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Regional Identities in Russia

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Nizhny Novgorod and Yekaterinburg – Two Cities are Reinventing Themselves

editorial

The Internet and a variety of means of transport enable us to undertake virtual and real journeys to ever more distant regions of the world. Nevertheless, local and regional identities remain an important factor, supplementing or counterbalancing large national and trans-national structures which are often perceived as complex and impersonal. By contrast, regional identities appear familiar, promising comfort and security.

Regional identities are constructed in a variety of ways: through the cultivation of historical traditions, through the arrangement of local space by means of urban planning and cultural policies, through representations of a city or region in local media. But regional identities are also designed by municipal authorities and tourist agencies in their advertising slogans, for they have long become part and parcel of marketing strategies.

In Russia, there has been a boom in regional identities since the beginning of *perestroika* in the second half of the 1980s. The rediscovery of the so-called 'little homeland' has found a variety of expressions. For example, during the period of political upheaval, many towns revived their coats of arms, or invented new ones. Amateurs and specialists are increasingly engaged in the study of regional and local history. Hundreds of new local studies textbooks have been written for schools in many towns and regions.

Few people outside Russia have an idea about what goes on outside the two metropolises, Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. But even to many of those born and bred in the Russian capital, the 'provinces' are a *terra incognita*. Their encounters with life outside 'Planet Moscow' mainly take place during visits to relatives, business trips or holidays – or, for male Muscovites, during their military service. However, a constant flow of immigrants from Russia's regions ensures that the 'provinces' are 'represented' in both capitals.

No less than 11 Russian cities outside Moscow and Saint-Petersburg have over a million inhabitants. Some of them refer to themselves as regional capitals, for example Yekaterinburg, 'the capital of the Urals'. Many of them are important industry or trade centres and have a dynamic cultural life. However, the disparity between the two capitals and other large cities in terms of living standards, lifestyles and pace of life are much more radical than in Western Europe. It may also come as a surprise that the differences between certain Russian regions are clearly smaller than those, say, between different parts of the United Kingdom – despite the fact that Russia is 70 times as large as Britain.

This issue of *kultura* takes a look at visual representations of regional and local identities in architecture and art, using the examples of Nizhny Novgorod and Yekaterinburg. In spite of all their differences, these two cities have many things in common. Until the early 1990s, both were closed cities and thus out of bounds to foreigners. Both are grappling with a negative image (Nizhny as Sakharov's place of exile, Yekaterinburg as the place where the last tsar and his family were shot). However, they also both have a great past and a future potential: Nizhny Novgorod as a famous commercial centre, Yekaterinburg as the intellectual and industrial hub of the Urals. Moreover, both are trying to put their history to profitable use: partly by recalling periods of the city's history that are perceived as a kind of 'Golden Age', and partly through forward-looking projects often patterned on Western models.

Translation from the English:
Mischa Gabowitsch

analysis

The Miracle of Nizhny Novgorod, or How a Russian Provincial City Became the Country's Architectural Capital

Sandra Frimmel

In many post-socialist countries, architecture serves as a means of self-definition and attaining self-assurance. The emergence of an extraordinary contemporary architecture in Nizhny Novgorod in the 1990s is due to local architects' responsible attitude towards traditions as well as to the involvement of private investors and the absence of state control. This stands in marked contrast to the developments in Moscow in the same period, where all construction projects were subject to state approval. By the beginning of the 21st century, however, the romantic phase of architecture seems to be over; the state is demanding back its discretionary powers.

Nizhny Novgorod, one of the biggest cities in Russia, is architecturally speaking divided into two parts. On the left bank of the Volga, an ideal socialist-type city was built around a car factory in the 1930s: the *Sotsgorod Avtostroya*. It constitutes the essence of what used to be the closed city of Gorky. This conglomerate of constructivist and Stalinist architecture is known as an architectural and social utopia expressed in stone. On the higher right bank, however, the 18th and 19th century Russian merchant city has been preserved around the Kremlin. It is in this historical city centre that a contemporary architecture emerged in the 1990s which turned Nizhny Novgorod into Russia's architectural capital.

The Nizhny Novgorod School of Architecture

In Soviet times, everyday life was transferred from the old heart of the town to the newly built ideal Soviet city. This helped preserve the architectural fabric of the centre of Nizhny Novgorod, with its neo-Baroque and neoclassical structures, typical 19th century Russian wooden houses, and *Art Nouveau* buildings. As a result of *perestroika*, both private and public life returned here at the end of the 1980s. Construction resumed.

Sergei Timofeev, the town planer since 1986, was then promoting the idea of abandoning the monotonous complexes of the Khrushchev era, and was strictly opposed to adopting the standardised architectural models devised in Moscow for Russian provincial cities. Timofeev was endeavouring to create an independent architectural style for Nizhny Novgorod in order to raise the city's profile after decades of seclusion, and build on its erstwhile significance as Russia's most important trading city. His successor Alexander Kharitonov continued in the same vein. He also called for a responsible attitude towards the local context and an architecture that would grow out of local circumstances. Because of the rejection of state-defined architectural patterns by Kharitonov and his colleagues Yevgeny Pestov and Viktor Bykov, the emergence of a Nizhny Novgorod school of architecture was already evident in the mid-1980s.

