

# **Yekaterina Degot**

## **A Deep Hole as the Place for Contemporary Art**

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**Russia**



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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

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](mailto: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](http://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.

## Yekaterina Degot

### A Deep Hole as the Place for Contemporary Art

German artists Christiana Delbrugge and Ralf de Moll, who go under the common name Delbrugge-de Moll, came to Moscow on an eight-month Senate of Berlin scholarship. Delbrugge-de Moll are professional “artists in residence”: since 1988 they have been in almost continuous travel around different cities, where they have been received by well-known art institutions. Theirs is not a way of life but an artistic strategy, because the authors respond in their works precisely to the ramified network of institutions of modern art (museums, Kunsthallen, galleries, non-profit spaces, free lance curators ...), which are frequently no place for the creative artist. In a situation like this, some will take a defensive position, escaping into the performance which does not need either curators or money. Others will take an offensive position, like Delbrugge-de Moll who in their works encroach on the rights of curators, museums or, as in this case, municipal authorities: while in Moscow, Delbrugge-de Moll opened an architectural design office and showed their design for a new Institute of Contemporary Art in Manezh Square. The design – in line with the speculative spirit of the whole project – was titled Substitute for Contemporary Art.

A design from the realm of “paper architecture” was chosen for Moscow because it was a “paper Moscow” the artists saw, they were so astonished by the virtual character of all of her artistic items.

Moscow’s Institute of Contemporary Art is stuffed with computers and famous the world over, but it has holds no real authority inside Russia; the Centre of the same name faces similar problems and as a result has almost completely shrunk into Kudozhestvennyj Zhurnal; while the Museum of Modern Art collection is kept in a latent state in the Tsaritsyno Museum’s underground bunker. It was as a virtuality memorial that the authors

designed a building which is growing endlessly from a single repeating module – a model of artist Kabakov's studio (which currently houses Moscow's ICA).

Contemporary art in today's Moscow has, indeed, no place of its own but, more interestingly, neither has it a time of its own, for how can you expect contemporary art with the Church of Christ the Saviour for background. Thus, the project could be titled ICA vs CCS and treated as a polemic countersymbol. However, it was not a proposal but a statement about the Moscow situation that the artists made, so it remains only to comment, in turn, on this "architectural commentary".

While in Moscow the artists were delighted to see that institutions concerned with world-level modern art retained their charming underground character and never became a part of the establishment. For that reason, in their design Substitute for Contemporary Art has no windows and looks like a multi-storey basement. This paradox gives perfect shape to the spatial relation, still not clarified in our present-day culture, between things "underground" and "overground". For nearly a decade the former catacomb culture had been coming to the surface and more or less successfully simulated its newly acquired official character, while the former official culture seemed to be pushed underground, to the Ploshchad Revolyutsii metro station, a visit to it becoming an adventure like a visit to an avant-garde artist's basement studio, especially after it had become just about the only preserve of Soviet-era monumental sculpture.

The situation has changed, of course, during the last one or two years, which is made abundantly clear by the rapid transformation of the "underground" (even if operating) Moscow Swimming Pool (which was swum in precisely in the underground period of our culture) into something awesomely overground. The Swimming Pool, a "thaw period" project, was, of course, far more in the nature of a grave for the Palace of Soviets than an antithesis to the Church; therefore, what has come to the ground from its bowels is more of a monument of Soviet triumphal aesthetics than of 19th century Russian architecture. This triumphal aesthetics has again risen from the metro basements and returned to the streets in the aspect of the Komsomolskaya-Koltsevaya metro station, which is actually being enacted in the centre of Moscow under the guise of restoration of its historical look. The wide-scale building activity in Moscow in recent years signifies the overground's victory; the underground idea of soul searching has lost ground to the idea of "we have nothing to hide", "we have things to be proud of" and "we shall show them what is what". Thus, it was right on

Manezh Square, which attracted the attention of the German artists, that an underground shopping mall was originally planned, but it was no coincidence that the plans got revised and it became known that the ensemble would make its way to the surface to take the shape of some arches and sculptures, although it is still uncertain how high it would go. At any rate, there are plans to simulate a section of the river Neglinka, which was confined into pipes already in the last century, which are clearly interpreted as a rhetorical gesture of “opening secret cellars and mineral resources”. On the other hand, all these “shows” are perfectly sham, and the Church of Christ the Saviour looks like a Las Vegas mirage even without its lamps which have just imitated its incomplete dome. With their project the German artists are not taking a vote on the question “to be or not to be” (with reference to contemporary art) but, rather, express their perplexity if it is “here or not”.

In fact, today’s Moscow we find ourselves in a curious situation of ontological uncertainty about the presence/absence of absolutely everything, in particular, of the attributes of a civilised state, which attributes include – along with the marketplace and democracy – modern art for which the man-in-the-street does not care but which guarantees him democratic freedoms: the freedom of performance is a guarantee of the freedom of demonstration. According to legend, the secret aim of the municipal project on Manezh Square is to eliminate the big and dangerous vacant lot near the Kremlin wall. There is no doubt of it, a Public Forum of Contemporary Art on the lines of the Centre Pompidou would have been in this place of much more use for Russia than the accidentally uncovered bed of the Neglinka – as a guarantor of progress, if other such are unavailable.