rikhard Vasmi, Shalom Shvarts, all expelled for formalism from the Art High School; in its artistic practice and personal contacts the groups were linked with the pre-war Circle of Artists. The outstanding leader of Boltayka, Alexander Arefyev, developed a theme which seemed strange against the background of the dominant Socialist Realism - unadorned everyday genre scenes with elements of grotesque and satire, the style making use of Expressionist forms. Of the numerous other groups, we must also mention Sankt-Petersburg, headed by Mikhail Chemiakin, which included Vladimir Ovchinnikov, Anatoly Vasiliev, Oleg Lyagachev and Evgeny Esaulenko. The group was oriented towards the

³ GINKhUK - State Institute of Artistic Culture, Leningrad, combined with the State Institute of Art History in 1926. Teachers included Malevich, Chashnik, Yudin, Yermolaeva, Matyushin, Tatlin, Nikolay Punin etc.

culture of the “Silver Age”, with its mystifications and quasi-historicism, its artistic and behavioural flamboyance. The “loners” also began artistic practice at this time - Evgeny Mikhnov-Voytenko, Albert Rozin (Solomon Rossin), Vadim Rokhlin, Gennady Ustyugov, Valentin Gerasimenko, Vladlen Gavrilchik, Evgeny Rukhin, Gleb Bogomolov, Anatoly Belkin and others. Sometimes they formed their short-lived groups, then joined others as unstable as the first. It was not only artists' apartments and studios which served as meeting places, places for discussions and the organisation of small exhibitions, but the apartments of collectors also. They were but few then (as indeed now), these collectors of modern art: Lev Katsenelson, A. Sidorov, I. Loginov, Nikolay Blagodatov, Boris Bezobrazov. But without them we cannot picture the existence of unofficial art in the 1960s and 1970s.

At a certain stage Leningrad's alternative culture was self-sufficient. But its 'narcissism' (as described by Boris Groys), its somewhat silly provincialism, contained the inner charge of humanocentrism. Up to the middle of the 1970s, its representatives sought openly to take a stand against the status quo. Moreover, “they felt themselves to be bearers of a true culture, which stood in opposition not so much to conservative tendencies as to anticultural tendencies, and they were ready to unite their forces in this plane on a broad professional platform with their colleagues from the Union of Artists.”⁴ But this did not take place. Timid attempts to go out to the broader viewer ended either in destruction or a ban, and of course small exhibitions in apartments, cafes, cinemas and students' dormitories, in closed scientific institutions, could not satisfy the artists. In their midst a new type of artist took shape - the personifier of aesthetic and ideological dissidence (Evgeny Rukhin, Yury Zharkikh, Alexander Leonov, Vladimir Ovchinnikov, Gennady Zubkov, Igor Ivanov). Any organised artistic actions were from now on perceived in a political context.

After the destruction wrought by the powers that be in Moscow, when the open-air exhibition held in September 1974 was flattened and thus became known as The Bulldozer Exhibition, Leningrad artists began to organise a large exhibition which was to be a review of the various forces in alternative art. They managed to gain permission to hold exhibitions officially. The first exhibition lasted just four days in December 1974, in the Gaza Palace of Culture. Without going into the details, which have by now become the stuff of legend (complex negotiations with the powers that be, the criticism of the exhibition, the rage of the mass media, the long queues of those who

⁴ A. Borovsky: 'Neformaly mezhdru proshlym i budushchim' [Unofficial Artists Between the Past and Present], *Iskusstvo Leningrada* [The Art of Leningrad], 1989, No. 3, p. 42

wished to get in to see the show), we should note that for the first time the underground had presented a united front. Over fifty artists of the most varied orientations (Expressionism, abstract art, Surrealism, Pop Art, Naive Art and even Salon Art) were perceived by the public almost anonymously, in part due to the poor hanging of the exhibition and the limited time available for looking at it. The viewers were not particularly interested in artistic qualities, in the aesthetic viewpoints of the authors, in their ideological platforms. The exhibition was perceived 'wholesale'. This was a manifesto exhibition.

Another exhibition was held in 1976 in the Nevsky Palace of Culture, incorporating this time around ninety artists and sculptors. This exhibition was more professionally put together and the quality of the works presented was considerably higher. It was the names of the palaces of culture where these exhibitions took place which gave the participants the name of the movement - Gazanevskaya Culture [gazanevskaya kultura].

The artists were not alone in their efforts. In Leningrad at the beginning of the 1970s free speech began to make its mark - samizdat journals such as *37, Chasy* [Hours], *Obvodnyy kanal* and *Molchanie* [Silence] (later renamed *Mitin Zhurnal*, which is still published today) made their appearance.

Over the course of 1975 and 1976 a number of interesting exhibitions were organised: three exhibitions of the Alef group, which united contemporary Jewish artists (one of these exhibitions was shown in Moscow) and an exhibition in the Ordzhonikidze Palace of Culture. The latter was not only interesting in itself but seemed to offer some way forward. It brought together considerably less participants than the "Gazanevskaya" group, just six in all, who demonstrated examples of non-objective art from the Tachisme of Evgeny Mikhnov-Voytenko and the geometric compositions of Leonid Borisov to the star number of the show, Igor Zakharov-Ross's object, *A System of Coordinates*, with integrated electronic and holographic elements. Its participants were clearly disassociating themselves from the "Gazanevskaya" exhibitions, demonstrating a lack of desire to provoke any politicised associations whatsoever.

In 1976 the Association of Experimental Exhibitions (TEV) was formed, in 1981 reorganized and renamed the Association of Experimental Fine Art (TEII); this took upon itself exhibition activity, coordination and organisation. Despite the consolidation of the artists, hard times had begun. Exhibitions were held extremely rarely; artistic life was once more to be found mainly in studios and apartments. Yet TEII did what it was set up

for: without going into all the complexities of this multi-faceted movement, we should emphasize that the unity of such varied people over many years was ensured thanks only to the fact that they had no common movement and thus no hierarchy and no leaders; each artist represented only himself.

2.

By the second half of the 1980s, the civil war in Russian art was over. "When the calm settles after battle," wrote Yury Tynyanov, "The locality forces itself upon you."⁵ The landscape after a battle is a joyless one.

The political, economic and social transformations undergone by the country created a totally new artistic situation. The old official art institutes lost their significance, the underground consciousness had collapsed and the creation of an alternative to it proved to be an irresolvable problem, there was no system to provide financial support for art. An art market, albeit embryonic, had appeared and, most importantly, an external art market, which the artists - as is only natural - immediately sought to master. For the majority it proved to be extremely difficult to enter into the international art system. Some were surprised by the indifference of Western gallery owners and collectors; others were annoyed by the view of "art from Russia" merely from the "ethnographical" or "perestroika" point of view. Those few whose art was taken up and whose ideas enjoyed a high international rating faced the problem of purely professional quality, which demanded things very different from the practices of the underground years. But the most important problem was the lack of a dialogue between cultures. Which has still not appeared. It is on this basis that "the well-known duality of identity of the Russian member of the intelligentsia is born as he finds himself between cultures - an inferiority complex and the corresponding compensatory complex of ignorant arrogance." (Viktor Misiano).⁶ With some reason critics began to speak of the "catastrophic experience" and "post-trauma syndrome" of society as a whole and of the artist in particular.

The losses of the Petersburg underground were significant: Mikhnov-Voytenko, Rukhin, Rokhlin and Alexander Manusov had died, in 1970 the emigration to the West began (Mikhail Chemiakin, Alexander Leonov, Igor Zakharov-Ross, Yury Kalendarev, Alexander Arefyev, Villi Bruy, Yury Zharkikh, Oleg Lyagachev, Mikhail Kulakov, Anatoly Basin, Evgeny

⁵ Yu. Tynyanov: 'Promezhutok' [The Interim], in *Poetika. Istoriya literatury. Kino* [Poetics. The History of Literature. Cinema], Moscow, 1977, p. 170

⁶ V. Misiano: 'Beseda v kontse 80-x' [Conversation at the End of the 1980s], *Iskusstvo* [Art], 1990, No. 6, p. 25

Abezgauz, Igor Tyulpanov, Alexander Rapaport), some artists gave up art, others drank themselves to a stupor. The artistic groupings fell apart, groupings which had determined the orientation and tendency of their work and continued to exist in name only. Artists, wrote Viktor Misiano, “become locked each in his own personal artistic universum, created by himself. External questions become a principle of internal structuring. Each creative gesture now proves to be an aggravated consciousness of its first cause.”⁷ This, of course, refers to most important artists, those who were able to survive in these years and not lose the creative impulse. Their activity became a valuable guide for younger artists, those who came to art at the end of the 1970s but who maintained contacts with the former underground.

The long isolation from world artistic processes, with only fragmentary information reaching Russia, meant that a number of Western tendencies in art either found no reflection in St. Petersburg, or, arriving too late, never fitted in. St. Petersburg art did not know Pop Art (the exception was the particular version of Pop Art in the work of Rukhin, who died in 1976), Op Art or Conceptualism, while Surrealism flowed over into salon art. Yet some trends found fertile soil here: the tendencies of abstract art developed apace, while the appearance of expressive lines coincided in turn with Neo-Expressionism in the West. This could already be seen at the exhibition at the Gaza Palace of Culture. Parallels between Western and Russian art at this time, however, should be traced with great care: it would be rash to identify with each other stylistically similar but in essence very different phenomena. In each case the historical context and those particularities which at first sight may seem unimportant must be taken into account.

The work of the recent underground in the 1980s was concentrated around a few artistic positions. Taking into account the traditionally modernist orientation of that art, we can roughly divide them into two groups - abstract-analytical and figurative. The first includes a somewhat broad range of tendencies, from Abstract Expressionism to assemblage, in which the leading position was occupied by artists whose work contained elements and images of objective reality. The bringing together of symbols, signs and depictions of objects, united by a single, freely developing painterly space, characterizes the work of the “veteran” of the Leningrad underground, Gleb Bogomolov, and the younger Vladimir Dukhovlinov; the combination of painting with ready-made objects such as musical instruments and, more recently, photographs accompanied by texts, is characteristic of the works of Anatoly Belkin; the painting of Gennady

⁷ V. Misiano: ‘Andergraund vchera. A chto segodnya?’ [Yesterday the Underground. And Today What?], *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR* [Decorative Art of the USSR], 1990, No. 10, p. 22

Zubkov is based on the heritage of the Russian avant garde, the “colourvision” of Matyushin and the “surrounding geometry” of Sterligov. Less linked with reality were the intimate works of Valentin Gerasimenko and the monumental canvases of Igor Orlov. Leonid Borisov’s work is also enclosed and hermetic, his geometrical compositions, which develop the principles of Suprematism and Constructivism, are meditative and absolutely un-literary. Sergey Kovalsky’s text-filled poster-paintings relate to the aesthetics of Pop Art. Babi Badalov (Babi) works on a conceptual plane; cutting fragments from the surface of a canvas filled with colour mass and texts, Babi performs a well thought-out ritual, opening a new space which is not the same as trivial space. The “socio-historical” assemblages of Vadim Voinov also come close to the “conceptual” circle: using a Dadaist technique, the artist makes a collage on the surface of materialised models of the outlook of a man of the past, which simultaneously “pass sentence” on that past and draw conclusions regarding historical experience, i.e. which are a kind of “falsification”.

Amongst the artists working in the sphere of figurative art, we should mention Vladimir Ovchinnikov, participant in the “Gazonevskaya” movement and creator of a consistent world in which mythological characters - angels, centaurs, St Sebastian - exist alongside the artist’s contemporaries, and everyday surroundings take on the “cosmic” finish of spherical space.

Objects in the works of Igor Ivanov, interacting with each other, enter on some mysterious game organised according to the rules of dramatic intrigue. His painting can be related to that broad layer of works which in some measure or other borders on expressionist tendencies: works by Alexander Manusov, Sergey Kasyanov, Alexander Menus, Vladimir Kupriyanov, Boris Koshelokhov. At one time Felix Volosenkov, Vyacheslav Mikhaylov and Valery Lukka worked as a united group. Formally, their experimentation was determined by the question of the living, breathing surface, its roots going back into the traditions of old Russian art. At the present time Volosenkov has migrated towards a style in the spirit of Arte Povera, and Mikhaylov is moving towards the fixation of archaic and archetypal forms.

Today it is clear that the majority of figures in the Leningrad unofficial art world of the 1960s to 1980s sought to resolve quite intimate formal problems, creating their own versions (at times relatively original) of various modernist projects, from Expressionism to Tachisme. Attempts at retrospective comprehension of historical and everyday contexts

undertaken by such artists as Voinov and Belkin reveal that their art is limited by traditional plastic and decorative thought. The didactic tone, the spontaneous obviousness of the author's idea, the aestheticization of the appropriated ready-made material, are dictated by the desire to maintain the artist's privileged position as creator and "master" of his own plastic and ideological universum.

Such a position, fully in keeping with the aesthetics of Expressionism or Tachisme, is incompatible with artistic models which presuppose a certain distance between the author and the results of his activity. Is it not because of this that Pop/Sots-Art and Conceptualism - with rare exception - did not find a home in the art of Leningrad?

It was opposition to officialdom which gave unofficial art that "great Meaning" which remained obvious until such time as that opposition ceased to be relevant. The radical change in the situation which took place in the mid-1980s and was recognised by the end of the decade was the test of how alive - and how capable of fighting its corner - was yesterday's underground. It became clear that almost thirty years of history of alternative art in Leningrad had not been not crowned by any phenomena which could be compared in scale with Moscow Conceptualism and Sots-Art.

Thus, that inferiority complex of which Misiano spoke is particularly acutely felt by the art of St. Petersburg. The city seeks to mask it, to compensate for it, appealing to the individuality of Petersburg's situation, to its historic roots and so on. Yet in effect those artists who came to prominence in the 1980s (and it is they who determine the current state of Petersburg culture) began with a rejection of the prophetic mood, the seriousness, self-expression, skill and other values of the compromised tradition of alternative art. This moment of "schism" within the artistic underground tends to escape the attention of critics concerned with the traditional conflict between "official" and "unofficial", "Soviet" and "modernist" art. What we have here is a particularly, barely conscious, artistic nihilism which came before the creation of new positive values.

At the beginning of this movement stand three artistic groupings - the Mitki (Vladimir Shinkaryov, Alexander and Olga Florensky, Dmitry Shagin, Alexey Semichev, Alexander Tikhomirov and Igor Churilov), the New Artists and the Necrorealists - closely linked with the lower and youth subcultures, with the Leningrad Rock Club, with all kinds of "informal movements" which were so popular during the period of perestroika. The

finale to this movement came in the activities of the New Academy of Fine Arts, founded in 1992.

3.

In 1928 the Leningrad writer Konstantin Vaginov published a novel which was not to reappear in his native land for another sixty years, but which seems to be some kind of intertext for modern Petersburg art. The novel was called *Goat Song* [Kozlinaya pesn'] and is a collection of curiosities. It describes the decline and degradation of a refined society of intellectuals and aesthetes; we become witnesses to at times horrific mutations: thus, an admirer of the deceased poet Zaevfratsky, Misha Kotikov, is gradually reborn as his idol, imitating his handwriting, precisely copying his poetic style, embarking on relationships with the poet's lovers and marrying his widow. Latent and yet obvious homosexuality is one of the book's central motifs; this is coming out in Petersburg art once more, and again its fatal link with the theme of death and decline is revealed.

Vaginov's interest in his heroes is the interest of a collector, likened to the passion of a necrophiliac. At the same time the collection of "dead souls" is here identified with creative activity: the characters in the novel live in Posthistory and their creativity is addressed not to the future but the past, the present for them is at best a repetition of that past, at worst barbarism and destruction. The link between creativity and necrophilia is developed in Vaginov's novel *The Works and Days of Svistonov* [Trudy i dni Svistonova]. The writer Svistonov is a "catcher of souls" who fights for "the population of another world". "Art," he says, "is the extraction of people from one world and their attraction into another sphere."⁸ The passion for collecting which Vaginov shared with many of his heroes turns his book into a collection of monsters and freaks, in other words into a Kunstkammer: "The flame winks - and it is not Pyotr Petrovich before you, but some sticky reptile; the flame leaps up - and you yourself are worse than a reptile; and those are not people walking along the street: you peer beneath the hat - there is a snake's head; you look at the old woman - there's a toad with its stomach going in-out."⁹

Perhaps the very existence in St. Petersburg of a Kunstkammer, a chamber of curiosities, almost as old as the city itself, left a deep mark on culture here, and on literature in particular: motifs of deformation, mimesis and duality we can find in abundance in the works of Gogol and Dostoyevsky

⁸ K. Vaginov: *Kozlinaya pesn'. Trudy i dni Svistonova. Bambochada* [Goat Song. The Works and Days of Svistonov. Bambochada], Moscow, 1989, p. 235

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19

and in Andrey Bely's *Petersburg*, in the work of Vaginov himself, in the poems of Fyodor Sologub, Mikhail Kuzmin and Yelena Shvarts.

Simply put, the Kunstkammer is a collection of weird things. Above all it is natural objects which at the strange whim of Nature contradict Nature's own rules, which are the deformation of those rules, i.e. "natural artefacts", which enter a Kunstkammer. Sometimes they are fakes. Thus, in olden days sailors armed with a sharp knife turned a dead skate into a "sea angel", thus amazing the naive Europeans.

Archaic art, the art of "primitive peoples", is another section of the Kunstkammer, for savages are the children of Nature herself, their life is natural in the extreme (or rather such they are perceived in the West), while their "art" seems no less anomalous than human and animal monsters. And any other exotica - not necessarily savage or barbarian - ends up in the Kunstkammer: for are not the civilisations and cultures of the deformation of familiar rules, norms and values alien to Europeans?

Objects from a Kunstkammer always lack meaning. Each of them may have many analogies but there is no clear classification which would reconcile them to each other and to the rest of the similar - normal - world. When the exhibits in a Kunstkammer are classified, normalised, illuminated by a common meaning, prepared and in part revealed as a mystification, that is when the museum is born. And until that time there are only the grimaces of flesh, its surplus and excessive clots.

The so-called normal, ordered world, however, is also permeated with deformations: not just in those cases when there is some breakdown in production and a monster is born - the human embryo is also monstrous, the incidences of nature's mimicry are also monstrous (art within nature herself), monstrous is the swarming of life seen through a microscope, monstrous is the social life of the anthill or the beehive (non-human sociality). In the Kunstkammer we observe an impossible or impermissible mixing of madness and calculation, meaning and absurd, the human and bestial, chaos and cosmos. Culture and man appear in a head-spinning perspective of rebirth and degeneration, whilst nature cultivates herself with some inhuman art.

The likening of artistic activity to collecting and of art to the Kunstkammer, with its forgotten, remarkable, "camp" or decontextualized objects, is a feature of many Petersburg artists. Timur Novikov feels particular passion for the photo discoveries of the end of the last century which he mounts in

the centre of his “tapestries”. Andrey Khlobystin is a “collector” of remarkable personalities whose creativity is expressed in unusual, illegal means. One of these non-invented persons, Valery Cherkasov, created thousands of “microworks”, laying them out over the floor of his home and moving amongst them on stools tied to his feet. “He also ended his life in suicide in his own special way: he fell with his eyes landing on scalpels carefully placed at a distance previously calculated.”¹⁰ Vladislav Mamyshev, famous for his reincarnations as Marilyn Monroe, went on to create a whole gallery of historical and literary heroes. Recycled matter and everyday utensils are used in the objects of Vladlen Gavrilchik and Olga Florenskaya, while Dmitry Prikhodko puts together “Mechanical formations” from the remains of household equipment, fish and crustaceans, supplementing them with scrupulous lists of their components. Marina Zhukova collects her own paintings, created during the years she studied at the Academy of Arts, subjecting the pictures to destruction and later to “reconstruction”, as it were creating from them a collection of quasi-functional objects.

4.

Most consistent in his strategy of “artist as collector” is Sergey Bugaev (Africa). Objects of “the Soviet cult” - numerous portraits of political leaders, models of equipment and architecture, souvenirs and printed material - make up the greater part of his work. Africa includes these objects in exhibitions of his work, where they illogically combine with other visual systems and contexts, from archaism to microbiology. Such a combination is the main device in the cycle *Aphasia* (1992-95): a series of Soviet flags decorated with relevant symbols and slogans - “Under the Guidance of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union - On to Victory!” or “Proletariat of the World Unite” - complemented by applications of depictions of prehistoric peoples, angels, Egyptian gods, micro-organisms, heroes from cartoons and extraneous inscriptions which lead to an evident decontextualization of the Soviet symbols, which have outlived their time and which continue an absurd existence in posthistory. We find an analogous desemanticisation of ideology and the diffusion of contexts in modern mass culture, where the whole of world history is present in “compressed” form, reduced to some kind of cartoon, or rather to a system of popular clichés, migrating through contexts and narratives. Lenin becomes the hero of a comedy and Rasputin advertises a brand of vodka bearing his name.

¹⁰ Andrej Chlobystin: ‘Die Kunst der Nicht-Kunst. Die geheime KunSt. Petersburgs’, *Metaphern des Entrücktseins. Aktuelle Kunst aus St. Petersburg* [dual-language catalogue, Russian and German], Karlsruhe-St. Petersburg, 1996, pp. 152-162

The myth of frustration regarding the lost context - the collapse of the USSR - lies at the basis of Africa's Crimean Project. On the initiative of psychiatrist V.P. Samokhvalov, the artist in February 1993 voluntarily spent three weeks in a psychiatric clinic in Simferopol, in the Crimea: he associated with other patients, published a wall-newspaper, underwent "a course of treatment".¹¹ The full meaning of this action would seem to have been hidden not only from the patients, for whom Africa was just such a "madman" as they themselves, but also from the greater part of the medical personnel in the hospital. In this sense the Crimean Project forces us to recall the classical actions of Vito Acconci and particularly of Stanley Brown. Art mimics within the context and the artist acts as a saboteur, the aesthetic significance of whose actions escapes those around him - the latter become involuntary collaborators on the artistic project. The difference lies in that Africa places himself not so much in an ordinary context, as in an extreme and quasi-artistic context. Not without reason, the scientific meaning of the action lay, according to the idea of Professor Samokhvalov, in the study of "obsessional representation syndrome", which is an analogy to creative representation and is characteristic of various categories of people who suffer from mental disorders. "ORS in all cases works as a symbolic structuring system, made by its adaptive (paroxysmal) character. This system, however, structures the past and the present but is not directed at the future," while the representation of former institutes of power set out in Africa's installations in the Vienna Museum of Applied Arts, "is directed into the future because the contamination of different objects results in the emergence of a new symbol with new semantics (context)" (V. Samokhvalov).¹²

Amongst other exhibits at the installation in Vienna were Africa's pyjamas, the hospital patient's uniform, a reference of course to Joseph Beuys's felt suit. The name of Beuys - who underwent, according to an unlikely legend put about by the artist, a sort of "Crimean reincarnation" - recurs frequently in Africa's commentaries to the project. Even the siting of oneself in a psychiatric hospital and identification with the inmates of the so-called "menagerie" - the chronic schizophrenics, who occupy the very lowest rank in the hierarchy of the clinic - recalls Beuys's famous action with the coyote.

Comparison with Beuys in the context of the Crimean Project was clearly not a matter of chance. "The entire semantics of Africa's personality

¹¹ For material relating to the Crimean Project, see *Sergej Bugaev Afrika. Crimania (Ikons, Monuments, Mazafaka)*, MAK - Austrian Museum of Applied Art, Vienna, 1995

¹² V. Samokhvalov: 'The Conception of a Fundamentally New Symbol - the Artist as an Object of Science and Art', in *Sergej Bugaev etc.....* p. 59

indicate the subconscious desire to grow from an adolescent into a hero,” concludes V. Samokhvalov on the basis of his analysis of the artist’s drawings for the project.¹³ The true meaning of that “frustration” which served as the catalyst for the Crimean Project becomes clearer. The Project reveals at its basis the canon of initiation: the stay in the clinic was nothing but a trial, the symbolic death and new life, which here took the form of “illness” and “cure”.

5.

In the 1980s Africa’s activities, like those of many other famous artists, were linked with the group known as the New Artists, the most radical example of the counter-culture in the mid-1980s, in part related to Western Neo-expressionism. In the works of Timur Novikov, Oleg Kotelnikov, Vadim Ovchinnikov, Ivan Sotnikov, Oleg Zayka, Evgeny Kozlov, Inal Savchenkov, Kirill Khozanovich etc, members of the movement, we see a tendency to the desemanticisation of painterly space and its components. This tendency can be traced in the deliberately slovenly Neo-expressionist painting, in reproductions of the clichés of mass culture, in the aim of collective creativity, and most importantly in the specific “astructural” nature of the picture surface.

In accordance with the traditional semantics of the painting as “window”, the frame - belonging, as Meyer Shapiro put it, to the viewer’s space - limits the immanent space of art. All symbols and forms which the painting contains are “fixed” in that space, occupying within it their own unique place and taking their source from it. The depth of the space accords with the depth of History. Neutralisation of this space takes place at the expense of making irrelevant the borders separating “the painting space” from “the viewer’s space”, at the expense of turning the picture into a neutral and chance image of a limited surface, able to take on any symbols which tear themselves away from their habitual spaces, which are removed from their contexts, acquiring a nomadic quality. In the words of Ye. Bobrinskaya and N. Gur’yanova: “The image in ‘new’ pictures exists without taking into consideration the traditionally semantically important carcass of the painting, settling itself, as it were, in the unstructured space, like any arbitrarily selected surface to which it simply proved possible to apply paint or draw lines.”¹⁴ Such was the original context of the leader of the New Artists, and later leader of Neo-Academism, Timur Novikov, in his use of textiles, the technology of applied art, eliminating spacial coordinates from

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 57

¹⁴ Ye. Bobrinskaya, N. Gur’yanova: ‘Prostrantsvo “novykh khudozhnikov”’ [The Space of ‘New Artists’], *Iskusstvo* [Art], 1989, No. 8, p. 38

the picture and noticeably reducing its symbolic pitch. Yet in Novikov's works the desemanticisation is combined with an opposing movement towards resemanticisation and "spatialising", which he achieves through local insets of images, transforming the elementary geometric structure of the picture into a "tapestry".

Another example is the painting by Oleg Maslov and Alexey Kozin, *The Chelyuskinites* (1988), in which the figures are scattered around the absolutely impenetrable and undifferentiated surface of the canvas, which could be cut down or extended in arbitrary manner. Thus, the New Artists intuitively resurrected the archaic-infantile model, the presence of which makes itself felt in palaeolithic wall paintings, in ancient Oriental art and, of course, in children's drawings, where the sheet of paper is not perceived so absolutely as a limited and structured space. And so, the child does not yet differentiate "mine" and "not mine", the original and the borrowed: the copying of various pictures and illustrations or simple colouring in of such illustrations is the most widely found form of children's creativity. For a child the value of the result of the drawing is secondary to the value of the process: drawing has all the elements of a game.

The infantile character of the painting of the New Artists, with their spontaneous, playful creativity, was not fixed on the achievement of some concrete result, but was simply one symptom of that infantilism which was to become a defining characteristic of Petersburg art. Its embodiment was the infantile hero of the film *ASSA* (1988), with the frivolous name Bananan, the role played by Sergey Bugaev. Africa's very appearance - that of the eternal teenager with his protruding ears - reflected the general situation as nothing else could. The relevant connotations are also present in the Crimean Project, as we saw, the artist's second birth. In the words of V. Samokhvalov, Africa's group (mainly represented by the critic Viktor Mazin) is here acting "as a parent with regard to a child whose behaviour seems anomalous."¹⁵

The infantile nature of Petersburg art finds reflection in the activities of the Mitki group with their system of an esoteric language, "passwords" and nicknames, in the simulation of academism (the play at an Academy) of Timur Novikov and his companions, in the works of Vladlen Gavrilchik, Olga Florenskaya and Dmitry Prikhodko, with their references to the practice of children's modelling. We should also include here the sharp

¹⁵ V. Samokhvalov: *Op. Cit.*, p. 123

attention paid to the physiology of death, to violence and the anal theme in the work of the Necrorealists.

6

At the end of the 1980s, Necrorealism acquired the significance of the central and yet most questionable phenomenon in the art of St. Petersburg. The works of Vladimir Kustov, Igor Bezrukov, Valery Morozov, Sergey Berekov (Serp), Andrey Myortvy and Yury Tsirkul, united around the group leader Evgeny Yufit, contained a sufficiently strong contaminatory charge directed against existing cultural values and therefore could not but attract attention.

For all the stylistic and technical variations, the meaning of any Necrorealist gesture lies in the “revelation of death” as a spectacle, not mediated through any cultural conditions and euphemisms. If such things appear on the horizon of Necrorealist experience, then it is under the sign of their “humiliation” and “destruction”. Thus Kustov calls his painting with the image of a half-decomposed corpse *Snowdrop* (a piece of jargon meaning a corpse found in spring after the snow has melted) or with a line from the Soviet pop songs of the time of the political “thaw”, “If the boys of all the world...” But Necrorealism’s most impressive results on this path are achieved in those very cases when naive naturalistic effects are avoided. The most shocking work at the exhibition *The Territory of Art* (Russian Museum, 1990) was an object by Yury Tsirkul, *Russian Forest*: gallows, built of the birch trees “so close to the heart of every Russian”, and hanging from it - birch logs.

It is clear why the interpretatory efforts of critics at this time were directed towards the assimilation of the capricious and exotic phenomenon of Necrorealism, which denied the possibility of positive dialogue and of interpretation itself. In the article “Necrorealism as a Mirror”, the title of which transparently hints at Lenin’s famous article “Lev Tolstoy as a Mirror of the Russian Revolution”, Alexander Borovsky placed Necrorealism in direct dependence on the “political” situation of the time of “stagnation” - a period when “ideological leaders” in the state “were the image of decline - not only ideological decline but also physical, working on both the social and the biological level”.¹⁶ Thus Necrorealism was attributed with a critical - i.e. constructive - position, allowing us to return it to the bosom of the positive values of liberalism and the intellectual’s consciousness of his time.

¹⁶ A. Borovsky: “Nekrorealizm kak zerkalo” [Necrorealism as a Mirror], *Bezдна* [Abyss] (thematic issue of the journal *Ars*), St. Petersburg, 1992, p. 65

We are helped to restore the original context in which Necrorealism existed by the recollections of one of the authors of this article who, at the beginning of the 1990s, was present at the showing of three films by Yufit in the Spartak Cinema, then the bastion of intellectual film (the military term seems totally in keeping if we take into account that this bastion has now “fallen” and become an entertainment complex for youth, yet one more stronghold of mass culture). On that evening, the public in the hall was divided into two categories: the first was made of the usual attendees of such events, “admirers of contemporary art”, the other - long-haired youths in leather jackets, fans of Yufit. Whistles and howls accompanied the lecturer’s brave appearance before the showing, and each of Yufit’s Necro-entertainments was greeted with friendly laughter.

In other words, Necrorealism was at that time still a semi-folkloric phenomenon, belonging to the lower levels of culture, inseparable from the infantile “black humour” which was the specific genre in Soviet oral folklore of the 1980s. At the same time the closest analogies to Necrorealism are found in the conceptualist prose of Vladimir Sorokin: suffice it to recall his short story “The Start of the Season”, or a chapter from the novel *The Norm*, which relates a visit to a collective farm by the first secretary of the regional committee of the Communist Party.

Already at the beginning of the 1990s Necrorealism as a unified manifestation of counterculture was departing from the artistic scene. If Kustov and Barekov continued to maintain the strategy worked out in the 1980s, the cinematic language of Yufit revealed a tendency towards greater complexity, fully borne out by his first full-length film, *Papa, Father Frost is Dead*, in which necro-motifs recede into the background.

This film, with its slow, contemplative rhythm, its absurd subject and dreamlike atmosphere, develops the surreal element of Necrorealism. For the Surrealists, the motifs of physical decomposition and violence played a major role and were directed towards the overcoming of cultural memory, forms and meanings. In this sense the surrealistic project is catastrophic. In the commentary to his installation *Explosion on Anichkov Bridge* (1996), the Necrorealist Vladimir Kustov dwelled on the history of the monument being subjected to virtual destruction,¹⁷ four sculptural groups which decorated the bridge, embodying man’s taming of nature, of the vital elements, which thus are transformed into a “compressed”, potentially

¹⁷ See Vladimir Kustov: ‘Installation “Eine Explosion auf der Anitschkov-Brücke”, *Metaphern des Entrücktseins. Aktuelle Kunst aus St. Petersburg* [dual-language catalogue, Russian and German], Karlsruhe-St. Petersburg, 1996, pp. 204-209

explosive state, turning man's cultural existence into life sitting on a bomb (the second part of Kustov's commentary was devoted to the nature of explosions and explosive materials). The artist effectively translates into the language of Necrorealism the theme of catastrophic desublimation which was such a key element in the "Petersburg archetype".¹⁸

The travesty of cultural values, black humour and folklore analogues bring out the carnival basis of Necrorealism. As we know, the concept of carnival has achieved philosophical authority thanks to Mikhail Bakhtin, who called carnival the festival of regeneration, the immortality of the collective corporeality. In the opinion of modern interpreters of Bakhtin's heritage (Mikhail Ryklin, Boris Groys), this concept is determined by the reality of the totalitarian state with its "collective bodies". Thus, Borovsky's idea of Necrorealism "as a mirror" if not of the Russian revolution then of "some of its distant results" seems somewhat less fantastical. Death in Necrorealism often appears as a nasty eternity of biological decline: the decomposing corpses of Kustov, or the severed human limbs which perform anal intercourse in the paintings of Sergey Berekov. In one of Yufit's early films, the evil-doer who has killed an old woman (the hint at Raskolnikov and Dostoyevsky as the first Necrorealist?) continues to hammer away in a frenzy at her remains for many days. Refuting Bakhtin, the philosopher and man of letters Igor Smirnov describes carnival as "a cultural mechanism, demonstrating the unfruitfulness of changes": "Pregnant death can be delivered only of a dead burden... The carnival apology for stupidity throws into doubt the fruitfulness of the consciousness."¹⁹

Necrorealism's turn to death and violence has an ambivalent meaning: the anticultural subversive gestures and breaking of taboos are at the same time a magical conspiracy, aiding the raising of the level of immunity, this culture's resistance in the face of the forces of evil and destruction. The depictions of corpses, dismembered bodies, inventive suicide, all these icons of Necrorealism are unique ruses: in fixing the attention on the physiology of death, they eliminate the consciousness of death: it is mediated by its own image, the crude obviousness of which dulls our receptivity and allows us to remove death from the game as an experience.

By the middle of the 1990s, the interest of critics in Necrorealism was fading, yet the necro-theme again came up once again in art, although now

¹⁸ This theme is realised in a different way in Andrey Chezin's photographic cycle *City-Text* (1991-1997)

¹⁹ I. P. Smirnov: *Bytie i tvorchestvo* [Everyday Life and Creativity], St. Petersburg, 1996, pp. 127, 128

in the work of artists far removed from Necrorealism. Andrey Popov, who began in the Neo-Academic trend, uses enamelled plaquettes intended for gravestones, transferring to them photographic images of animals (*A New Bestiary*, 1993) or macabre symbols (*Thanatology*, 1996). Such a procedure can be understood as a metaphor for museification: placed in the convex-surfaced oval plaque, the symbol acquires qualities of completeness and permanence, dooming it to eternal preservation. However, the conservation of the photographic symbol is achieved at the cost of its disembodiment: the animals from the *Bestiary* seem to be ephemeral, semi-transparent projections, which have settled on the impregnable, polished surface, the shine and whiteness of which symbolise the emptiness of oblivion.

7

In an interview in *Khudozhestvennyy zhurnal*, Timur Novikov spoke of the specific nature of the Petersburg situation: while in Moscow “the more you are ‘independent’, then the more chance you have to survive”, “in Piter you survive if you get in under the wing of an older brother”.²⁰ The hidden irony of these words lies in that from the beginning of the 1990s it was Timur who played the role of “older brother”. In 1992 he achieved the appropriation of a whole artistic institute, founding the New Academy of Fine Arts, which became the centre of the true art of St. Petersburg, the only centre of its kind. The artists Oleg Maslov, Viktor Kuznetsov, Denis Egelsky, Georgy Guryanov, Egor Ostrov and Olga Tobreluts joined the Academy. The activities of Sergy Bugaev, the critic Ekaterina Andreeva, the fashion designers Konstantin Goncharov and Alexey Sokolov are also linked with the work of the Academy.

Today, when Neo-Academism has pretensions to the role of the new establishment in St. Petersburg art, Novikov openly speaks of tasks of a political and ambitious nature: to acquire as many followers as possible, including followers abroad, to influence the world artistic process (the excess and maximalism of these demands in part discredits their seriousness). The concept of Neo-Academism is seen by them as a political ideology which can affect the “sore points” of mass consciousness and recruit new adepts. “The 1990s already belong to us,” says Timur Novikov, effectively repeating Alexander Brener, who decided to “take power into his own hands”. But for Novikov “politics” are given an aesthetic foundation, the battle for power becomes a means in the battle for beauty and the Classical heritage, rejected by the art of modernism. And the critics tend to take such slogans on trust without paying attention either to the

²⁰ A. Filippov, K. Zvezdochotov, T. Novikov: “Mesto iskusstva i iskusstvo mesta” [The Place of Art and the Art of Place], *Khudozhestvennyy zhurnal* [Art Journal], 1997, No. 16, p. 39

more than vague meaning of the concept of “Beauty” or to the visible contradictions of the Neo-Academic project, so closely linked with the strategies of valorising kitsch. We intend to take a close look at this link below.

The beginning of Novikov’s career coincided with the end of the formation period for Moscow conceptualism and Sots-Art, when this art had achieved wide, although somewhat short-lived recognition in the West. In the 1980s, “Soviet” iconography - whether it be the Cruiser Aurora or the abbreviation USSR - occupied an important place in Novikov’s works. In the artist’s own words, his approach to such iconography differed from that of Sots-Art in the use of the Soviet cliché in formal and decorative terms, in terms of “surface”, rather than in political and ideological terms. In other words, an affirmative and not critical attitude to the iconography. Yet such an approach became possible in many ways only thanks to Sots-Art, which did the preparatory work on making empty and desemanticising the ideological symbols, which thus became an element in decoration and/or the individual author’s iconography. Only this kind of “decorative-lyrical”, goodnatured and inoffensive appropriation of partially or fully annulled political symbols, having lost their virulence, was possible during the second half of the 1980s, when the mocking and critical mood with regard to such symbols came to determine mass culture.

Unlike its twin and predecessor, Pop Art, Sots-Art not only aestheticized and emasculated the ideological cliché to the state of a mere empty shell, but also subjected it to transformation through a parodied identification with other cultural contexts, from folklore and mythological thought to Western modernism and pop culture. One key strategy of the 1970s and 1980s was reflection on the theme of succession and the internal relationships between the avant-garde and Socialist Realism. When Novikov in the 1990s subjected to pressure and made taboo the paradigm “avant-garde - Socialist Realism - Sots-Art”, he was in essence repeating the logic established in the circles of Moscow art.

As an alternative, Timur Novikov turned to the pre-avant-garde and the pre-Soviet past, taking from that past the half-forgotten and erased word “Beauty” and building an alternative sequence, “Antiquity - Classicism - Historicism - Modern”, the last two terms in which should rightly be united under the word “decadence”. It was the culture of the end of the 19th century, with its quasi-retrospection, the Salon and ideology of pure art, which became for the Neo-Academists the most important field of iconographic relations. Thus, alongside photographs of Antique

monuments and painting on mythological subjects, Novikov's "tapestries" include such icons of the era of Symbolism as a photograph of Oscar Wilde, a Chinese pagoda or a Mannerist portrait from the School of Fontainebleau, i.e from the era of Renaissance decadence.

Yet unlike numerous Leningrad artists who unconsciously repeated the aesthetic standards of the turn of century, expressing a fixation on this period and not only not seeking to express their essence, to make them the subject of artistic reflection, but on the contrary seeking to fill them with new life, Novikov preserves the necessary distance from his theme, setting the style in a frame, allowing us to admire it without being totally drawn into it.

Such a means of using a style, "involved yet distanced", when seriousness borders on self-parody, is characteristic of the "camp" perception. Susan Sontag sought to describe "campness" as a phenomenon, explaining that objects become "camp" not when they of themselves become old-fashioned, but when are less involved in them, and instead of being depressed by the failure of the object, we gain pleasure from it; which means that many objects which perhaps should be considered camp are to us just old-fashioned, irrelevant and *démodé*.²¹

Objects of mass culture become old-fashioned and lose their relevance very quickly, but by this very quality each such object is thus a valid and authentic representative of its era - for unlike immortal (endlessly renewable) creations, a sweet wrapper cannot outlive its time, it remains faithful to that time to the very end. At the same time the objects of "camp" art have an ineradicable autism, insofar as the sweet wrapper owes its value solely to its collector and appreciator, who gave this empty or tasteless little object the status of a personal, esoteric ready-made object.

Beauty falls within the range of the artistic interests of Neo-Academism under the aspect of "prettiness", identified with the "camp" charm of kitsch. Timur Novikov turns to the profane and dark side of the culture of Symbolism, to its "blind field" - photography, which had already been given theoretically meaning in the age of modernism, and at the turn of the centuries is going through something of a decline. The frame or inverted commas in which the artist places the values of the style should be understood literally: these inverted commas materialise on the border between ready-made photography and a drapery framing device. Novikov

²¹ Susan Sontag: Camp

uses set-piece, retouched photographs, in a word, “artistic” shots, in which the referent is mediated and culturalised to the maximum. The immanent quality of photography, which lies in the direct quality of its referent, here retires to the background: the style comes forward to the surface of the shot under the effect of time, like invisible ink under the influence of heat. The specific qualities of photography at the turn of the century reflected the growing popularity of this new kind of representation and at the same time the bourgeoisie’s fear of its decoding characteristic. Thus Walter Benjamin characterises this period in the history of photography: “Photographers in the period after 1880 saw their task as being in the main to simulate the aura which disappeared from photos along with the loss of shadow due to the use of illuminating lenses, just as the aura disappeared from life with the degeneration of the imperialist bourgeoisie - to simulate using all the contrivances of the retouching process... Thus, particularly in the Art Nouveau style, the crepuscular tone became fashionable, getting rid of the artificial reflections; despite the crepuscular lighting, however, the pose was more clearly fixed, its immobility revealing the impotence of this generation in the face of technical progress.”²²

The imitation of the qualities of photography at the end of the last century described by Benjamin becomes one of the main strategies of Neo-Academism, in which the photographic medium plays a major role, equally with the “actual” means of manipulating this medium, anticipated by the “contrivances of the retouching process”. In the theatricalised series by Maslov and Kuznetsov, *Secrets of the Holy Grove* (1995), inspired by the works of von Gloeden, and the collective cycle of photographic illustrations to Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* (costumes by Konstantin Goncharov and Alexey Sokolov, project by Denis Egelsky and Andrey Medvedev, computer montage by Olga Tobreluts; 1994), the same lack of mobility and artificial poses are present, references to the tradition of academic and Neoclassical painting, but totally out of place in photography.

“The revelation of the device”, the montage of very different elements, the discontinuity of the whole - these are strategies present in the works of almost all the Neo-Academists. All contain the contradiction between Classical iconography and the means of its embodiment, the deliberately tasteless, pseudo-salon painting of Maslov and Kuznetsov, elements of kitsch in the work of Novikov and Tobreluts, the imitations of photographic raster which distances the subject in the paintings of Egor Ostrov. Taking

²² V. Venyamin: ‘Kratkaya istoriya fotografii’ [A Short History of Photography], *Proizvedenie iskusstva v epokhu ego tekhnicheskoy vosproizvodimosti. Izbrannye esse* [The Work of Art in the Era of its Technical Reproduction], Moscow, 1996, p. 79 [translated from the German]

their oath on loyalty to the cult of the Classical, the artists nonetheless continue on a technical level to operate with the methods of contemporary art, which lie in problematising the unity of the artistic text, in the destruction of the Grande Illusion, in making relevant the technical procedures of collation and montage. These ideas are implicitly contained in Classical art itself: the legend of Zeuxis, variations of which on many occasions appeared in the European aesthetic, confirms that beauty is a masked montage.

Each of Novikov's Neo-Academic works becomes an ensemble of ready-made objects and techniques, only partly fitted to each other and combined on the bricolage principle and the principle of "inappropriate" combinations. The disbalance between the tiny photo and the "tapestry" canvas emphasises the role of the "inverted commas", hindering the identification with the photographic image and bringing out its non-representational nature, its characteristics as an object. Transplanted into an alien context, the photograph seems not to be an image, an offspring of a referent, but rather a non-transparent "bagatelle", a semi-decadent, semi-bourgeois fetish, a quasi-reliquary - an object of ironic cult. While the Neo-Academism of Novikov balances on the border of self-parody, the works of Maslov and Kuznetsov and of Olga Tobreluts, Georgy Guryanov's paintings on the theme of "sport", are all parodic regardless of whether or not that was the author's intention.

The strong side of Novikov's art is that it is rooted in the "local situation" and is not simply a reproduction of tendencies, themes and devices imported from the West, as is characteristic for many of the other Neo-Academists. The textile frames of his "tapestries" have two significant connotations, referring to various spheres of applied art. One of these is theatre scenery. "The theatre" and "theatricality" are among the main components of Neo-Academism and in effect coincide with the concept of simulation. Using a staged photograph, Novikov gives it the feel of a theatrical scene, whilst the textile frame takes on the significance of a curtain. We have only to add that the retouching of the photograph in such situations is nothing but the application of make-up to the faces of the actors.

Another connotation is the sphere of mass culture which we will describe as "domestic kitsch". This practice existed in the Soviet Union along with official, ideologized mass culture. Many of its tendencies and individual objects (one of these is the "Chinese" carpet, such as that which appears in Novikov's *Cupid in China*, 1992) were mass produced, but here we are more

interested in home-crafted things, in the truly homely manifestations of “domestic kitsch” - embroidery, tapestries, rugs, patchwork quilts and similar works of female handicraft intended to decorate the interior. In “domestic kitsch” a covert domestication of the masculine symbols of official culture took place - they were transferred to the soft, obedient, warm substance of textiles: suffice it to recall all those embroideries with portraits of Lenin, Gorky, Stalin and other political and cultural leaders. Often “domestic kitsch” closed ranks with folklore, with the technologies of folk and ethnic art, to a great degree assisted by the multinational composition of the Soviet state. It was here indeed that the aesthetics of Beauty found a refuge - in the adornment of the home, in the creation of a soft, amortizing shell within industrial boxes, a shell which could isolate its inhabitant from outer influences and shady enterprises, protect him from communal squabbles and return him to the cosy paradise of domestic life.

Thus, the use of female handicraft techniques and “domestic kitsch” is for Novikov a means of opposing the “great culture” - industrial, modernist, Soviet, patriarchal and masculine. Meanwhile, it is on a technological level that the artist’s link with Sots-Art makes itself felt.

The main (and only) competitors to Neo-Academism in the battle for first place on the home art scene are described by Novikov as “the Moscow radicals” - Oleg Kulik, Alexander Brener and Anatoly Osmolovsky. For Novikov, “Moscow radicalism” is a continuation of the tradition of Sots-Art, alien to the spirit of Neo-Academism. Yet, if we look closer, the activities of the New Academy reveal quite a few features which relate it to the activities of the “Moscow radicals”. They all gamble on the direct effect and “tangibility” of the artistic gesture, they all in some way give self-advertising the status of art, none are indifferent to the mass media, they are all the inheritors and overthrowers of Moscow conceptualism. They oppose the esoteric language of the latter with the intelligibility and vitality of their own practice, and in the case of Neo-Academism, with the new elevation of “Classic” and positive values in art (even if such an elevation results in the travesty of those values).

Soviet unofficial culture was largely “private” and belonged to narrow groups, the manifestation of this being the esoteric nature of the conceptualists’s language games. The main centres of this culture were the studio, the apartment, the countryside (as in the performances “collective actions”). At the end of the 1980s, art came ever more public, ever greater significance was acquired by various kinds of networking or mixing with the right people, taking part in actions, going to discos and such like. Neo-

Academism played far from a minor role in this movement. Novikov's interest in youth club culture was typical: in the magazine *Om* (1996, No. 4) he published an article entitled "How I Invented the Rave". Neo-Academism, Ekaterina Dyogot noted with great perception, "is both a form of spending one's free time and a career strategy".

Whilst functioning as a kind of club, the New Academy still preserves the characteristics of some kind of secret organisation along the lines of the Freemasons, the link between the members being of an almost filial nature (if only thanks to the "programmatic" homosexuality of the Neo-Academists). The very space they occupy at 10 Pushkinskaya ulitsa remains essentially a residential apartment, simply cleared of belongings and given over to major repairs: a theme worthy of Kabakov. At the regular exhibitions here, the feeling never leaves the viewer that before him is just the tip of the iceberg, and somewhere nearby, behind the scenery of hastily hung draperies and the wretched surroundings in the Academy, "another Academy" is hiding, not intended for outside observation, in which Neo-Academism is a secret language which allows the initiated to throw sand in the eyes of outsiders and to wink to each other unnoticed beneath its cover.

The New Academy became a "school" for a whole number of independent artists who first came to the fore in the 1990s. In addition to the above-mentioned Andrey Popov we should name Andrey Ventslova and Alexander Filipchenko, who created an original version of "Neo-Baroque" with the aid of computer montage. In the works of Filipchenko, who most effectively overcomes the crisis of Neo-Academism, plastic "intrigue" is built around an inner schism, a tension between two series, formed for example by a depictive motif and those standard syntagmatic elements - fragments - on which it collapses. The mutual differentiation and intertwining of the series create the polyphonic effect of these pictures.

Neo-Academism is now going through hard times - we can see clear signs of degeneration. The time has come to sum up: the Contemporary Art Department of the Russian Museum is preparing a one-man show of the works of Timur Novikov. Unlike Necrorealism, the New Academy has no intention of leaving the art scene quietly. Neo-Academism has every chance to form a new establishment in Petersburg art, if it is not already the new establishment. Over seven years, the concept of "Neo-Academism" has become so much a part of the concept of "the very latest in Petersburg art" that its waning forces us to confront the question: what will that art be like tomorrow?