The Privatisation of Architecture

In Moscow, mayor Yury Luzhkov, who has been in office since 1992, was dictating architectural policy in the first half of the 1990s. At that time policy was implemented by state-directed organisations and teams of architects. Luzhkov used architecture as an ideal public expression of his power interests; a process that had been initiated by his predecessor, Gavriil Popov. In clear contrast, Nizhny Novgorod witnessed a privatisation of architecture.

The altered economic conditions resulting from the Russian upheaval shifted the focus of urban development back into the city centre: numerous banks began to settle there, and private investors came in. To them, architecture was a status symbol and an instrument of self-identification. Moreover, in the years 1992 and 1993 almost all successful architects who had previously been

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civil servants became self-employed in order to profit from the great artistic freedom private clients would grant them. Nizhny Novgorod's unparalleled construction boom in the first half of the 1990s is thus due mainly to the involvement of private investors. They enabled the architects to make the far-reaching step from the paper architecture that had never been intended for realisation under Soviet ideological and material conditions to real architecture.[1] The remarkably broad freedom of planning that the private clients granted the architects in this process, and the end of decades of state-sanctioned architectural production, stimulated a formidable desire to experiment, and resulted in an incredible eclecticism. The influence of *Art Nouveau*, which had found an internationally appreciated, specifically Russian folk art expression in the late 19th and early 20th century due to, among others, the *World of Art* group, exerted a special influence until the mid-1990s. The turn to *Art Nouveau* was an expression of the search for a national identity, which came to be reflected in architecture.

Private initiatives, private clients, private architects – in contrast to Moscow's mayor Yury Luzhkov, who used architectural policy for self-projection, the then governor of Nizhny Novgorod region, Boris Nemtsov, and the city's mayor, Ivan Sklyarov, largely refrained from imposing building regulations. When discussing the reasons for the flowering of Nizhny Novgorod architecture, the Russian press liked to quote a remark by Nemtsov: 'My main merit obviously consists in not having interfered.' Thus, artistic discretion was entirely in the hands of Kharitonov and his collaborators, above all Pestov. Thanks to Nemtsov's non-interference in architectural matters, Nizhny Novgorod rose to become Russia's architectural capital during the first half of the 1990s. This phenomenon was described in the Russian media as 'the miracle of Nizhny Novgorod', in part referring to Karl Schlögel's book *The Miracle of Nizhny Novgorod, or The Return of the Cities*, in which he describes the city's economic and cultural revival.

Reanimating Topographic Traditions

In the early 1990s, a very special architecture emerged in Nizhny Novgorod. The chief concern behind it was to fit the new buildings into existing structures, namely the 19th-century streets and blocks of houses. The concept of contextualism that was used to designate this current refers to an architecture which is intended to become an organic part of a city centre that has grown over centuries and is already densely built-up; an architecture that does not look out of place despite using contemporary materials and design. Kharitonov and Pestov played a decisive role in developing this current. Their buildings were adapted as far as possible to the existing architectural fabric, expressly preserving the proportions of the historical city centre. Old buildings were not torn down in order to erect new ones. Instead, the new buildings were fitted into empty spaces, such as the characteristic Russian courtyards.

This use of the existing architectural fabric stands in marked contrast to architectural policies in Russia's capital, where by 'reconstructing old buildings' in many cases the city administration means demolishing them and building a concrete and glass clone that reproduces the architecturally most important elements of the old building's design. In Nizhny Novgorod, architects proceeded much more cautiously. It was their hope that the city administration would be anxious to preserve the old 19th-century wooden buildings with their numerous folk-art carvings and ornaments, which are important from the point of view of the history of architecture, in order to create an unparalleled interplay between traditional and modern Russian architecture. As time showed,

[1] The term 'paper architecture' was coined in 1984 by Yury Avvakumov. He used it to refer to conceptual architectural projects that were primarily intended for demonstration at competitions. It later came to denote a whole school of Soviet art in the 1980s.

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however, the city administration had little interest in preserving the houses, which were prone to fires. Thus for several years the old buildings left standing between the new ones have been collapsing, making the proportions of the modern buildings and the design of their façades seem inappropriate. Drastically, the inhabitants of the little old wooden buildings prefer to burn down their homes rather than repair them; added to the lack of clear regulations concerning the protection of historical buildings, this has contributed to the gradual disappearance of these architectural landmarks.

The total absence of state architectural guidelines led to an extravagant use of ornaments and playful elements of design. In 1997, this prompted Yevgeny Ass, who later, from 1999 to 2004, was first vice president of the Moscow Architects' Union, to ask Kharitonov cynically: 'Don't you think the façades of your buildings display too many artistically valuable elements?' Another architect added: 'This eclecticism has no future, absolutely no future.'

