

## STAGES OF THE GROTESQUE BODY

Guest Editor: Dagmar Burkhart (Hamburg)

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## BODY – SIGN – TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

## editorial

In the creation of models of the world, mankind has always taken the body as a measure. Whereas the empirical world is made up of a countless multitude of objects, thereby providing a heterogeneous model of the world, the artistic world and its modelling are homogenous. All of the realities presented by artistic models of the world are subject to the artist's principles: the principle of selection and the principle of sensory constitution in an evaluative model of the world.

The discourse on the body in contemporary Russian art and literature is no exception. In this context, somatics is accorded a signifying character: *soma* (Greek for 'body') becomes *sema* ('sign'). After decades of abstinence from 'primitive' somatics in the art and literature of Socialist Realism (which tended to present a glossed-over version of reality), the body has become one of post-modernism's favourite transmitters of sign and 'text'.

In contemporary Russian literature, the discourse on the body is dominated by a grotesque physiological artistic model of the world. *Soma* and *sema* are mutually dependent in that they are both deployed to depict the body (with all its connotations of Eros, Pathos and Thanatos) as an authentic frame of reference (as in Lyudmila Petrushevskaya and others). Other authors employ a poetics of the ugly grotesque as well as an aesthetics of memory in their contributions to the discourse on the body. For these writers, marks on the skin (scars, tattoos) and inter-textual tracks (the theme of the Caucasus as an eternal 'open' wound) serve to construct a philosophical and ethical, not to mention political, horizon (for example, Vladimir Makanin).

The prose and drama of Vladimir Sorokin codifies the body to the greatest extreme. His verbal somatics, which can be read allegorically, are based on a post-modern aesthetics of ugliness, which he uses to explore the topic of totalitarianism in all its forms. To this end, he employs a

profane corporeal lexis, which was taboo in the official literature of Socialist Realism, in order to reveal imposed discourse practices. Another variation on the discourse on the body in contemporary Russian literature entails the destruction of the somatic: texts analysing the dominant role of the digital media address the reverse side of the corporeal – disembodiment through virtualisation, simulation and metamorphoses into virtual worlds (Victor Pelevin).

In the Russian art scene of the last ten years, the body has served as a social metaphor. Radical artists of the post-perestroika era, including the performance artist Brener, the AES project group and the photographer Boris Mikhailov have filled the body motif with ideology. As with the avant-garde, the body appears as a condensed canvas of sensory constitution – it is written upon, and it is used to write. The body is language; *soma* and *sema* are considered equal. The radical artists in today's Russia are enlisting these semantics to proclaim the end of all utopias – above all the utopia of social harmony and utopia of progress or reform.

The current neo-avant-garde art scene is impossible to appreciate without reference to the distinct corporeal code of the avant-garde; on the other hand, the experience of the Soviet underground must also be taken into account – i.e. the unofficial art of the Brezhnev era with its social and political connotations. Russian conceptualism (Ilya Kabakov, Victor Pivovarov, Andrei Monastyrskii, Dimitri Prigov) was only accessible to a small circle of the 'initiated'. This hermetic stance was assumed in order to expose the isolation of the art of the 1970s from the official ideology. In contrast, the art of the following two decades embraced the eccentricity of the carnivalesque and expressed the creative beginnings of perestroika through the exposed, ecstatic body in an almost

\*see box on p. 18.

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metonymic way.

This leaves us with an interesting question: to what extent does the discourse of the body in the art and literature of the post-perestroika era represent or even promote the search for a new identity in contemporary Russia?

*Translated from the German  
by Christopher Gilley*

## ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR:

Dagmar Burkhart is Emeritus Professor of Slavic Studies. Alongside cultural-anthropological questions, her research interests include topics such as intertextuality, the relationship of text and image, literature as memory and the aesthetic of the grotesque, for example, in modern and post-modern Slavic literatures.

THE BODY AND THE SIGN IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN LITERATURE  
VLADIMIR SOROKIN. VLADIMIR MAKANIN. VIKTOR PELEVIN

*Dagmar Burkhart*

## analysis

*Soma and sema, the body and the sign, are mutually dependent in the works of Russian-speaking female authors in that they contrast the body as reality to the simulacra of post-modernism. In contrast, Vladimir Sorokin's somatically infused prose and drama is based on a post-modern poeticism of grotesque ugliness, with which he reveals the violence of imposed discourse practices. Vladimir Makanin uses marks on the skin and intertextual tracks to shape his philosophical horizon. In his novels and short stories dealing with the digital media, Viktor Pelevin, on the other hand, takes disembodiment through virtualisation as his central theme.*

## THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE BODY

Contemporary Russian literature reflects a discourse on the body that views the world, which is perceived as grotesque or absurd, as a conglomerate of signs and language systems. Female writers like Nina and Yekaterina Sadur (*Yug* ['The South'], 1994, and *Prazdnik starukh na morye* ['A Holiday for Old Women on the Sea Shore'], 1996) direct their attention to somaticism as a genuine authority. At the same time, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya places female corporeality in a connotation-laden context of eroticism and social constraint when she works with the semantic opposition of *old skin as reality* vs. *young skin as deception* in short stories such as *Junost'* ('Youth') or *Slabye kosti* ('Weak Bones') (1999/2002). In contrast, in light fiction, which is characterised by its literal use of language, the stylised body

of the "new Russians" is an invitation to murder, for example in Aleksandra Marinina's detective novel *Voyushchie Psy Odinochestva* ('The Whining Dogs of Loneliness') (2004), or serves, as in Oksana Robski's *Casual: A Novel* from 2006, as a stage for the exhibition of youth and wealth: 'Katya's sixty year-old mother, who liked to behave as if she was younger than she really was, met us wearing jeans with enormous letters out of Swarovski crystal on her backside: RICH'.

## INGESTION AS A METAPHOR

While an author like Vassily Aksenov was able to cause a furore in the Khrushchev era with his short novel *Apelsiny iz Marokko* ('Oranges from Morocco'), in which the oranges symbolise the new awareness of life in the period of the 'Thaw', contemporary Russian literature presents itself as

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either lacking illusions or destroying the dogma of optimism prescribed by Socialist Realism. Here, too, the theme of food acts as a significant means of expression. Petrushevskaya, Yevgeny Popov, Dimitry Prigov, Vladimir Sorokin and others represent a literature which, now possible following the collapse of the censor, subjects Russia to an analysis that knows no taboos.

It is easy to suppose that this literature, in which the perverse consumption of food assumes a prominent place, is simply obsessed with shocking detail. However, this would be a misunderstanding of the intentions of these authors, for whom perverted eating represents, amongst other things, social coldness, disrupted communication and totalitarian indoctrination. The repulsiveness of, for example, the excessive consumption of alcohol instead of food in the works of Venedikt Yerofeyev, cold junk food in those of Petrushevskaya, dog-meat kebab in the writings of Popov, psychedelic drug-induced highs in Pelevin, the eating of human flesh and faeces in Sorokin etc. is all part of a poeticism of ugliness and an allegorical version of reality. 'Taboos attract me', said Sorokin, author of the novel *Goluboe Salo* ('Sky-Blue Bacon'), in an interview, 'and I like to penetrate them. Here is living flesh which one can eat in that one breaks the taboo' (DIE ZEIT Nr. 46, 9.11.2000, p.67).

## THE ARSE IN THE AIR

Sorokin, for whom the discourse of the body is more pronounced than is the case for other Russian-speaking authors, follows through his use of the motifs of excretion and the backside an aesthetics that constantly experiments with the

borders of taboo. By crossing over ('transgressing' in the sense of Georges Bataille) into the area of physical violence and coprophagy (the eating of faeces), Sorokin reveals the totalitarianism of traditional templates of text and thought and questions long-established patterns of aesthetic discourse: his texts normally begin by imitating a style of conventional writing, only to break down at a certain stage into language which uses obscene or disgusting vocabulary, but at the same time lacks emotion. Sorokin deconstructs traditional aesthetic discourse by presenting different versions of textual templates and brings together contradictory readings of a text which destroy each other.

The short story *Pervyi Subbotnik* ('The First Subbotnik'<sup>1</sup>, 1992), which describes a working party raking leaves, at first follows the pattern of a socialist realist text: it describes the memories of an enthusiastic *subbotnik* at the beginning of the war; it depicts the young worker Mishka receiving praise for his first proletarian *subbotnik*, and it celebrates the achievement of the collective. After this socialist realist section, a deconstructivist change in style takes place in that the *subbotnik*, which had hitherto been celebrated as a ritual, suddenly becomes a farting competition.

In *Sergei Andreyevich*, the spheres of the Soviet school and the dramatically idealised teacher as a transmitter of the correct way of thinking (à la Tendryakov) are deconstructed in a coprophagic scene in which the teacher's pet devours his mentor's excrement (that is, the ideology) on an excursion to the forest. In the short story *Proezdom*

<sup>1</sup> *Subbotnik*: formally voluntary, unpaid work on days off (from the Russian word *subbota* = Saturday).

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE WORKS OF VLADIMIR SOROKIN:

*Ice*, New York: New York Review of Books, 2006.

*The Queue*, London: Readers International, 1988.

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(‘Passing Through’), a deconstruction of the Soviet production novel takes place when the travelling regional manager gives his ‘blessing’ to the brochure for the factory’s 50-year anniversary by defecating on it.

Other texts which Sorokin parodies and deconstructs by filling them with a scatological lexis include those of fundamentalist village authors (Belov, Rasputin) and war writers like Bykov.

The short story *Obelisk* not only unites these allusions, but also satirises Pushkin’s theme of monument. Accordingly, at one level Sorokin plays intertextually on the one hand with the false cult of heroes in Soviet literature: in *Obelisk*, the supposed hero receives a grotesque ceremony for the dead from his wife and daughter on the phallically protruding war memorial. However, in the execution of his ‘testament’ – a parodistic reference to Stalin’s version of ‘Lenin’s Testament’ – the litany-like cascade of words of an obscene ‘confession’ reveals that he was a coprophilic phallocrat.

At another level, Sorokin takes here the motif of the monument as a stimulus to memory to its absurd extreme. He also does this in his short story *Pamyatnik* (‘Memorial’) (1992), in which he satirises scatologically the heroic-dramatic symbol of the ‘eternal fire’:

*On a bright summer’s day, when the masses come flocking to the sounds of sunny Mozart, a silk cover is pulled back to reveal a golden man with a slightly pushed out backside shining in the sun. From its centre shoots out a celebratory gas flame which is ignited by a worthy representative of the public: TO THE ETERNALLY BURNING FART will be chiselled into the plinth. Thus. And this will become the most important monument. And the people’s path to it will never become overgrown.* (Translation based on the German translation by Gabriele Leupold).

The discourse of the body also plays a prominent

role in Sorokin’s text *Den Oprichnika* (‘Day of the Oprichnik’)<sup>2</sup> (2006), which takes as its theme a Russian police state, its elite circle and their addiction to sadomasochistic rituals: surveillance, corporal punishment<sup>3</sup> and obscenity are the expression of political power in this vision of a totalitarian state. The characterisation of this power draws a somatic comparison with Ossip Mandelstam’s poem *Ariost* (1933): ‘Power is revolting like the hands of barbers’ (‘vlast’ otvratitel’na kak ruki bradobreya’).

Sorokin makes use of the scatological and obscene style with its taboo lexis in his texts because this was the only level of discourse that had not been taken over by the official Soviet style of writing. This also explains his somatic relationship to the text and his understanding of writing, which in his eyes consists of relieving oneself in public.

#### SCARS – SIGNS ON THE SKIN AND TRACKS ON THE BODY

In the opinion of the Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>4</sup>, the ‘acts of the bodily drama’, such as eating, drinking, digestion and excretion, sexual intercourse, birth, illness, death and decomposition, take place at the border between the body and the world. And herein – with the surface of the body or skin acting as the ‘stage’ of this drama – resides the phenomenon of the scar. Scars appear as a sign on the skin which invite deciphering and thus communication. In Rus-

2 Member of the *Oprichnina* – the special guard of Ivan IV which possessed arbitrary administrative and judicial powers and lived as a caste separated from society.

3 In his work *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michael Foucault shows how the system of punishment gradually turned from public ‘festivals of martyrs’ to forms of punishment such as incarceration or labour camps. Corporal punishment in public was officially abolished in France in 1831, in Britain in 1834, in Germany in 1848 and in Russia in 1863.

4 M. Bakhtin (1895–1975) dealt with grotesque bodies under the Stalinist repression: enormous noses, gashed mouths and erect members in folk literature and carnival – an opposition culture of laughing against the authoritarian regime.

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sian literature, it is in texts from Pushkin, Gogol and Dostoevsky (e.g. his *Notes from the Underground*) that pockmarks especially play a role in the construction of meaning and the characterisation of figures. For Mandelstam, the semantic field of ‘ospa’ (pockmark) is written into the code of a political subtext, which above all refers to Stalin or the Stalinist period; Stalin had pockmarks and was known by the people as the ‘ryaboi chort’ – the ‘pockmarked devil’.

Scars also have an ambiguous function in contemporary Russian literature, for example in Vladimir Makanin’s complex novel *Ande-graund, Ili geroi nashego vremeni* (‘Underground, Or a Hero of our Time’) (1998). The novel’s protagonist and first-

person narrator Petrovich is a writer living in the ‘underground’ of the Brezhnev period who ekes out a living as the privately paid watchman of a Moscow apartment block. He is reminded by the ‘scarface’ of a police officer investigating the murder of someone from the Caucasus (committed by Petrovich, but as yet unsolved) of Dostoevsky’s inspired examining magistrate Porfiri Petrovich (from

*Crime and Punishment*) and his ‘unhealthy, dark yellow’ face. Although the ‘investigator with the pockmarked face’ in Makanin’s book turns out to be professionally incompetent, he is also revealed to be inclined to blackmail: ‘You don’t have pockmarks in the face for no reason’ remarks the porter Akulov, whose negative assessment of ‘ospa’

draws on folk tradition.

In many literary texts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, branding marks and whipping scars serve as a somatic expression of experienced violence. In Dostoevsky’s *The House of the Dead* and Chekhov’s *The Island of Sakhalin*, whose titles alone serve as a megametaphor for the repressive tsarist regime, pictures of hell (the burning island; the sweltering heat of the sauna) are constitutive as the epitome of physical suffer-



Text: “They trample” – “The 20th Century” – “Slave” – “CPSU”. From: “The Tattoos of Prison Camp Inmates”, collected by D.D. Baldayev, Saint Petersburg: Limbus Press 2001, unnumbered page before the title page. © S.G. Vasilyev

ing. Scar motifs characterise the infernal rooms and their prisoners according to the rules of the somatic code. In this way, Dostoevsky’s autobiographical narrator describes scars from branding which were ‘inscribed’ with red-hot branding irons and coloured with indigo and Indian ink as a symbol of the convict’s loss of rights for the

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rest of his life – for thieves (in Russian ‘vor’), for example, the Cyrillic letter ‘B’ (that is ‘V’) was burnt onto the forehead, and the letters ‘O’ and ‘P’ (that is ‘R’) onto each cheek.

Here there are connections with the body code, which can still be observed today, of the anti-world of the GULag with its hierarchical stratification and personal ‘code of honour’. The language of the GULag was expressed not only in a particular thieves’ cant, but also through the tattooing of prisoners, whose colourful scarred inscriptions (ironically referred to as ‘tailcoat with medals’) portray a system of signs in the form of provocative mixtures of pictures and writing. In Sorokin’s ‘Day of the Oprichnik’, the tattoos of the doorman in front of the sauna where the corporeal excesses of the Oprichniks take place evoke exactly these connotations of criminality, imprisonment and violence: an allegorical reference to the totalitarian state as a whole.

## THE CAUCASUS: RUSSIA’S ETERNAL WOUND

The scar motif can be of importance for the action and conflict structure of a text, but also for its political, philosophical and ethical horizon. In the chapter ‘The Caucasian Track’ from Makanin’s novel *Underground, Or a Hero of our Time*, which is also a self-referential journey to the author’s short story *Prisoner from the Caucasus* (1995), scars are signs full of meaning. For example, the scars on the breast of a young prostitute caused by the razorblade cuts of her clients remind the protagonist Petrovich of the provocative Caucasian whom he stabbed to death in a quasi-duel. The scars disgust him; they arouse in him the ‘call of conscience’ (in the sense ex-

pounded by Heidegger) at precisely the moment he had convinced himself that as a ‘duellist’ à la Pushkin, he should have nothing to regret, and that the murder on the bench in front of the apartment block should not burden him.

At the same time, the ‘Caucasian track’ refers intertextually to a line of tradition in literature in which the theme of the Caucasus as the Russian experience of ‘self’ and the ‘other’ is explored, albeit with changes in emphasis: the Caucasus as Russia’s eternal, unhealed wound, a cultural construction in which the Caucasus is imagined as a female body (in the sense expounded by more recent concepts of Orientalism) which must be repeatedly conquered and penetrated.

## DISEMBODIMENT THROUGH VIRTUALISATION

In the chat room text *Shlem Uzhasa* (‘The Helmet of Horror’, 2005), Viktor Pelevin, the author of computer-generated textual worlds (such as *The Prince of Gosplan*, 1992, *Homo Zapiens*, 1999, *Akiko*, 2003), manages to achieve disembodiment by going beyond the creation of virtual dream bodies (avatars) in the Second-Life world and presenting chat as a pure body made of language on the computer screen: eight ‘people’ with programmed nicknames or userpics meet involuntarily in a chat room. They all find themselves imprisoned in identically furnished rooms. The monitor and keyboard serve as the only ‘window’ to the outside. However, the chat contributions are censored by invisible moderators. The attempt via chat both to impart the absurd situation with some sort of meaning and to find a means of escape lead those involved to the trail of the myth of the Minotaur; however, their hope for a

TRANSLATIONS IN ENGLISH OF THE WORKS OF VLADIMIR MAKANIN:

*Escape Hatch & the Long Road Ahead: Two Novellas*, Anne Arbor: Ardis, 1998.

*The Loss: A Novella and Two Short Stories*, Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 1998.

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Theseus, the saviour, is disappointed.

The confusion caused by the uncertain phenomenological status of each interlocutor shapes the entire communicative situation. The longer the characters are imprisoned in the virtual environment, the more they suspect each other of acting under false pretences or of not even existing physically at all. The drama of this intimate chamber-play – inspired, to give but one example, by Sartre – lies in the existential uncertainty in view of the increasingly virtualised ‘lifeworld’: no-one can be sure whether the person they are communicating with exists or is an incorporeal ‘internet-marionette’, a grapheme body presented on a computer screen.

The plot of the text finally dissolves to reveal that all of the characters are the product of a single, inebriated chat participant’s imagination. These characters have taken on a parasitic function with regards to the ‘landlord’ accommodating them, who is a parody of the author, and whose consciousness they have occupied against his will.

Pelevin, who had already presented bodies in metamorphoses and simulations in his *Svyashchennaya kniga oborotnya* (‘The Holy Book of the Werewolves’) (2004), does this again in his story *Empire V* (2006) about the apprenticeship of a young vampire: is this the virtual reverse of the discourse on the body in contemporary Russian literature or an ironic treatment of it?

*Translated from the German*

*by Christopher Gilley*

## READING SUGGESTIONS:

- Book reviews (in several languages) on the works of Vladimir Sorokin: <http://www.srkn.ru/criticism/>
- Natal’ia Ivanova: “Bakhtin’s Concept of the Grotesque and the Art of Petrushevskiaia and Tolstaia.” In: *Fruits of Her Plume: Essays in Contemporary Russian Women’s Culture*; ed. Helena Gosciolo, 21–32. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993

## VICTOR PELEVIN’S VIRTUALISATION OF THE CORPORAL WORLD

*Karlheinz Kasper*

## book review

Pelevin sounds the depths of the state of consciousness in which ‘Soviet Man’ finds himself after his expulsion from Paradise. The genre of the *Bildungsroman* lends itself to this topic: the hero asks his teacher about everything under the sun, and receives from life the relevant lessons. The three novels by Pelevin presented here follow this pattern, in the course of which the corporeality of the characters is increasingly subjected to virtualisation.

*Homo Zapiens* (in Russian: *Generation ‘P’*, 1999; English translation 2002) presents the mutation of the ‘Pepsi generation’ of the 1970s into the post-

Soviet ‘pizdets’ generation. The Soviet mentality is transformed into the consumer culture of the West; propaganda is replaced by advertisements. Babilen Tatarski makes a career for himself as an advertising copywriter. The ghost of Che Guevara reveals to him how the individual becomes an ORANUS (from the Latin *ōs*, *ōris* [mouth] and anus), which requires neither eyes, nose, ears or intellect, but simply orally ingests and anally defecates money, repressing the banality of the transaction through the ‘Wow! impulse’. The television presents Yeltsin, Chernomyrdin and members of the *Duma* as virtualised 3-D models (even the simulated Yeltsin has to be drunk in or-



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der to maintain high viewer ratings). A skeleton or a copy from the waxworks suffices to clone the politicians.

In order to ensure his pseudo-divinity in a pseudo-world, Babilen has to become his own 3-D double. As an 'ersatz man', the new 'creator' (Babilen) marries the goddess Ishtar, whose disembodied head personifies the idea of the almighty dollar. While this is happening, he hears tell of the limping dog Pizdets, who has a fifth paw where others have their 'thingy', and understands that as a 'polit-technologist', he is a modern, virtual surrogate of this dangerous animal.

In *Svyashchennaya kniga oborotnya* ('The Holy Book of the Werewolves' – 2004), the werefox A Huli and werewolf Alexander meet. The narrator is A Huli, a prostitute, who learned the art of 'superphysical transformation' in China more than 2000 years ago. She has the appearance of a 'Lolita', and every fifty years must simply align her interior with her exterior by means of a fresh 'soul simulacra'. She freely describes her sexless body: the leather 'cock catcher' as an ersatz vagina, the bushy 'antenna' that inspires erotic fantasies in her clients and her pleasure in 'stealing other people's life force'. Human knowledge, stored in A Huli's head as in an enormous database, is a simulacrum of 'words which can be defined by Google'.

The clever little fox sees through post-Soviet capitalism with its 'criminal code of honour', the elite of 'cock suckers' (a play on the Russification of

the phrase 'high society', 'khui sosaeti', with khui meaning 'cock') and 'upper rat' (i.e. 'apparat'). Alexander, the secret service general, who owes his lack of education to an 'anti-brainwash' at the FSB academy, becomes A Huli's lover. The first time they make love, he breaks out of his 'tsar-like' body and morphs into a monstrous hybrid of man and wolf.

The next encounter presents the fox as a 'post-modern ironification' in that she mimics desire. When she kisses Alexander for the first time 'in the human style' on the mouth, he metamorphoses into the ugly black dog Pizdets with the clawed fifth leg, symbol of violence and imperial power. At this point, Alexander believes himself to be a super-werewolf and does not want to revert back into a human being 'until all internal and external enemies of the fatherland have been eradicated'.

*Empire 'V'* (2006), with the subtitle 'A Story of Real Super-Humans' is a parody of both the Soviet classic *The Real Human* by Boris Polevoi and Alexander Prokhanov's political thriller *The Symphony of the 'Fifth Empire'* (2000). At the same time, Viktor (Pelevin) personifies himself with the letter 'V', just as he did in his first novel with the letter 'P'. Roma, the protagonist, grows up in a stronghold of the Moscow nomenclature as though in an enchanted world. He does not succeed in breaking into the new society; at 19, he feels like a 'loser'. He accepts the invitation to join an 'elite', and as 'Rama II', inherits the immortal tongue (in Russian 'yazyk' = tongue and

## ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE WORKS OF VIKTOR PELEVIN:

*The Helmet of Horror: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006.

*Homo Zapiens*, New York: Viking, 2002.

*The Clay Machine Gun*, London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

*The Blue Lantern*, London: Faber and Faber, 1997.

*The Life of Insects*, London: Harbord, 1996.

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language) of the vampires, which confers upon him the role of cultural memory.

Teachers such as Baldur, Jehovah, Loki and Osiris initiate him in the worldview of the vampires, according to which humans occupy the lowest rung of evolution. He lives in a world of illusions, becomes a 'soldier of the Empire V', sees in money the only goal and is 'milked' by the vampires. The Chaldeans are the link between man and vampire. Their culture is 'developed post-modernism', which is based on pop culture.

The vampires are blood-suckers no more. They 'sip' a few drops of the 'red liquid' in order to 'read' the lives of others; they much prefer to ingest 'bablos', a concentrated form of the human greed for money. Their 'anonymous' dictator's power is based on 'glamour' (hallucination, deception, publicity stunts and embellishment) and 'discourse' (the secret code of a caste, 'bird language'): 'glamour is the discourse of the body, and discourse the glamour of the spirit'. Both aid countless metamorphoses of gender, body, occupation and social

status; both guarantee power over others.

Rama's queries about God, the soul and the meaning of life cannot even be answered by the vampire goddess Ishtar, a large bat consisting of only a head and leg, a faded beauty with the 'vestiges of cosmetic interventions and rejuvenating injections' in her face. Hera, whose physical love Rama vainly seeks, replaces Ishtar following the amputation of her own torso, accepts Rama into her circle of friends and grants him dominion over 'glamour' and 'discourse'.

*Translated from the German*

*by Christopher Gilley*

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IN REMEMBRANCE OF DMITRI ALEXANDROVICH PRIGOV (1942–2007)

(from Marat Guelman, Blog Entry, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2007, 12.35pm, <http://galerist.livejournal.com/>)

At the beginning of the eighties, when most of those who today are pictured holding candles on the church's high feast days would not even touch a bible (while all the rest could not get hold of a bible), Prigov decided that 'it was the job of the artist to convey the hidden – that is the *word of God* – to the masses'. He undertook the following action:

He printed the Commandments and other quotations from the Old Testament on strips of paper the size of flyers. Instead of a telephone number, he wrote the chapter from which the quotation came, and pasted the sheets onto bus stops among the reports of missing dogs and rooms to let.

The cops soon caught him and handed him over to the KGB. To the question as to what he did and which sect he belonged to, Prigov answered: 'I am an artist. I am performing'. The checks confirmed that he really was an artist.

When they let him go, they said: 'We're letting you go free, but you have to tell us – in the future, how should we **distinguish artists from madmen and the members of sects?**'

This really happened. [*emphases in the original*]

VLADIMIR SOROKIN: ICE  
(TWO EXTRACTS)

## text

*Moscow has been hit by a wave of brutal murders. The victims are of both sexes, from different backgrounds, and of all ages, but invariably blond and blue-eyed. They are found with their breastbones smashed in, their hearts crushed. There is no sign of any motive.*

*Drugs, sex and violence are the currency of daily life in Moscow. Criminal gangs and unscrupulous financial operators run the show. But in the midst of so much squalor one mysterious group is pursuing a long-meditated plan. Blond and blue-eyed, with a strange shared attraction to a chunk of interstellar ice, they are looking for their brothers and sisters, precisely 23.000 of them. Lost among the common herd of humanity, they must be awakened and set free. With a crude hammer fashioned out of the cosmic ice. Humans, meat machines, die under its blows. The hearts of the chosen answer by uttering their true names. For the first time they know the ecstasy of true life. (from the blurb)*

(pp. 6–9)

The young man whined. His rickety knees knocked together.

Rutman began to help Uranov. They tore open the black T-shirt with the red inscription [WWW.FUCK.RU](http://WWW.FUCK.RU). Shivering under the shirt was a white bony chest covered with spotty freckles.

Uranov thought a moment. He handed the hammer to Gorbovets.

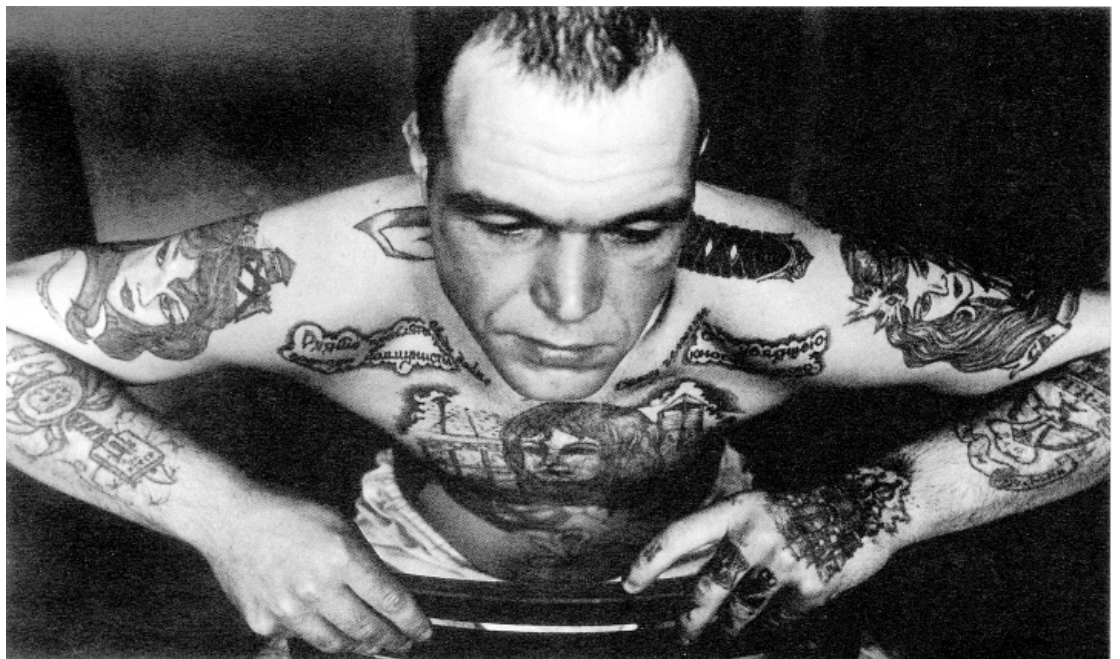
“Rom, you do it. I haven’t had any luck for a while.”

“Okeydoke...” Gorbovets spat on his palms. Pulled himself up. Swung back.

“Re-SPOND!”

The icy cylinder hit the frail chest with a whistle. The captive’s body jerked from the blow. The three listened closely. The young man’s thin nostrils flared. Sobs broke from them.

Gorbovets sadly shook his shaggy head. He drew the hammer back slowly.



From: “The Tattoos of Prison Camp Inmates”, collected by D.D. Baldayev, Saint Petersburg: Limbus Press 2001, unnumbered page before the title page. © S.G. Vasilyev

## text

“Respond!”

The whistle of air splitting. A sonorous blow. A spray of ice splinters. Weakening moans.

“Something... something...” Rutman listened closely to the black-and-blue chest.

“Just the upper part, the upper...” Uranov shook his head.

“It’s thumbsing... I don’t know... maybe it’s in the throat?” Gorbovets scratched his reddish beard.

“Rom, again, but more precise,” Uranov ordered.

“How much more precise can ya get...” Gorbovets swung back. “Ree-pond!”

The chest cracked. Ice scattered on the ground. A bit of blood spattered from the broken skin. The young man hung limp from the ropes. His blue eyes rolled back. The black eyelashes fluttered.

The three listened. A weak staccato grumble sounded in the boy’s chest.

“It’s there!” Uranov twitched.

“Lord almighty, bless the Light!” Gorbovets tossed the hammer aside.

“I was sure of it!” Rutman laughed joyfully. She blew on her fingers.

The three pressed against the young man’s chest.

“Speak with your heart! Speak with your heart! Speak with your heart!” Uranov spoke in a loud voice.

“Speak, speak, speak, come on little man!” Gorbovets mumbled.

“Speak with your heart, with your heart; speak, with the heart...” Rutman whispered joyfully.

A strange, faint sound came and went from the bloody, bruised chest.

“Speak your name! Speak your name! Speak your name!” Uranov repeated.

“Your name, little fella, tell us your name, your name!” Gorbovets stroked the young man’s fair hair.

“Your name, say your name, speak your name, name, name...” Rutman whispered to the pale pink nipple.

They froze, transfixed. They listened closely.

“Ural,” said Uranov.

“Ur. .Hurrah, Ural!” Gorbovets pulled on his beard.

“Urrraaaaal... Uraaaaal...” Rutman’s eyelids closed in joy.

They began fussing about happily.

“Quick, quick!” Uranov pulled out a coarse knife with a wooden handle.

They cut the ropes. Tore the bandage from his mouth. Placed the young man on the cement floor. Rutman dragged a first aid kit over. He found the smelling salts and brought them over. Uranov placed a wet towel on the battered chest. Gorbovets supported the young man’s back. He shook him carefully.

“Come on now, little guy, come on now, little one...” The boy’s whole puny body jerked. His thick-soled boots thudded against the floor. He opened his eyes. Inhaled with difficulty. He passed gas and whimpered.

“Now—there, there. Go ahead and fart little one, go ahead and fart...” In a single swoop, Gorbovets lifted him off the floor. He carried him to the car on his sturdy, crooked legs.

(...)

(pp. 263–64)

The meat machines didn’t see the truth—they looked right through it, they couldn’t distinguish the Divine Light.

It was incredibly wonderful to speak the truth, to delight in it.

## text

They swore and laughed.

Finally, they got sick of hearing about the singing of hearts. They undressed me, tied me to a bench, and began to flog me with a rubber plait. They were in no hurry, they took turns: one would flog, while the other shouted or quietly cajoled me to change my mind.

I felt the pain, of course.

But it wasn't like before, when I was a meat machine. Previously, there had been nowhere to escape from the pain. Because the pain was the master of my body. Now my master was the heart. And the pain couldn't reach it. It lived separately. My heart felt the pain in the form of a red serpent. The serpent crawled over me. But my heart sang, mesmerizing the serpent. When it crawled for too long at a time, my heart shrank, flaring violet. Then I lost consciousness.

(Vladimir Sorokin: *Ice*. Translated from the Russian by Jamey Gambrell, New York: NYRB 2007)

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 THE BODY AS A SOCIAL METAPHOR IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN ART<sup>1</sup>


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Nataliya Zlydneva

## analysis

*The visual arts are by nature somatic: they create material objects which stimulate by means of the senses. Similarly, contemporary Russian artists 'write' with their body in different ways: A. Brener, B. Mikhailov, A. Martynova, the AES and 'Mitki' groups, amongst others, speak about the body or let the body speak in their art. The social metaphors in their bodily code aim to analyse the post-Soviet reality and enable a critical interpretation of it.*

The social imagery of contemporary art in Russia is infused with depictions of the darker side of life. This negativism is revealed through a corporeal code which incorporates a great variety of sinister symbols: from dismembered mutilated and violated bodies to the rupturing of the limits of human physicality in the form of extreme pain – the symptom of the body's suffering. The abstract understanding of a collective body – the Soviet people – has been replaced by the physically concrete oligarch. The post-Soviet world has become a world of lonely, disoriented bodies.

#### BODIES IN PERFORMANCE

Above all, contemporary Russian art expresses its

<sup>1</sup> The material for this article was kindly provided by the Guelman Gallery in Moscow (<http://www.guelman.ru>).

corporeal metaphors through performance. The 1990s witnessed an explosion in performance and absurdism, which not only carried on the legacy of the avant-garde and twentieth-century Russian culture in its entirety, but was also heir to the particularities of the art of the previous decades. The performances of contemporary art are full of brutality. In keeping with the avant-garde's predilection for scandal, its performances use the poetics of scandal as an expression of the artist's sense of resentment against society. To this end, the body was – and continues to be – used as a writing implement: in one of the most brutal provocations of the avant-garde, a three-letter Russian obscenity was spelled out with human bodies (belonging to the performance participants) in Moscow's Red Square (author: Anatoli Osmolovski). No

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less scandalous were Avdei Ter-Oganian's acts of physical violence against icons. His blasphemous performances clearly contain elements of social protest: in one of his interactive performances, he exhibited the 'physical bodies' of beggars and homeless people by pulling them directly off the street into the exhibition; once inside the exhibition space, they involuntarily became 'natural' aesthetic objects.

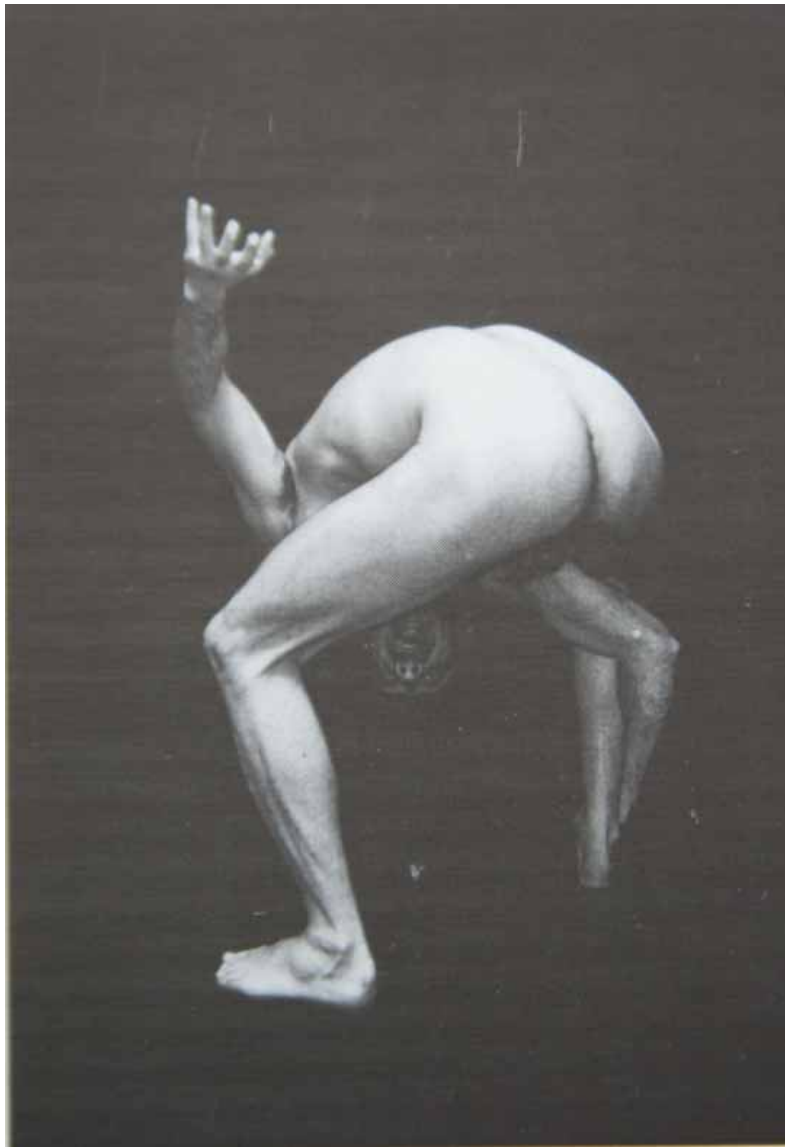
Sometimes the boundaries between physical pain, the wound as a social metaphor of protest and

physical violence become blurred. As part of one project, Alexander Brener, one of the most well-known performance artists, defecated in a foreign museum in front of a picture by Van Gogh. In the mid-1990s, Brener's performances had a political tinge: he demolished the stands of street vendors, and, wearing boxing gloves, challenged President Yeltsin to a fight while standing on Red Square's 'Place of a Skull' (site of execution); in yet another performance, he rampaged through a church, taking the sins of the Russian people

upon himself. As a rule, all of his performances ended in the artist's arrest by the forces of law and order.

#### BODIES IN THE SERVICE OF THE ANTI-UTOPIA

The collapsed utopia was replaced by an anthropological dystopia – an absolutely uncontrollable reality replete with mechanisms of manipulation, such as psycho-technology and genetic engineering. The performance artist Oleg Kulik protests against this. At the beginning of the 1990s, he developed a position which he called *Zoophrenia* (literally: 'animal-insanity'). As part of a polemical rejection of culture, Kulik organised performances in which pictures on wheels were rolled past the audience, the audience trampled canvasses, a woman gave birth in front of a live audience, a live pig was slaughtered and



Alexander Brener: Installation "Come to me, Chimeras!"  
Body Space 1995 © Nataliya Slydneva

## analysis

soldiers held pictures in their hands (1992, *Art at First Hand*). In his most famous performance, *The Family of the Future*, Kulik spent a number of days on all fours, nude, in a cage, imitating a dog.

According to the critic Vyacheslav Kuritsyn, 'the underlying idea of Kulik's creative work – that it is necessary to study and nurture the animal in man; that anthropomorphy is arbitrary and temporary; that the bonds between the species can run very deep, and that man is not at the centre of nature – pushes political correctness to its limits, destroying it from the inside, because only human culture could have given birth to this correctness; animals themselves could not have come up with it'.

#### THE BODY AS A SPACE AND MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

In the work of the AES group (Tatyana Arsamasova, Lev Yevsovich and Yevgeny Svyatsky), the body is presented as the exhibition space itself. Together with Alexander Brener, this group conceived the *Body Space* project in 1995. The section of the installation prepared by the AES group contained a display area full of anatomical photos and schemata from different perspectives, as well as objects on the topic of a physicality constructed by medicine, such as a 'thermal bridge', 'stitches' and 'human body cavities'. These fragmented 'object-bodies', which are estranged from the 'I-body', formed a kind of display area for discussions of the body in the conventions of institutionalised (medical) rationality.

In contrast, Brener's part of the project did not present the body as the subject of scientific study, but rather displayed it in its vital totality. In the installation *Come to me, Chimeras!*, the nude artist speaks through his body by means of various poses and grimaces, achieving an indissoluble identity with it. Unlike the AES group's analytical dissection, Brener was interested in the

body's hidden possibilities for communication in the sphere of the pre-rational. His speaking body confirmed his words itself – through pain, blood and injury; for Brener, the body is a sign of the genuineness of existence. On the other hand, the AES group uses the body to deconstruct rationality: its main aim is to demonstrate the ways in which the body is described, to exhibit the variety of its surfaces and in this way to reach the plane of the universal. Flesh is not a source of suffering; it is only put on display.

#### BODY WORLDS

In his written commentary on the installation, philosopher Valeri Podoroga states that in developing a metaphor for the extinction of ideologised models of the world, the piece describes the whole world: 'We are drowning in an environment that is teeming with bodies which we have not created: boxes, cases, schemata and frames that resemble bodies. And we must move our bodies in the world as carefully as these 'external bodies' demand of us; with their help, we must appropriate or 'try on' this or that area of social life. None of these bodies, which we take on through necessity and not coincidence, will be 'mine'. The body must necessarily remain installed: the whole spectrum of social relations, forms, institutions and positions constructs a monstrous machine for the installation of our bodies in the spheres of work, punishment, education and so on. We are all installed bodies'. In this way, only objects which can be displayed represent the body; however, this is the body on a screen: it is impossible to break through the barrier to true communication.

#### PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TRACE OF THE BODY

The projects described above sometimes used photography to document or trace corporeality. The photographs of Boris Mikhailov, one of the outstanding post-Soviet artists, address the

analysis

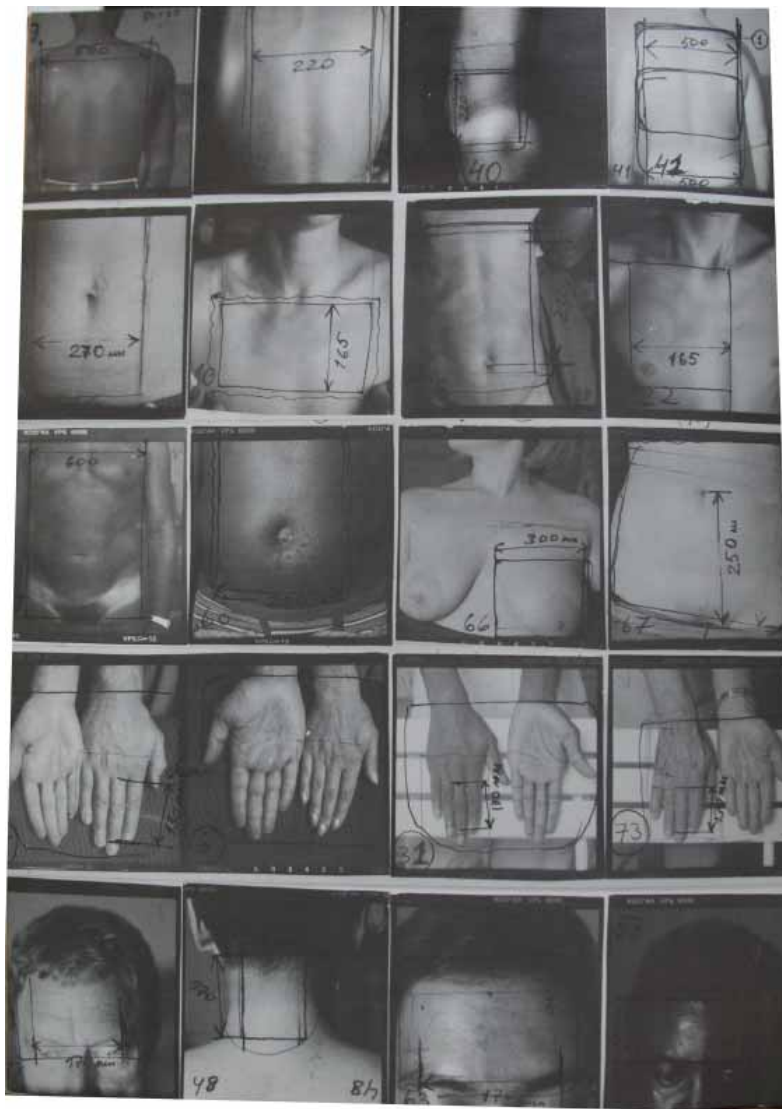
themes mentioned in the previous paragraph in a pointed, socially critical form. His series *A History of Illness* documents the socially marginal, the so-called dregs: tramps and beggars pose for the camera in provocative frivolity. A modern world à la Dostoevsky looks out at the audience: the bodies, ravaged by illness and dressed in dirty rags, belong to the fringes of humanity, expelled from society; for this reason, they look at this society with an even more penetrating gaze. The language of sincerity, the photographed object's relationship of trust to the author, creates a new

variation of the brutal positive. This 'positive' is today more radical than all the negatives of the twentieth century: it is an aesthetic of closeness and compassion, of sympathy and unmasking, and of shame; an aesthetic which breaks taboos.

THE CARNIVALESQUE BODY

The artists who today work with the more traditional media of communication – painting and the graphic arts – and want to explore the mentality of their compatriots through the language of the body are turning to the legacy of the avant-garde.

The *Vodka* project by the 'Mitki' group from St. Petersburg has developed the motif of the 'carnivalised' infantile body. By means of a primitive, 'low' form of depiction, the diverse forms of bodily experience are presented as metaphors for national self-identification. In the comic pictures on the theme of drinking vodka in Russia, the body appears as a spontaneous mode of behaviour, a gesture manifested above all in text. In the 'Mitki' project, reflections on the state of drunkenness take on the form of a 'minus-body' removed from the 'sodium' which has been emancipated from the constraints of social norms. Within this body, daring, revolt and the consciousness of one's own powerlessness against the imperative of social reality are inextricably linked.



AES: A Fragment "Imprints of Control", Project Body Space 1995. © Nataliya Slydneva.



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Damir Muratov from Omsk works with the theme of corporeality in handwriting. His sculptural compositions and pictures contain fragments of handwritten text that cover the face. His work unites the post-modern principle of faciality as a special area of conventional meaning with the body as text.

The orgiastic body in the 'Mitki' project is both an aesthetic, simplified protest against the social control of the individual and an ironic game with the earthiness (Russ. *potchvennost*) of this protest.

PHYSICAL CODIFICATION THROUGH SEX, GENDER  
AND DEATH

More resonant is the metaphor of power in the sexual code. The gender-studies tendency in art, which has long been fashionable in the West, has found ardent followers in Russia over the last decade. A great number of women artists present the female body with an explicit sexuality; this liberated depiction alone violates a taboo and thereby challenges the repressive consciousness. This is exemplified by the works *Melons* (photography, 1997) by Tatyana Liberman, *Birth* (sculpture, wood, 2000) by Natalya Turnova and *Painting in Nylon* (object, tights, 1997) by Alyona Martynova. The installation *Stay a Little* (2002) draws on sexuality as a sign of power in order to demonstrate the hackneyed metaphor of 'suffocation' for love/power in the natural language: when a visitor enters the plastic pavilion formed in the shape of a women's lips, the inflatable walls fill with air and put pressure on the guest with an imperious, erotic embrace.

At the same time, other artists consciously remove the female body and the erotic motif from the realm of ideological and political connotations. The famous painter from Moscow Aydan Salakhova constructs her self-portraits on the basis of quotations in a classical style: her own corporeality is raised to the level of abstraction. The

phantom character of one's own body designates beauty as apolitical and implies a social metaphor through the figure of concealment.

All traditional roles for the female body are prescribed from above by the socium, and their quotation stands in ironic contrast to that which is visible. The work *A Beautiful Woman* (oil on canvas, 2001) by Maria Pogorshelskaya emphasises its own apoliticism; using a neutral motif and style, it depicts a female figure on a beach. However, this neutrality is ironically defamiliarised by the triviality of the title and interpretation. In the video installation *Love* (1997–2003) by Gor Chakhal, this ironic subtext disappears completely; the video variant presents viewers with an abstract expressionism with sexual references.

The field of negative connotations of the body motif in contemporary art extends to the problem of the borders between human existence in general and of a Baroque *memento mori* in particular. In the series *Danse Macabre* (a mixed technique consisting of painting and photo-montage), Andrei Savadov studies narrative scenes from the funerals of the so-called 'New Russians' (*Spring, Summer, 1997; Deep Insider, 1997*). Here the Baroque rhetoric acts as a descriptive metaphor.

BODY WRITING

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1987), Josef Brodsky spoke of how an individual who puts lines of poetry to paper is comparable to a body thrown out into space. By overcoming this space, the body makes an aesthetic decision which precedes the ethical choice. It is the contention of this text that a similar process is undergone in visual creation: the artist, who 'writes' with his or her body – regardless of whether this means the language of the body or about the body – extends the space of the bodies, the space of their negative experiences in the context of this or that culture (in this case, Russian culture). Even the choice of

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linguistic devices represents an ethical decision. On the one hand, the social metaphors in the body code aim to delineate the zone of critically interpreted reality (and the totality of its visibly darker side), and one's own position towards it. On the other hand, they define the bridges and borders between the aesthetically oriented individual and the ethics of the socium.

*Translated from the Russian  
by Christopher Gilley*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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semiotics, intermediality, the 20th Century Russian art and literature (Russian avant-garde, Platonov), Balkan art and culture.

This text is a short version of the article 'Telo kak sotsial'naja metafora' published in the volume *Telesnyi kod v slavianskikh kul'turakh*, Moscow 2005, 247–255, edited by the author.

## READING SUGGESTIONS:

- *Boris Michajlov*, ed. Brigitte Kölle, Stuttgart: Oktagon 1995
- *Beyond Memory. Soviet Nonconformist Photography and Photo-Related Works of Art*, ed. Diane Neumeier, New Brunswick, N.J./London: Rutgers University Press 2004
- Alexander Brener, "The End of Optics", Moscow Art Magazin: <http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/>

## PREVIEW:

The next issue of *kultura* (4/2007) will appear at the end of October 2007. It deals with the cultural meaning of sport in contemporary Russia.

The guest editors will be Sandra Budy and Manfred Zeller from the DFG project *The Social and Cultural History of Sport and the Culture of the Body in the Soviet Union* at the Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg.