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New Forms of Dialogue between Art and Society

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editorial

Over the past two decades, Russian society's attitude towards contemporary art has been marked above all by incomprehension and ignorance. The Artists' Union had previously been responsible for bringing artistic life into line in the Soviet Union; in the mid-1980s, during perestroika, it was charged with turning Moscow into an artistic centre of global significance. As a consequence, several non-conformist artistic currents that had been suppressed for decades simultaneously appeared before the public. The previously dominant artistic criteria dictated by the state had lost their validity; now there were no more guidelines, and both the state and the intended audience were left confounded.

The short period before the final break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not leave enough time for new criteria of assessment or new forms of artistic organisation to emerge. And so Western cultural institutions and organisations took it upon themselves to judge the value of Russian art works. The crucial event was an exhibition and sale of Soviet art staged in Moscow by the London-based Sotheby's auction house in 1988. Works were valued by Western buyers hardly familiar with Russian art, rather than based on home-grown hierarchies.

For a long time, Russian artists hoped that Western buyers and patrons would assist in the revival, or rather the creation, of a functioning, non-state-controlled artistic life. Indeed, many contemporary art centres could only exist thanks to Western foundations. Several so-called 'Russian waves' in the West in the late 1980s and 1990s, i.e. temporary blazes of interest in contemporary Russian art, ebbed away without putting Russian art on an equal footing with others in the international artistic scene.

The main obstacle to the acceptance of Russian art was its lack of backing in its own country. Contemporary artistic life in Russia seemed mainly focussed on what was happening in West European institutions; the public at home had little opportunity to get acquainted with contemporary art and the distinctive claims it makes on the perception of its works.

Over the past three or four years, however, state cultural policies as well as private investors' involvement in contemporary art are undergoing significant changes. Art is securing new intellectual liberties and conquering new territories; it is perceived as a status symbol and re-enters public urban spaces in a way that is reminiscent of the early Soviet avant-garde. This issue of *kultura* gives an account of these processes.

At the same time restrictions upon contemporary art are tightening. In recent years the *Caution: Religion!* and *Russia-2* exhibitions in particular made the headlines. The organisers of both exhibitions were charged with incitement to hatred. In the first case, a fine was imposed; in the second case the trial only just ended with an acquittal. While recent developments in Russian artistic life give cause for hope, the current situation remains paradoxical.

ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR OF THE PRESENT ISSUE:
Sandra Frimmel (see also *kultura* 2/2006) 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*.

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'This is not a bomb'
On the influence of the First Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art on the artistic situation in Moscow

Yulya Aksenova

Contemporary artistic life in Russia is undergoing radical structural changes. Significant changes are also taking place in the state's cultural policies. For the first time in ages, an exhibition project – the First Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art – enjoyed considerable state support; it was even intended to be 'part of a political approach to renewing the country'. The self-understanding and the practices of private patrons of contemporary art are also changing. Private backers have learned to acknowledge art as a symbolic resource and increasingly join the battle over cultural symbols.

A (cultural) explosion in the Lenin Museum

'This is not a bomb' was the title of a project by the young Russian artist David Ter-Oganyan that was presented at the *First Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art*[1] in early 2005. The project consisted of several self-made 'blasting compositions' – jars of pickled gherkins, shoe boxes and other 'innocent' objects wrapped in wire and fitted with clockworks – which the artist had distributed in several rather unexpected places across the former Lenin Museum. Visitors who suddenly discovered such a suspicious object reacted very ambiguously: within seconds, paralysing fear turned into its opposite – a laugh of recognition and relief.

Of course this work alludes to current Russian socio-political realities. However, it can also serve as a wonderful metaphor for the *First Moscow Biennial.* Just like the fake blasting compositions, the Biennial didn't send any deep-reaching shockwaves through the field of contemporary art; socially, however, it did go off like a bomb. This is evidenced by the serious changes currently taking place in state cultural policies and in public consciousness as shaped by the mass media. The assimilation of contemporary art by private investors and their capital provides further evidence of this.

The *First Moscow Biennial* was a huge media event. One of its main aims was to attract broad public attention to contemporary art – a sphere of contemporary culture that many Russians are unfamiliar with. The heated debates among professionals that had started long before the Biennial were taken up by the media that were reporting on how different strata of society, from the political and business elite to ordinary visitors, reacted to this event. The Biennial instigated highly interesting discussions and spawned numerous critical texts devoted mainly to a diagnosis of the important structural changes taking place in contemporary artistic life as a whole. One of the criticisms levelled against the Biennial was that it served the interests of the authorities by functioning as an efficient instrument of state policy.

Contemporary art and state power – from life in the shadow to tight embrace

For decades, part of the Russian artistic scene remained in opposition to officially-sanctioned culture. The unofficial art that existed alongside official art was not only excluded from the internal life of society; it was also blocked from external links with the international art scene. Russian art was at home among strangers and a stranger at home; it was always an 'other' both for progressive Western civilisation and for the conservative Soviet cultural model. Following the collapse of the socialist system, art came out from the underground and gradually began to discover new ways of existing in society. The emergence of state and private institutions of contemporary art in the early 1990s seemed to demonstrate that this previously repressed type of cultural experience was now becoming integrated into society. However, this was not the case. Contemporary

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art failed to garner any substantial state or private support in Russia. The new institutions vanished as quickly as they had emerged. Being essentially private initiatives, these projects had no systematic funding. The authorities certainly didn't regard contemporary art as an enemy, but neither were they in a hurry to delegate any significant social functions to it.

The *First Moscow Biennial* opened a new chapter in the history of the relationship between art and the authorities. This large-scale exhibition project obtained considerable state support and was meant to be 'part of a political approach to renewing the country', as the curators declared in the catalogue. Here is how Andrei Erofeev, one of the leading Russian curators, commented on this fact in the catalogue of an exhibition called *Accomplices* in the State Tretyakov Gallery: 'However critical one may be of the Biennial's exhibitions, it is clear that it is a significant event of enormous proportions. The new Russian administration is using Western experience and has at last decided to ally itself with the avant-garde and turn it into a symbol of its break with the totalitarian Soviet past. That this is not a momentary confusion, but a considered political decision is proven by the unexpected unanimity of the Ministry of Culture, the main Russian museums and the Academy of Arts'.

The state museums' new policy was most vividly demonstrated by the main exhibition, shown in the former Lenin Museum. A space that symbolises the bulwark of communist power was suddenly occupied by the artistic avant-garde, one of whose tasks is to unmask the repressive mechanisms at work in society, including the authorities.

Traditionalist institutions also took part in the Biennial, above all the Moscow Museum of Modern Art. The museum's creator and director, Zurab Tsereteli, is also president of the Russian Academy of Arts. Most of the museum's exhibits come from his salon-type personal collection. At the Biennial, the museum presented an ambitious project called *Stars*, featuring four of the most successful contemporary Russian artists or groups of artists: the AES group, the duo of Alexander Vinogradov and Vladimir Dubossarsky, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe and Oleg Kulik. It needs to be pointed out that none of these artists has ever had a large-scale solo exhibition in Moscow. This time, however, the museum gave each of them a separate floor, and visitors were surprised to see how nicely these well-crafted, expensive works of art fitted in with the villa's sumptuous halls.

Oleg Kulik, one of the most radical Russian artists, who for years played the role of a dog, delivered an impromptu performance at the opening of the exhibition. He didn't bite anyone; instead, he embraced Zurab Tsereteli. This artistic gesture didn't go unnoticed: to many, it signalled that contemporary art is no longer in opposition to the powers-that-be and is in fact becoming part of their system.

Moscow's building sites provide an apt metaphor for this process in that they make the voids and blanks of urban space disappear and privatise them with the help of state and private capital. Similarly, free, unoccupied zones are disappearing from the field of culture. The authorities are demonstrating their resourcefulness and mobility by absorbing the field of independent judgement that contemporary art has always been in Russia. Instead of the usual censure, they have suddenly decided to express agreement with the critics, thereby rendering pointless an opposition which, in the Russian tradition, has always been an important constitutive principle of art, nay its ethical foundation. Many people perceive the current situation as crisis. They ask themselves: if there is no longer an external position that would allow

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one to gain an advantage over the system, then where is the space of resistance?

Contemporary art and private capital – a question of image

The territory of art has always been a field of battle over cultural symbols, and many people in Russia today are prepared to join that battle. In addition to state institutions, private companies have also recently begun to appreciate the huge symbolic potential of contemporary art. One of the main tendencies of this year has been an upsurge of investment in contemporary art institutions, as illustrated by the emergence of new foundations, galleries and even museums of contemporary art. A crucial feature of many of these new institutions is that they are non-commercial. The current season saw the creation of two charitable foundations aiming to support various artistic initiatives, exhibition projects and education programmes.

The *Modern City Foundation* was set up in September 2005 by Claire Savoretti and Dilyara Allakhverdieva, two collectors of contemporary art. They are working with a circle of well-known Russian artists belonging to the middle generation, such as Anton Litvin, Viktor Alimpiev or the *Blue Soup* group. Every month, the foundation organises chamber-sized presentations of projects which then become part of its collection. In February 2006, the *Era Foundation* made itself known by presenting an interesting and varied programme of activities. The forthcoming events include solo and group exhibitions of Russian and foreign artists, master classes and discussions on pressing issues relating to the contemporary artistic process.

Thus new spaces are emerging; but at the same time, existing institutions are also radically reorienting their artistic policies. One example is the *Moscow Art Centre*, which belongs to the big entrepreneur Alexander Smolensky and is known as one of Moscow's most respectable exhibition spaces. For years, it mainly hosted exhibitions of Russian avant-garde of the early 20th century and traditional art. Today, the centre's exhibition strategy has changed dramatically. It has invited young curators, artists and theoreticians who have turned this place into one of Moscow's most dynamic and interesting art venues. This magnificent villa is now used to showcase the latest tendencies and artistic practices. A year ago this would have seemed an impossible format for this centre, which had so far relied on respectable art and exhibitions with guaranteed success.

David Ter-Oganyan, This is Not a Bomb, *2005. In the artist's possession.*

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Today, private backers are prepared to support such projects as a demonstration of their active involvement in contemporary cultural and artistic processes. Their main motivation is to create a progressive image for themselves to hide their often unsightly past. But such alliances between private enterprise and progressive contemporary art often prove short-lived, disintegrating as soon as the sponsor obtains the dividends he or she needs.

Contemporary art and new collectors

To many people it has now become obvious that contemporary art is not limited to the material object artists produce. On the contrary, art opens up an infinite variety of perspectives, linked above all to certain forms of communication and information. This is why the art market is seeing not only quantitative changes, e.g. a stable growth in sales, but also qualitative transformations. Most importantly, private collectors' approaches have changed. The decision to purchase an artistic work used to be determined exclusively by individual taste; nowadays collectors are increasingly heeding the advice of independent experts and often ask them to work out an original conception for their future collection. In order to keep up their status in the eyes of others, they no longer find it sufficient simply to buy a work and hang it on the wall. Today it is more important to be an art connoisseur, to be able to talk about art and to have experts corroborate the significance of one's collection.

This is illustrated by the emergence of several large collections containing a comprehensive range of Russian works from the second half

Organising art: the post-Soviet transition

In the Soviet Union, artistic life was brought into line with the party's program. The Artists' Union of the USSR, created in 1932, was the only socially and politically relevant organisation and the only one that was sanctioned by the state to assess the quality of artistic products with reference to the official canon.

In 1962, a number of abstract pictures in an exhibition in Moscow's Manege caused a great scandal; thereafter, art was divided into official and unofficial, or more precisely into officially supported and officially unsupported art. Non-conformists were deprived of state patronage; they were not allowed to exhibit their works, and were denied integration into society as most of them were not admitted to the Artists' Union. While a liberal faction did emerge within the Union, it kept inside the narrow limits defined by the state.

During perestroika, art was freed from its exclusive subservience to ideology, and the non-conformist artistic currents that had been suppressed for several decades now gained access to a large public.

The early 1990s saw a difficult transition from the old structures that used to dominate all areas of culture to new, non-state, self-managed initiatives. These included various Centres for Contemporary Arts founded at the beginning of the 1990s as well as several galleries. All these organisations represented attempts to transfer Western-type, non-commercial institutions to Russia, which was why they found it difficult to integrate into local social and administrative processes. Until recently, they were unsupported either by the state or by society, remaining dependent on Western funding because of the lack of a well-off middle-class and a developed system of sponsorship, and because there was a lack of social acceptance of contemporary art.

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of the 20th century, including the collections of Vladimir Semenikhin, Vladimir Antonichuk and Igor Markin. Markin is even currently having a museum built for the purpose of displaying the works he owns.

Contemporary art in new urban spaces

The recent changes have also affected the topography of art. The main news of this year is that conceptually undefined exhibition spaces are giving way to modern galleries, and more and more space is made available for exhibitions. Introducing contemporary art into industrial spaces such as factories or workshops has become especially popular. In Moscow, the first such experiment in cultural restoration was the *Art Strelka*, a complex of galleries housed on the territory of the *Red October* sweet factory since September 2004. A project called *Fabrika* started during the First Moscow Biennial. The exhibition hall, located on the site of a former paper mill, is now open to any initiatives in the area of contemporary visual art, drama and music. The site of a former gas holder near the Kurskaya metro station is now taken up by the *Gas-Holder* art club, designer show rooms and the huge *Yakut Gallery* with an area of 1,800 square meters (almost 20,000 square feet). One of the most promising upcoming projects is a multifunctional complex situated within the buildings of a former winery: the *Winzavod* complex, located next to Kursk Station, has at its disposal 20,000 square metres (about 215,000 square feet) which will soon house exhibition halls, galleries, studios, shops and cafés.

The most successful Moscow galleries are leaving their respectable sites for jauntily renovated production halls still smelling of fresh paint. The gallery owners are evidently hoping that the changes in exhibition context and interior design will help them create a semblance of active creative dynamism. Besides, such art complexes may also attract a substantially greater number of visitors to the galleries.

Contemporary art and glamour

Contemporary art is becoming very fashionable in Russia. Art works are being used as design elements at various presentations. Exhibitions are often staged in fashionable restaurants, clubs or shops. Glossy magazines are full of vivid reproductions of contemporary art works, interviews with their creators and spectacular photographic portraits of artists. Contemporary artists are well-received at glamorous parties, talk shows, or corporate celebrations. Authors are often invited to take part in sales campaigns designed to fashion an original image for some new brand name.

The overall mood surrounding the institution of contemporary art in Russia today is a state of excitement punctuated by abrupt emotional breakdowns. Hopes border on disillusionment, moments of success give way to failures and promising projects often remain unrealised. Many are becoming aware of the significant changes currently taking place in this segment of culture, but few would venture to predict their consequences, be it from the point of view of art's social function or that of its internal problems. Time will show.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

Endnote:

The First Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art took place from 28 January to 28 February 2005 and was curated by an international team whose members were Joseph Backstein, Daniel Birnbaum, Iara Bubnova, Nicolas Bourriaud, Rosa Martinez and Hans Ulrich Obrist. The Biennial's exhibitions were staged at more than 50 different venues, including state museums, private galleries and a metro station.

Information about the author is on the next page.

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About the author:
Yulya Aksenova (born 1975) works at the contemporary art department of the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. She is also a curator at the Moscow Art Centre and a freelance art critic. Her main areas of professional interest are working with young artists and studying contemporary curating practices.

Reading suggestions:
- *1 Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art.* Exhibition catalogue. Moscow 2005.
- *Accomplices.* Collective and Interactive Works in Russian Art of the 1960s – 2000s. Moscow 2005.

portrait

Contemporary art awards in Russia

Anastasia Mityushina

2005 was a year in which Russian contemporary art consolidated its success on an institutional level. It was also an eventful year in the sphere of contemporary art awards, which may be considered indicative of the overall state of the country's artistic life. There are an increasing number of not-for-profit organisations that create publicity for art, which has a positive effect on art awards. However, the institution of prizes and awards still doesn't carry enough weight to make a serious impact. In Russia, an award does not yet earn an artist any special esteem, nor does it increase the market value of his or her works. I shall briefly present the main contemporary art prizes in order to provide an insight into their structure and significance.

State prizes

Until recently Russia had no state prizes for contemporary art. The oldest Russian distinction in the field of art, the *State Literature and Art Prize* of the Russian Federation, is not limited to the visual arts. It shows preference for traditional practices and works by artists of an older generation, and is awarded on behalf of the president 'for an outstanding contribution to the development of Russian and world culture in the form of especially significant literary and other creative works'.

Contemporary art has only recently begun to enjoy state support. This can be seen in the state backing for the *National Centre for Contemporary Arts*' initiative to institute an award called the *Innovation Prize*, worth 15,000 euros. This recently created award is intended to support the latest trends and stimulate artistic life as a whole, including artists, curators, publishers, institutions and artistic education. The competition is accompanied by an exhibition, master classes and debates.

Private awards

The number of private prizes has grown considerably. There are now prizes instituted by individuals as well as private organisations. But the rules governing most of these awards are still so random and incomplete that they do not even have a legal status. The two exceptions are the *Black Square Prize* and the *Master Prize.*

The *Black Square Contemporary Art Prize*, instituted in 2003 by Expo-Park, the company that organises the annual *Art Moscow* fair, is similar to *Innovation* in its stimulating effect. In addition to the 5000 euro prize money, the award potentially offers the winner a solo exhibition. Moreover, the *Black Square* is awarded not only for works produced in the preceding year, but also for

sketches of works that have not yet been publicly displayed. Thus the *Black Square* reveals tendencies that have yet to develop. However, the 2005 award ceremony was moved to 2006 – essentially for lack of funding.

Another private award, called the *Master Prize*, was created, also in 2003, by the *Kovcheg* (*Ark*) gallery, which consistently upholds traditional artistic values and is only nominally part of the contemporary art scene. The *Master Prize* was only endowed with prize money (1,500 euros) in 2005. This prize also offers a rather incomplete reflection of artistic life: the jury's choice of works from among exhibitions staged during the preceding year had a conservative slant from the outset; preference is given to paintings and drawings.

Thus the private awards are a mirror image of the state prizes in the sense that there is one award to support the most progressive artistic tendencies, and another that promotes classical artistic values.

On the difficulty of instituting new prizes

The *Innovation Prize* is conceived as an award that would provide the best possible overview of what has happened in art over a year. But it remains badly structured and somewhat ineffectual. Among its shortcomings is the fact that some nominees sit on the jury themselves, while others only learn of their nomination by accident.

But the private awards have their problems too. A promising prize created at the initiative of the artists Dmitry Vilensky and Olga Yegorova and funded by the Corporation General Satellite was only awarded once, in 2003, after which the company discontinued funding because the prize had failed to attract sufficient publicity. This is typical of 2003, when contemporary art was already selling well but had not yet become really fashionable.

The *New Government's* alternative prize

Paradoxical as it may sound, artistic life in Russia is best reflected by a prize instituted by the artist Georgy Ostretsov in 2002 in the framework of his long-term artistic project to create a *New Government*. This part-provocative, part-parodistic prize, also awarded for a particular year, in a mocking way, fulfils the function of a half-ironic and half-serious self-reflection of the artistic community. The award goes to Russia's best citizens in five categories: Art, Law, Patriotism, Journalism and Patronage. The current year also saw the institution of a special award for an exemplary civic stance. The Patronage and Law categories are highly important – private persons do indeed make an important contribution to fostering art, and many of them do so on a permanent basis.

Conclusion

To conclude we may say that Russian art prizes, just like artistic life as a whole, is currently in a state of rapid development. However, a lot of work lies ahead if the prizes are to have an effect. Serious financial investments and intellectual efforts are needed for an independent and efficient artistic infrastructure to emerge.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

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analysis

From artistic coterie to artistic community: public art in Russia

Maria Korosteleva

Public art is the most recent of all forms of contemporary art explored by the Russian artistic scene. It made its appearance in the late 1990s – at first, not in Moscow but on the periphery, where the lack of an audience and artistic institutions forced artists and curators to look for new ways of interacting with local communities. This approach was new for Russian art, whose interaction with its social context traditionally boiled down to provocation. The obligatory self-censorship arising out of the recognized necessity of sparing public opinion, as well as a policy of dialogue with the authorities was a recipe for success for the programmes staged by the Yekaterinburg and Nizhny Novgorod branches of the National Centre for Contemporary Art.

Public art made a late, indeed a very late appearance, in Russia. It is the most recent of all forms of contemporary art explored by the Russian artistic scene. By the time this finally happened, Russia already had a more or less developed artistic infrastructure, with its own galleries and festivals, its heroes and martyrs, and even its own schools and textbooks. Seen from Moscow, the emergence of public art may be dated back to 2002, when both the *ArtKliazma* open air festival (at the Klyazma reservoir) and the first open air video festival, eloquently called *Empty* ('Pusto'), were launched. If we abandon this Moscow-centred view, however, we will have to go back to 1999, when the first public art event took place in Yekaterinburg under the name of *Agitation for Art*, or at least to 2000, when the artist Nikolay Polissky initiated his partnership with the peasants of Nikolo-Lenivets by lining up 100 snowmen along the bank of the Ugra.

There are several reasons for public art's belated arrival in Russia. Some of them are historical, others socio-political, and yet others administrative; economic factors were the least important. Let's start with history.

The (non-existent) history of contemporary art in Russia

The history of contemporary art in Russia is so short that until a certain point in time it was hardly of interest to anyone except its direct participants. For decades, this art seemed to lack any legitimacy. In Russia, the authorities, business and society do not trust each other, and neither of them trusts art, especially contemporary art. Public art, however, is based on trust, on a social contract between the artist or the artistic institution that represent his or her interests and society, or more precisely, the state or business institutions that use art to address the society on whose behalf they are acting.

Since the times of the artistic underground in the USSR, art has traditionally been in a state of conflict with the authorities, and it usually takes no interest in public opinion. After the Thaw of the 1950s and 60s, artists would either lock themselves up in their studios to cherish the myth of the unrecognised genius, or else make use of any opportunity to dispatch their paintings to the West. Their every step was watched by the KGB, who were in turn monitored by Western radio stations. Every turn of this surveillance was discussed in the Western media, and the lucky persecuted artists were entirely sure that things would always stay that way, and that everything they did would arouse the same kind of steady and keen interest always and everywhere.

At first, perestroika seemed to bear out these hopes; but interest in new art vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Contrary to the artists' expectations, society didn't pay any attention to what the artists were doing, and the artists in turn didn't make any attempts to communicate with society. For years, they addressed themselves ei-

ther to eternity, embodied by a distant posterity, or to the Western community. To them, their next-door neighbours or passers-by were characters from some parallel universe that had absolutely no points of contact with their own world.

This arrogance, coupled with an elitist sense of itself that post-Soviet art inherited both from Soviet underground culture and from the liberal faction in the Artists' Union, had a harmful effect on post-perestroika Russian art. It took about a decade for the artistic coterie to develop a view of itself as an artistic community, and for the artistic community to try to transcend its limitations and find a common language with other groups and communities. This was the time it took for a new generation to take shape and for the old one to shed its illusions and complexes.

Public art in the provinces: Yekaterinburg

This happened most quickly not in Moscow but in the provinces, where the cultural stratum was thinner, the coterie was smaller, and artists were more independent – simply because in the provinces there is no one to be dependent on: no authorities, no artistic institutions, no public, no critics. Instead, there is a boundless desire to create and an untiring inventiveness in the face of limited resources. A typical example of this 'provincial' approach in art is the *Blue Noses* group with their art 'for pioneers and pensioners', where everything is subordinated to the one task of communicating with 'simple viewers' and straightforward ideas are expressed in forms that are just as simple and ingenious.

Such renunciation of snobbery and readiness for dialogue come naturally to those starting from scratch, on a *tabula rasa*. Yekaterinburg was such a *tabula rasa* in 1999, when the then director of the local branch of the *National Centre for Contemporary Arts* (*NCCA*), Nailya Allakhverdieva, and the curator Arseny Sergeev launched Russia's first programme of public art. Yekaterinburg's *NCCA* consciously chose a strategy of communicating with the city's inhabitants. This approach was new for Russian art, whose interaction with its social context traditionally boiled down to provocation, as in the case of the Moscow actionists. Abandoning the role of public irritant, the Yekaterinburg artists – again, consciously – opted for a Western model of public art that presupposes a dialogue between the artist and society.

The trial balloon was a project called *Agitation for Art* which started in Yekaterinburg and, after its successful launch, was shown in Samara, Togliatti, Izhevsk, Naberezhnye Chelny, Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. The project consisted of two-colour leaflets printed on a risograph that looked like advertising posters from the early 1990s, but were campaigning for contemporary art. The artists were using the street-level aesthetic idiom of the time, and took the street by storm. *Agitation* probed the potential of contemporary art in the city, and the test was successful.

The next step in this direction was a Russian-Dutch project called *Debates and Credits* which adapted Dutch experience and Dutch artists' works in public space to the Russian situation. *Debates and Credits* was the first attempt to co-operate with the city administration and local businesses. Working with the administration allowed the artists to gain access to such diverse spaces as the metro, local television, outdoor video screens, fences and facades. The project's recipe for success lay in its generally positive tone, as in a work by the Dutch artist Leo van Munster called *Positive Mirrors*, consisting of little square mirrors pasted on facades in the city centre to make up sentences such as 'I have never seen anyone more beautiful than you' or 'You are unique'. The issue of 'uniqueness' temporarily became the most discussed topic in the local media, more popular

even than the dug-up pavements and the poor quality of medical care. A mosaic on the wall of a local supermarket – a pixelated photo of people on a grandstand – was immediately included in tourist agencies' lists of local sights.

This strategy of unobtrusively and gradually 'habituating' viewers proved to be a safe policy under local conditions. A week after *Debates and Credits*, the Yekaterinburg branch of the *NCCA* staged a public art festival called *A_real* along the same lines, which also successfully took up the Dutch model. Convinced of the inoffensiveness of contemporary art, the local authorities readily supported the project. The only part that put the 'censors' on their guard was an advertisement board by Vladimir Logutov which said 'Vova was here' (Vova is a short form of Vladimir). The administration of the Leninsky district, where the work had happened to be put up, took it as a slight to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, while the local media interpreted it as a greeting to Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, whose birthday coincided with the opening day of the festival.

The organisers were in for yet another unpleasant surprise: the 'benches for lovers' designed by students of local art colleges were wrecked a few months after they had been erected. It must be said in Yekaterinburg's defence that the problem of ordinary Russians' aggression against their urban environment is not limited to the Urals. During the *ArtKliazma* open air festival near Moscow the artists had to guard their works at night, and the sculptor Dmitry Kaminker, who lives in St. Petersburg, Russia's 'cultural capital', was speaking from his own bitter experience when he proposed to regard the 'vandal resistance factor' as the main criterion for assessing contemporary art.

Apart from the problem of vandalism, however, the experience of Yekaterinburg proved highly successful. Self-censorship based on the recognised necessity of sparing public opinion, as well as the policy of dialogue with the authorities, reaped a rich reward. There followed three instalments of a festival called *Long Stories of Yekaterinburg*, during which well known Russian artists decorated concrete fences in the city centre with graffiti, and a project entitled *Out Video*, with screenings of video art on outdoor video screens. These projects proved decisively that public art could take root in Russian soil.

Public art in the provinces: the Volga region

Another example of the successful implementation of this strategy was the *Volga Capital of Culture* festival, jointly staged by the Nizhny Novgorod branch of the NCCA and a foundation with the same name as the festival. In every year since 2001, cities in the Volga region have competed for the title of the region's cultural capital. The winner received additional funding to carry out a marathon of cultural events, including concerts, exhibitions and festivals. The programme also usually included a festival of public art.

In contrast to Yekaterinburg, where the idea had originated in the cultural community, in the Volga region the initiative came from the local authorities. Sergey Kirienko, the presidential envoy to the Volga Federal District and one of the leaders of the laissez-faire Union of Right Forces, consciously followed a Western model, choosing to emulate the European Capital of Culture programme.

Like this prototype, the *Volga Capital of Culture* aimed to raise the area's profile in the eyes of tourists and investors, and shape a new, positive image with the help of culture in general and contemporary art in particular. As in Western Europe, the regional managers who supervised the project brought in outside experts and artists.

In the course of its existence, the *Volga Capital of Culture* moved from larger cities (e.g. Samara) to

smaller ones (e.g. Izhevsk), meeting with the best response in the smallest town, Nizhnekamsk. The novelty factor of taking contemporary art to places where it's never been made the project attractive to local authorities and residents as well as art professionals from Moscow and St. Petersburg. Both the public and the artists were in an open-minded mood and were thus prepared to meet each other half-way. As a result, the unpretentious but lovely objects the artists made from tyres produced by a local factory – a tower by the artist Maxim Ilyukhin from Moscow and the 'Golden Man' by Mikhail Kosolapov – gave the locals food for talk, and were discussed in the Moscow press long after the event.

There was another important reason why the *Volga Capital of Culture*, just like the Yekaterinburg events, proved so successful. All these projects filled a cultural niche that was vacant at the time, yet very important for the Russian tradition. For centuries, Russian art had not only had an educating and exhorting mission, but also a comforting one. With the onset of perestroika it had lost its audience, who were left suspended between the Soviet past and an uncertain future. Russian art became isolated. The aloof and critical attitude adopted by the new artists may have made their works more intelligible to Western artists, but it also definitively estranged ordinary Russians. In this context public art was the first attempt to instigate some sort of communication between artists and the public.

Public art in Moscow

It was in the capital, rather than on the periphery, that this dialogue proved most difficult to get going. Thus, in the long list of cities where Yekaterinburg's *Agitation for Art* was displayed, Moscow was the only one where it was only shown in a gallery. Unlike the provinces, the capital was not ready to embrace contemporary art. Apart from the above-mentioned snobbery of artists and curators, there was also the problem that Moscow's market for culture was already oversaturated, and the city was too big, requiring large-scale events for which there were not enough financial and administrative resources. Small and charming festivals such as *Empty* were unable to attract the attention of a large public, and simply provided amusement for a small circle of artists. It was only when the artist Vladimir Dubossarsky and the curator Olga Lopukhova, the artistic director of *ArtKliazma*, decided to stage their festival outside the city and focus artists' efforts and public attention on the small Klyazma reservoir, that a local artistic activity turned into a significant cultural event.

Another focus that attracted the attention of the Moscow public was a village near Moscow delightfully named Nikolo-Lenivets, which roughly translates as Nicholas-Lazybones. The artist Nikolay Polissky created an artistic co-operative in which he brought together around 70 peasants from the Kaluga region, providing the residents of destitute villages with their first employment for many years. In the village, they erected a straw ziggurat, a wooden fortress, a 27 metre tall wattled radio tower and a lighthouse made from wicker and willow branches. They also constructed a huge snow mountain for Nizhny Novgorod, a reproduction of the Baikonur cosmodrome for the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, and decorated the Lianozovo and Likhoborka parks at request of the North-Eastern district of Moscow.

Thus one artist's socio-cultural initiative proved economically profitable for an entire community. The Russian peasants acquainted themselves with the boundless potential of Russia's artistic space, and the enormous profits the 'lazybones' made were invested into the local infrastructure. Thus communication between the artist and the local community had been successful, and the

analysis

art that emerged from their collaboration proved highly fruitful.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Maria Korosteleva (born 1974) is chief curator of the project and exhibition department at the Anna Akhmatova Museum and curator of the St. Petersburg branch of the *National Centre for Contemporary Arts*. She is also curator of a number of exhibitions and festivals in Russia and Western Europe, and of the first St. Petersburg public art festival, *Field Studies*.

READING SUGGESTIONS:

- Barbara Gladstein (ed.), *Public Art by the Book*. Seattle 2005.
- *Collective Creativity*. Exhibition catalogue. Kassel 2005.
- Tom Finkelpearl: *Dialogues in Public Art*. London 2001.

POLITICAL ART IN ONE CITY[1]

Maxim Neroda

portrait

THE *CAT* GROUP

The *CAT* (*Contemporary Art Terrorism*) group was founded by myself, Yekaterina Drobysheva and Artyom Loskutov in 2003 as an experimental artistic group aiming to create political art in the local context of the city of Novosibirsk. For two years we devoted ourselves to studying the political and social reality upon which we intended to build a context for political art in Novosibirsk that might correlate with art outside Russia.

DE-MONSTRATION

To criticize existing practices of protest as well as the current social system, we created situations in which representatives of the authorities, business, the church and other repressive institutions were forced to appear in an absurd and comical role in the fulfilment of their formal duties, thus laying bare the absurdity of the way in which power functions. We decided to refrain from creating material works, trying to reach a point where it would be impossible to sell a work. We also refused to co-operate with cultural institutions, considering them to be repressive organisations that commodify and thus neutralise the artist's creative intentions. Our refusal to participate in the life of a closed artistic (or political) community notwithstanding, we still aimed to create art, or more precisely left-wing political art.

Our artistic tactics consisted in drawing unprepared passers-by into the process of creating a critical artistic statement, as a result of which everyone would partake in the product of our collective labour. During our public actions the system of values we were creating came into confrontation with a system that presupposes people's alienation from the results of their labour, thus visualising the relations of alienation in society for all to see. To prepare our actions and performances we used flashmobs[2] as well as mailing lists, which we perceived as alternative and uncontrollable media that preserved elements of a free flow of information and enabled people to organise themselves without external direction, thus eliminating the person of the organiser who might be subjected to penal sanctions.

Our first public action, a monstration, was organised as a direct critical action against a practice of protest that is taking on a spectacular character, expressed in people's readiness to display obvi-

portrait

ously fake slogans. We used the examples of the terms DE-structiveness, DE-construction and DIS-assembling and dissected the term DE-monstration, leaving only the constructive part, i.e. the monstration. Before the May Day demonstration, we published an appeal in the Web, inviting anyone who wanted to join our May Day monstration: every participant would bring a banner that would either be nonsensical or express a simple emotion. The very idea implied the principle of self-organisation, since a person who would display a political slogan at the monstration would automatically become part of the demonstration and thereby an object of our criticism.

A few days beforehand, the press carried headlines such as 'Novosibirsk's anti-globalists will display obscene and deeply personal slogans at the May Day demonstrations'. About 100 persons joined the monstration with self-made banners which the police immediately asked them to account for. The column of National Bolsheviks present at the demonstration numbered only 30 people, which gave our monstration the character and force of a political statement. The first banner, 'Tanya, don't cry!', was deemed anti-social, and the police demanded us to wrap up all the other banners and leave the demonstration. It was only thanks to the presence of numerous journalists that we were able to finish our procession. On Lenin Square five people were arrested and sent to the police station, where they were forced to sign a statement to the effect that the slogans 'Urrrgh!', 'Ah' and 'Something like this' do not constitute calls to overthrow the constitutional order.

A demonstrator at the Monstration 2005 with a home-made placard; 'Glück' is the German word for 'happiness'. (Photo by a participant of the Monstration)

Three participants were sentenced to a 500 rouble (18 USD, 10 GBP) fine. In response to this we carried out another protest, formulated as a conceptual reaction to the authorities' decision to punish us. We decided to conceptualise the mechanism the authorities use to identify danger. In response to their attempt to transform our artistic gesture into a violation of the law, we used the punishment as an occasion to make a statement. In a notice we published on the Web we announced that we were collecting coins up to 50 kopecks to pay the 500 rouble fine. In the end we collected around 700 roubles. The fine was paid after a long argument at the bank, in the course of which we made it clear to its employees that they were just as guilty as us.

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We regard all our activities as an artis-

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tic investigation into social relations under conditions of alienated labour, when workers are already able to buy their own means of production, but are nevertheless alienated from the result of their labour. As a political alternative, our public actions used artistic discourse to demonstrate the possibility of a different, creative attitude towards the product of labour.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

ENDNOTES:

1 The title alludes to Stalin's slogan of 'building Communism in one country', an expression that is now often used ironically.

2 Flashmobs are short-lived, seemingly spontaneous crowds in public places that are in fact organised via the Internet or mobile phones. Groups of strangers form very quickly, engage in some meaningless activity, then disperse immediately. Flashmobs weren't originally intended to promote any values or political aims; now, however, some flashmobs have a political background.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Maxim Neroda (born 1980) is an artist and curator. His main field of interest are artistic practices that can serve as political expressions of contemporary art in public urban space. He currently holds a Robert Bosch Foundation scholarship for cultural managers from Eastern and Central Europe.