Nevertheless, Nizhny Novgorod contextualism was an outstanding current in early-1990s Russian architecture. The architects' balancing act between preserving traditional architecture, adapting the new buildings to the stylistic features of the old ones, and cultivating a personal artistic style, may often have produced strange aesthetic solutions, but it undoubtedly contributed to conserving the historical urban panorama.

Back under State Control

In 1997, Andrei Bokov, who is now vice-president of the Russian Architects' Union, described

Nizhny Novgorod

Nizhny Novgorod was founded in 1221 at the confluence of the Oka and Volga rivers; today, with its 1,311,252 inhabitants (in 2004) it is Russia's fourth most populous city.

At first, Nizhny Novgorod-Suzdal was an independent principality; in the 14th century it was annexed to Muscovy and soon came to play an important role as a bulwark against the Tatars.

It was in Nizhny Novgorod that the merchant Kuzma Minin recruited the 'militia' that marched on Moscow under the leadership of prince Dmitry Pozharsky and, in 1612, expelled the Polish interventionist troops who had occupied the capital two years before. Minin is buried in Nizhny Novgorod's Kremlin.

The trade fair that was set up in conveniently situated Nizhny Novgorod in 1817 soon became Russia's biggest and most important; it existed until the revolution of 1917.

In the 1930s, because of the numerous armament factories located there, Nizhny Novgorod became a 'closed city' off-bounds to foreigners. In 1932, it was renamed after the Soviet writer Maxim Gorky, who was born in Nizhny Novgorod. There is still a museum dedicated to him in the city. In the course of Stalinist industrialisation, one of the USSR's biggest automobile factories was created there: GAS (the Russian abbreviation for 'Gorky Automobile Factory').

From 1980 to 1986, the nuclear physicist and civic rights activist Andrei Sakharov, who had criticised the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, was exiled to Gorky. In 1986, he was allowed to return to Moscow as a consequence of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. The flat in which he lived under constant supervision by the secret service, the KGB, is now a museum.

In 1991, Nizhny Novgorod got back its old name. In 1992, the city was opened to visitors. The tradition of trade fairs has also been revived.

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Nizhny Novgorod as the only city in the whole of Russia where the profession of architect was recognised as an artistic occupation in its own right. In the same year the Russian state awarded Kharitonov and Pestov a prize for having created a regional school of architecture which is now known as the centre of Russian post-modernism. However, Kharitonov's supremacy began to crumble as early as 1998 with the election of a new mayor, Yury Lebedev. Striving to emulate Luzhkov, he was much more outspoken on architectural matters than his predecessor. Lebedev deprived the local star architects of their freedom of planning; discretionary powers were once again transferred to the region's Ministry of Construction. The position of town planer was abolished; instead, Lebedev appointed himself chairman of the Council of Architecture. Thus for some time many architectural projects got bogged down in a bureaucratic loop. Investors were compelled to take part in an invitation to tender in order to obtain permission for their building projects. All the past achievements which had made the Nizhny Novgorod building boom possible, such as artistic freedom for the architects or the fact that relations between the architects and their patrons had been unburdened by state sanctions, seemed lost. When, in 1999, Kharitonov died after a car crash, the romantic phase of architecture in Nizhny Novgorod seemed over for good.

But building did not come to a standstill. However, the change in administration did bring about a change in style. Instead of alluding to the local exotics of *Art Nouveau*, architects now attempted to catch up with neo-constructivism in order to link national elements with international ones. However, this barely altered the basic contextual strategies of architectural design or the idea of adjusting new buildings to the historical city centre. Even if they echoed contemporary and avant-garde currents, the buildings erected between 1997 and 2000 could fill only those empty spaces that had been left by old buildings from past centuries. The style had changed, but the scale had not.

After the Romantic Phase

The first Western-style shopping centres in Nizhny Novgorod were built at the beginning of the new millennium; they were increasingly located outside the historical heart of the city. In 2002/3, the 'architectural rating', between 1997 and 1999 an annual and from 2001 a biennial exhibition of modern local architecture, was dominated for the first time not by banks but by residential buildings and shopping centres that were stretched out both vertically and horizontally. This tendency continues in the list of nominees for 2004/5, signalling the end of the romantic phase in Nizhny Novgorod architecture. The former contextualist architectural policy has irrevocably lost its vigour. Entire blocks of houses, rather than merely historically delimitated plots of land, are being put on sale by the city administration to be turned into shopping centres with entertainment facilities. It is even planned to build a 20-storey shopping centre in the immediate vicinity of the Kremlin, something that would have been unthinkable in 1990s contextualism.

This alarming process is essentially driven by the city administration's highly dubious decision to cede to the Nizhny Novgorod region's current governor, Valery Shantsev, the right to sell land belonging to the city. This has attracted investors and construction companies from Moscow or Samara, who are unaware of local architectural traditions and prepared to erect outsize buildings in the city centre. The new developers are no longer considering adjusting their projects to the existing architectural fabric. Thus Shantsev,

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a former deputy to Luzhkov, is transferring Moscow's centralised architectural policies to Nizhny Novgorod.

Conclusion

Nizhny Novgorod's building policies in the 1990s, which benefited from cooperation between private investors and independent architects, were unique in the whole of Russia. Nowhere else was such great importance attached to the preservation of the historical city centre or were so many new buildings fitted into a pre-existing context.

But this approach, which can't be praised enough, when implemented often had bizarre results. As impressive as these architectural principles, especially those coined by Kharitonov, may be, the modern buildings often look lost and out of proportion because of their tiny dimensions. Architectural elements and styles that are habitually used in much larger buildings were applied here in three- to two-storey houses. This prompts one to ask whether the combination between an ironically citational post-modern style and harmony-hungry contextualism, often praised by advocates of contemporary Nizhny Novgorod architecture, has actually been successful.

Nevertheless, in their consideration for the existing architectural landscape and historical buildings worthy of protection, the achievements of Nizhny Novgorod's architects have been nigh on incredible, especially when one thinks of Moscow's building policies. But in view of recent developments, this romantic phase evidently seems to be over. Having regained their strength, the state authorities seem less intent on preserving the cultural heritage than on profitably selling property. Thus, glass and concrete towers will probably soon loom over the towers of the Kremlin.

Translated from the German
by Mischa Gabowitsch

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Sandra Frimmel is an art historian and literary scholar. She specialises in the study of contemporary Russian art, with a special interest in the interaction between artistic and social processes. She writes as a freelancer for the German daily *taz*, the *Moscow Art Magazine*, and *ArtCHRONIKA*.

Reading suggestions:
National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Sweet *Gorky. Nizhny Novgorod Architecture 1985–2004*, Nizhny Novgorod, 2005.

The short list of the 2004/5 architectural rating: *http://www.art.nnov.ru/archive/images/top10.html*

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portrait

Local in Content, International in Form
Examples of Nizhny Novgorod Architecture since the Early 1990s

Sandra Frimmel

Since 1997 the most outstanding works of architecture in Nizhny Novgorod have been rated in a contest initiated by the architectural journalist Marina Ignatushko in conjunction with the local branch of the *National Centre for Contemporary Arts.* In what follows I shall present a number of award-winning contextualist buildings in order to illustrate how site-specific building works in practice.

The Local

The new building of the *Garantiya* bank (designed in 1993 / completed in 1995) emerged victorious from the first contest of Nizhny Novgorod architecture, held in 1997. It was designed by the Pestov/Kharitonov architectural partnership and borrows from Russian *Art Nouveau.* The *Sladky Gorky*[1] architectural guidebook published by the National Centre for Contemporary Arts even describes the bank as the city's best-known building. It incorporates distinct references to the State Bank building erected by Pokrovsky in 1913 in the *Art Nouveau* style, and thus continues an existing architectural tradition.

However, the building's style can hardly be described as *Art Nouveau* or 'neo-*modern*' (*modern* being the Russian word for *Art Nouveau*) since this is only visible in fragments of the façade. Pestov and Kharitonov apparently tried to combine organic and geometric forms and reach a synthesis of *Art Nouveau* and post-modern style. In the case of the *Garantiya* building, however, this looks as if an ornamental, bipartite lump were growing out of one side of the otherwise cu-

Bank Garantiya (Photo: Vladislav Yefimov)

1 *Sladky Gorky* (Sweet Gorky) literally means 'the sweet bitter'. This pun refers to Gorky, the Soviet name of Nizhny Novgorod, as well as to the cake (shaped like the award-winning building) that is served to those attending the award ceremony.

bical building. True to the spirit of contextualism, these decorative elements, called 'padlock' and 'trunk', are there to preserve the rhythm of this area's original architecture. They break up the monolithic façade and make the structure appear to be two different buildings. The turn towards *Art Nouveau* in the early and mid-1990s may be seen as an attempt to revive national and local traditions, allowing all those involved to uphold their status in the prospering provincial city.

The International

After a brief revival of *Art Nouveau*, the architects increasingly turned to Western currents, proceeding in a highly eclectic manner. The disconcerting effect of the wild jumble of different stylistic elements is reinforced by the architects' decision to preserve the small-scale character of the surrounding 18th and 19th century buildings. The residential *Dom-kucha*, or 'jumble-house' (1998/99), also by the Pestov and Kharitonov partnership, is considered an exemplary work of this second period. Celebrated as a shining example of modernism, this building was among the winners of the 1998 Nizhny Novgorod architecture contest. The lower, cubical, closed, bright part of the building is crowned by dark, aerial elements as if, in the phrase of the Dutch architect Bart Goldhoorn, a small Russian village had landed on top of a typical European downtown building. Indeed, the top part was designed to recall the numerous Russian wooden houses preserved in the city centre, while the lower part is a bridge into modernity. Embedded between a 19th century and a 1970s building, the *Dom-kucha*'s roof slopes southwards, making it fit in smoothly with the surrounding buildings. The basic tenets of contextualism thus continued to be honoured even as the architects were striving for a more international style.

The Turn Away from Contextualism

After an extension to the *Garantiya* bank building, the delightfully named *Titanic*, won the 2000/2001 architecture competition, shopping centres dominated the contest for the first time in 2002/2003. The *Etazhi* ('Floors') centre (2001/3), by Viktor Bykov, came first. With its diaphanous glass façade that stands in marked contrast to the surrounding brick buildings, it heralded a new trend in Nizhny Novgorod architecture. It has a five-floor inside atrium and a panoramic lift. Instead of a single central entrance there are several doorways, highlighting the democratic character of the building, one of whose purposes is to provide space for city dwellers' recreation.

Finally, the nominees for the 2004/5 contest were predominantly high-rise buildings, mostly blocks of flats and shopping centres erected outside the city centre. These hardly take into account local conditions and the stylistic traditions of earlier periods. Besides, as architects withdraw from the city centre there is no more use for contextualism.

In a space of less than two decades, architecture in this formerly closed city has traversed a century of architectural history and arrived in the present. One cannot help feeling a little melancholy about this, for the time of playful architectural experimentation is now over.

Translated from the German
by Mischa Gabowitsch

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analysis

Contemporary Art in the Urals in Search of a Regional Identity

Alisa Prudnikova

The article analyses the regional identity of the Urals and Yekaterinburg. Due to the uniqueness of its geographical location, this city may be simply designated on the map as an intersection of Europe and Asia. Moreover, it is Russia's industrial centre. These features may also serve as a basis for a special approach to the cultural representation of the city. The cultural wealth of Yekaterinburg is comprised of a concentration of different contemporary artistic practices which aim to present the city as 'the third capital'; at the same time they remain deeply rooted in tradition.

An apt adage has it that 'provinciality' refers not to a location but rather to a sense of oneself. A mere semblance of disdain on the part of the capital suffices to provoke resentment: 'Just you wait, we'll show you what we're capable of', 'Things aren't worse around here', 'We're going to prove we're special and unique', 'All we need is to get our self-presentation right'… Depending on the situation, the offended party may arm itself with local or global arguments, all in order to be treated as equals. I believe this is the reason why the word 'capital' is so fashionable in Russia today. A tremendous number of cultural programmes use slogans such as 'The Cultural Capital of the Volga Region', 'The Northern Capital', 'Yekaterinburg, the Third Capital', 'Capital of the Urals' etc.

Flights of Fancy and the Practice of Ural Identity

Yekaterinburg's geographic location should allow the city to become a link between West and East, fostering tolerance and intercultural understanding. But this is hampered by its provincial sense of itself: Yekaterinburg lacks a competitive image to offer a post-industrial information society. The image of an industrial city that has been characteristic of Yekaterinburg/Sverdlovsk ever since its foundation is not very attractive in the modern world. Besides, for the past 15 years the tourism industry in Yekaterinburg has developed around the tragedy of the Romanov dynasty (Russia's last emperor was shot with his family in July 1918 in the basement of Ipatyev's House), which is also conducive to a gloomy, negative and one-sided idea of the city.

The Ural's mythology is not limited to an image of the Urals as the country's industrial centre, the 'skilful', 'manufacturing' Urals of working men described by the local writer Pavel Bazhov. The Ural's identity is also distinctive in that we are bearers of a myth of overcoming. The sense of strength that is always inherent in overcoming is embodied in the well-known Soviet slogan: 'The Urals are the land that supports the state'. Apart from long-established industrial structures, the Urals also boast intellectual potential, represented by the high-tech and defence industries and the universities.

One of the aims of cultural policy in Yekaterinburg today is to create and develop modern cultural institutions, which are still few and far between, as well as to improve the city's image and expand its innovative potential. But what remains once we have rejected the everyday landscapes associated with the 'work front', workers' areas, a polluted environment and a provincial culture? The image that works most effectively in the modern world is that of a multifaceted city with rich cultural traditions and a vibrant cultural life. Yekaterinburg's unique Euro-Asian location, which makes it a multi-cultural place from the outset, potentially allows the city to become a space capable of accumulating and integrating creative energies.

Today, a city's appearance and attractiveness are determined not only by networks of state and mu-

nicipal cultural institutions, but also by art festivals in public spaces, music clubs, theatre and dance troupes, Internet cafés, private art galleries and other kinds of cultural initiatives that create an encouraging environment for a variety of creative processes.

New Architectural Focal Points

The most striking example of the municipal administration's work within the cultural milieu is its 2005 project for a *Eurasian Centre for Contemporary Art, Education and Artistic Communication* (ECEAC), an interdisciplinary cultural institute that will bring all forms of contemporary art together under one roof. The Centre is planned as a non-commercial cultural institution whose attention will mainly be devoted to developing and advancing new tendencies in contemporary art and strengthening international and inter-regional cooperation in this field. It is going to be an experimental debating platform combining science, art, politics and economics in order to make sense of, and develop, contemporary culture and new media technologies. All the Centre's activities are project-oriented and based on a number of priority programmes.

The city is providing grounds in downtown Yekaterinburg to build the centre, probably former factory sites that will be redesigned into a contemporary art centre following the example of London's *Tate Gallery* and the *Trafo House of Contemporary Art* in Budapest.

Several such super-modern architectural focal points are planned for the city. The rich history of 1920s constructivist architecture that has determined the look of the central historical part of the city until now and inscribed it into the context of both Soviet and pan-European urban development, is an expressive reminder of Yekaterinburg/Sverdlovsk as a city of industrial culture. In developing its positive image as a 'capital', referring to a capacity to create, concentrate and develop the city's symbolic and creative capital, the city has created or is projecting several architectural ensembles, such as the planned 'city within the city' on the banks of the Iset called Yekaterinburg-City, which will include business, shopping and entertainment centres. They not only create a new urban panorama, but also bring Yekaterinburg back in touch with the pan-European architectural tradition.

The Current State of Art in the Urals: The Vitality of Myths

'We are unable to fly, but we are able to make forces clash in order to soar.'

The contemporary artist creates a communicative field. He initiates an artistic process based on his experience of his own originality. The contemporary artist is an explorer of his surroundings and his own mentality.

A regional identity in art may be rooted in historical traditions and myths, but in its contemporary form it takes shape under the pressure of social, economic and political circumstances. Ural artists' projects strikingly represent the 'hybrid' identity of the Urals engendered by our territory's quality of being a border-line contact and conflict zone that combines local and global features.

My field of interest is the contemporary art of the Urals. While they are formally comparable with Western artists in terms of technique, Yekaterinburg artists are rarely commensurable with them in terms of the conceptual background of their work. They embody a contradictory blend of a striving for modernity and a traditional character. Despite the accessibility and openness of communication channels, and although they are well-informed and able to take part in every contemporary art forum, exhibition or festival, few of

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them actively participate in the 'process of art'.
This problem has only recently become the subject of artistic projects and academic research. The first sign of interest in it was a seminar in ever artistically active Nizhny Tagil in October 2001 entitled 'The Ecology of Art in an Industrial Landscape', mainly discussing issues of artistic communication and problems of borrowed artistic strategies, role models and forms of behaviour.
In 2002, the Ural State University's *Centre for Contemporary Art* initiated a project entitled 'The Eurasian Syndrome' (in collaboration with the *Desht-i-Art Centre* in Karaganda, Kazakhstan). The project arose from work on the instability of contemporary borders and attempts to establish the main elements of Ural identity – and Russian identity as a whole – in comparison with Kazakh identity.
The exhibition brought together works by artists experiencing the impact of diverse cultural traditions, living in Russia and Kazakhstan, between Europe and Asia, in a border-line space. In one way or another, every work formulated, and made sense of, the whole complex of issues linked to people's national, linguistic and cultural sense of themselves and search for mutual understanding. It is obvious that the way in which borders are overcome depends in many ways on the point of view of the person who is trying to cross the border, on his/her view of the world. Contemporary art is trying to enrich that view and make it more tolerant.

YEKATERINBURG

Yekaterinburg was founded in 1723, during the reign of Peter I, in conjunction with the construction of an ironworks. The city bears the name of Peter's wife, the later tsarina Catherine I (Yekaterina I in Russian). With its 1,293,537 inhabitants (in 2004), Yekaterinburg is Russia's fifth most populous city. It is less than 40 kilometres away from the Urals, which count as an imaginary dividing line between Europe and Asia. A monument not far from the city marks this border.
Yekaterinburg soon became the tsars' centre of metal processing and an important transport hub. The region's wealth of mineral resources caused the city's infrastructure to be developed further.
After the revolution, Yekaterinburg acquired a gloomy fame: in 1918, the Bolsheviks murdered the last tsar, his family and his entourage in the house of the merchant Ipatiev. When, in the mid-1970s, the house threatened to become a place of pilgrimage, it was torn down. A cathedral has since been erected where it stood. The burial place of those shot – the 'Ganin pit' in a wood near Yekaterinburg – was long kept secret; there is now a monastery there. Both places have become important sights for visitors to the city.
In 1924, Yekaterinburg was renamed Sverdlovsk in honour of the Soviet politician Yakov Sverdlov. During the Second World War, the city, which was located far from the front line, became one of the Soviet Union's most important evacuation centres. Numerous defence factories were relocated there, as were cultural and economic institutions from Moscow and artistic treasures from the Hermitage. Because of its many armament factories, Sverdlovsk was declared a closed city. Today, Yekaterinburg is one of Russia's most important industrial hubs as well as the cultural centre of the Urals.
In 1991, the city was once again renamed Yekaterinburg and opened to foreign visitors. Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first president, was born in a village near Yekaterinburg and in 1976-85 was secretary of the region's Communist party.

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"The Long Stories of Yekaterinburg" – Segment
(Photo: Yekaterinburg Branch of the NCCA / Demidova)

The *Yekaterinburg Branch of the National Centre for Contemporary Art* (NCCA) was founded in 1999. From the outset, it aimed to work with myths and go out into public space (through its public art programme). The Centre organised several festivals: 'AREAL_001. art in public spaces' (2002), 'Long Stories – 1, 2, 3' (2003–5), and 'OUT VIDEO', an international festival of video-art on outdoor screens, in 2004 and 2005.

The AREAL_001 festival made artists invent mythologies for the city, creating new 'sights' or reinterpreting old ones: the *Where the Dogs Run* group hid little 'secrets' in the asphalt of the city's central streets. Vladimir Logutov created a peculiar myth about all the Vladimirs who had visited the city, by hoisting an enormous 3x6 meter banner saying 'Vova was here'. Vova is a diminutive form of Vladimir, a name that has a special significance for Russia, where 'Vladimir Lenin' and 'Vladimir Putin' have come to be used as generic nouns. Undoubtedly he also referred to the often keenly political jokes about an impertinent little boy called Vovochka.

The artist Anna Titovets made coffee house patrons listen, instead of music, to the sounds of their city, which she had recorded on the street, in offices, factories and homes and then mixed to create a dreadful chaotic din.

The concrete fences made of individual cells that enclose building or industrial sites in central Yekaterinburg seem to have been purpose-made for displaying artistic 'stories'. Now they have been turned into a tourist sight, having been covered with 'The Long Stories of Yekaterinburg' – a series of contemporary art works made using different techniques – monumental painting, supergraphics or graffiti. The idea was suggested by the fences' modular structure: the individual

cells may be presented as parts of a comic strip or film shots – an illustrated 'long story'. The project was created to support new technologies in art and fosters the large-scale introduction of striking images of modernity as well as new ideas into the urban environment. This is a form of art which cannot remain unnoticed: it undoubtedly promotes a more conscious attitude to living in a big city.

'Alertness', a project carried out by the *Kaliningrad Branch of the National Centre for Contemporary Art* in 2003, was aimed at developing a new artistic brand using the potential of the long-established special military and defence zones in the Urals (with their huge military-industrial complex) and in Kaliningrad (as a special Russian frontier outpost). The unusual social situation bred by these zones was used to depict a global problem using the methods of contemporary art as well as to involve contemporary art in the problematic space of media and war. The striking feature of the project was that the artists used the traditional Ural technique of painting tea trays.

Any discussion of the identity of artists from the Urals would be incomplete without mentioning the Ural-born Alexander Shaburov (who now lives in Moscow) and the Yekaterinburg and Novosibirsk-based group *The Blue Noses.* These artists have adopted the Western tradition of liberating the body from its historically imposed function as mere material (for painting or sculpture) and have succeeded in turning it into a medium for asking deep-seated questions about identity strategies. Bodily experience turns into personal and social experience, and artistic actions change accordingly. An example is provided by one of the projects of *The Blue Noses*, 'From Siberia with Love', an anthology of video art (from 1999–2003) by Vyacheslav Mizin, Dmitry Bulnygin and Konstantin Skotnikov (Novosibirsk) as well as Alexander Shaburov. The artists, who wear blue clowns' noses, quilted jackets and caps with earflaps, have come to stand for contemporary Russian art in the West. 'The only artists in Siberia are me and two bears,' says one of the group's leaders, Vyacheslav Mizin, 'that's why we create art that's comprehensible to everyone, from pioneers to pensioners'. The artists choose as their topics what fills the lives of a million-strong nation in front of their TV screens: the clichés of mass culture.

9000 KM

The latest programme of the new NCCA team in Yekaterinburg is a trans-national project called '9000 km'. 9000 kilometres is the distance from Russia's westernmost to its easternmost border. The project is aimed at studying the latest tendencies in contemporary Russian art; at the same time it is an original 'guide' to the contemporary culture of Russia that shows the 'assemblage points' of different Russian regions as well as Russian diasporas in a number of European countries, which together produce a 'single axis' from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad. The project's main focus is to discuss the interaction between contemporary artistic practices and the contemporary social and cultural situation 'on the ground'. The Ural region is thus described in the project:

People in the Ural range have difficulties understanding their own identity. Their border-line location forces them to look around, to pretend they can stand with one foot in Europe and with the other in Asia. But that is something of an external view; the Uralians themselves consider themselves to be Europeans, preferring a Western way of life and thinking. The Europeans, on the other hand, often see the Uralians as Asians, usually amalgamating the Urals with the more general term "Siberia". However, the Eurasian border becomes a kind of "obligation" to espouse

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a certain image, to fight over the dualism of the Ural character and its special way of thinking.

The outcome of the project remains open, as artists can send in their work until October 2006.
'9000 km' uses a network principle for developing regional cultural processes and refuses to divide up the space it covers hierarchically. Indeed it sees its task as de-hierarchising the sphere of contemporary art. Every city which hosts the festival's events becomes for a time the centre of Russian art, but that centre, too, is only a 'transit station' on the way to the next point.
The geographical range of the '9000 km' project is the whole of Russia, just like the geography of the Internet covers the entire network. Moreover, new spaces may well be 'plugged in'. On the basis of the festival's events (exhibitions, work-shops etc) we want to create a space of horizontal communication, as democratic and free as possible, between people and communities interested in the development of modern art and capable of attaining a deep grasp of their own place and special features in the general process of interaction on the contemporary Russian artistic scene.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

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Reading suggestion:
DAVAJ! Russian Art Now. Aus dem Laboratorium der freien Künste in Russland, edited by Peter Noever (MAK) and Joachim Sartorius (Berliner Festspiele), Ostfildern-Ruit, 2001 (German-English-Russian edition).

The *Eurasian Syndrome* Art Project

Alisa Prudnikova

portrait

The Eurasian Syndrome was a project conceived by the Ural State University's *Centre for Contemporary Culture*. Although it was carried out in 2002, even today it remains central to any discussion of artistic expressions of a Ural regional identity.
The exhibition was staged in the framework of an international project entitled *Bridges of Mutual Understanding: Rapprochement through Culture and Art*, whose first stage took place in Karaganda (Kazakhstan) from 8–19 July 2002.
The exhibition presented works by artists born or living in the Urals as well as artists from Kazakhstan, a former Soviet republic that is now an independent state. The curators chose works made from a range of materials and belonging to different artistic mediums: paintings, artistic objects, videos, installations and photographs. In its own way, every work formulates and makes sense of the complex of problems linked to people's national, linguistic and cultural sense of themselves and ways of reaching mutual understanding. The variety of artistic languages and plastic and conceptual solutions puts viewers in the position of someone confronted with the unknown and not fully comprehensible world of a strange and dif-

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ferent culture. In most cases, the artists assume an ironic or detached attitude towards various prejudices or, on the contrary, excessive admiration for the symbols of a particular culture.

The project's aim may be defined as studying the role played by national identity and nationalism in the system of relations between individuals and groups, the ways in which national identity is socio-culturally constructed in contemporary society, and ways of semiotically representing national identity by artistic means.

The concept behind the exhibition was based on a desire to reconstitute the main elements of the order of symbolic codes of national identity in artefacts, as well as visualise models of perceiving the world that are characteristic of different ethnic groups. It was an attempt to create an ideal-type cultural model of the manifestations of Russian and Kazakh identity. The participants' projects visualised the process of the ideological production of 'national identity' as well as collective notions of familiarity, otherness and strangeness.

One of the participants in the project was Leonid Tishkov, who was born in a small Ural town; he portrayed the evolution of his conceptions of identity. A project in which he introduced strange creatures called 'dabloids' (consisting of a head and a heel), which was shown in the Yekaterinburg Art Museum in 1995, was his attempt to reject identity altogether and to free himself of symbols. Later he turned to more private projects that gave a meaning to the concept of a hometown. One of these projects is his film *Snow Angel* (1997): it shows how, in the winter, Tishkov climbs a mountain in the town where he spent his childhood. According to the artist, 'identity must be within yourself: if you feel strongly about what you are doing, then you have managed to reach that state. The artist must experiment not only with form, but also with time. Sometimes, in order to understand something inmost and important, it may be useful to return to the time of your childhood and youth.'

ZER GUT, a Yekaterinburg-based group of young artists, presented an installation entitled *Eurasian Mantra* – an incantation by a sect the artists 'created'. Its adepts are sitting in a little clearing, wearing masks modelled on the artists' faces, and struggling against their 'Asian barbarousness' by repeating Gorky's sentence from his article 'Two Souls': 'We must struggle against the Asian features of our psyche'. The film was presented as a peculiar sarcastic instruction-cum-mirror: the clearing from the film was reproduced in front of the TV screen, so that all those inspired by the struggle could sit down and reiterate the mantra.

Erbosyn Meldebekov's video *Pastan* is about a mythical Asian country called 'Terra incognita'. The suffix 'stan' is a typical part of the names of contemporary Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan etc). The film shows a man who spouts swearwords while incessantly beating another man – a metaphor for Asian violence and brutality, for the eternal threat that the East presents to the West, harking back to the Hun and Mongol invasions. At the same time, the man who is being beaten stands for another image of Asia – he is patiently and humbly enduring the blows.

Thus the exhibition explored the problems of identity in all their variety and contradictoriness.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch