

STUDIES IN ART HISTORIOGRAPHY

ROUTLEDGE

# New Narratives of Russian and East European Art

Between Traditions and Revolutions



EDITED BY  
GALINA MARDILOVICH AND  
MARIA TAROUTINA

# New Narratives of Russian and East European Art

This book brings together thirteen scholars to introduce the newest and most cutting-edge research in the field of Russian and East European art history. Reconsidering canonical figures, re-examining prevalent debates, and revisiting aesthetic developments, the book challenges accepted histories and entrenched dichotomies in art and architecture from the nineteenth century to the present. In doing so, it resituates the artistic production of this region within broader socio-cultural currents and analyzes its interconnections with international discourse, competing political and aesthetic ideologies, and continuous discussions over identity.

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# New Narratives of Russian and East European Art

Between Traditions and Revolutions

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## Note on Stylistic Conventions and Transliteration

This volume follows the Chicago Manual of Style and adopts a modified form of the Library of Congress transliteration system. In the interest of readability and familiarity, we use the English variants of place names, names of rulers, and commonly established spellings for proper names, for example, Moscow instead of Moskva, Nicholas I rather than Nikolai I, and Alexandre Benois, not Aleksandr Benua. In general, Russian names are given without patronymics unless necessary to avoid confusion. Diacritical marks, accents, and hard signs are generally omitted with the exception of accepted spellings of proper names, and the titles of institutions, movements and organizations, such as Jože Plečnik, János Kádár, and Fiatal Művészek Klubja. Soft signs are indicated with an apostrophe, except in cases of frequently used spellings in Western scholarship, such as Vrubel instead of Vrubel', Ilia Repin and not Il'ia Repin, and Natalia Goncharova rather than Natal'ia Goncharova.

The dates of artworks, exhibitions, important historical events, and the life and death dates for key figures are included in parentheses at first mention. Dates referring to events in Russia that took place before January 1918 are given in the Old Style. Subsequent dates conform to the post-revolutionary Gregorian calendar. The titles of artworks, exhibitions, books, and catalogues are italicized; titles of articles, chapters, and essays, however, are rendered in quotation marks. The names of societies, institutions, and associations are capitalized. All foreign titles are given in English with the original title transliterated in parentheses at first mention, except for recognized names and expressions, such as *Exposition Universelle*, *Peredvizhniki*, and *Pravda*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Russian or any other language into English are by the respective author.

# Acknowledgments

This volume grew out of two sessions of a panel entitled “Reconsidering Art and Politics: Towards New Narratives of Russian and Eastern European Art,” which was held at the 103rd Annual Conference of the College Art Association in New York in 2015. We are grateful for the support of the Society of Historians of East European, Eurasian, and Russian Art and Architecture (SHERA), which sponsored the panel, and to Richard Woodfield, who had approached us with the suggestion of expanding the papers into a book for the Studies in Art Historiography series. The present volume includes only a fraction of the material and ideas that were discussed during the sessions, but much of the scholarly dialogue that ensued helped to shape the direction and structure of the current publication. We would therefore like to express our sincere thanks to all of the scholars who had originally participated on the panel, as well as to the subsequent contributors to the volume, both for their inspiring scholarship and for pushing our field into new directions. It has been a real pleasure and privilege to work with and learn from all of them.

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„КАЖДАЯ КУХАРКА ДОЛЖНА УМЕТЬ



УПРАВЛЯТЬ ГОСУДАРСТВОМ.”

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*В.В. Вайсман*

# Introduction

## *Galina Mardilovich and Maria Taroutina*

Let them decry: “You’re beauty’s executioners!”  
We’ll burn up Raphael for our Tomorrow’s sake,  
trample art’s flowers and destroy museums.

We’ve cast off the oppressive burden of tradition,  
rejected the chimeras of its bloodless wisdom.  
Venus de Milo cannot match the vision  
of young girls in our Future’s shining kingdom.

[...]

Oh, poet-aesthetes, curse us—the Great Brute you fear!  
Kneel, kiss the splinters of the past beneath our feet,  
and wash the ruins of the shattered temple with your tears.  
We breathe another beauty—we are brave and free!

– Vladimir Kirillov, “We,” 1917<sup>1</sup>

In his iconoclastic poem, “We” (My), Vladimir Kirillov (1890–1937) embraced the spirit of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, enthusiastically asserting that the proletariat was ready to “burn up Raphael.” Much like Kirillov, an entire generation of artists, architects, writers, poets, and playwrights believed that the 1917 Revolution would replace the antiquated bourgeois art of “gold and ornament” with the new, defiant proletarian “machine heaven,” wrought from the “poetry of iron.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, as a number of scholars have recently noted, the idea of breaking with the past as espoused by many in the days and years after the October Revolution was not novel, but rather, often followed in the footsteps of predecessors, such as the Futurists in the case of Kirillov.<sup>3</sup> Just a few years prior in 1912, with their faces painted, David Burliuk (1882–1967), Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), and others had championed throwing “Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.”<sup>4</sup> Increasingly, the connotations of poems that have defined the energy and fervor of the Bolshevik Revolution, including Kirillov’s “We” or even Aleksandr Blok’s “Twelve,” are being problematized and contextualized.<sup>5</sup> The present volume contributes to this ongoing re-analysis by extending its interrogative eye to the realm of visual culture.

Such an intervention seems especially timely in light of the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution, which has generated a number of scholarly publications and museum exhibitions, signaling a significant surge of public and specialist interest in Russian and East European art. Blockbuster shows at the Royal Academy of Arts and Tate Modern in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Institute of

## 2 Galina Mardilovich and Maria Taroutina

Chicago, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, among others, have all offered important insights into the aesthetic, political, and philosophical debates that marked the production of some of the region's most radical works of art a hundred years ago.<sup>6</sup> The exhibition at the Royal Academy, for example, used the decisive 1932 anniversary exhibition of Russian art produced since the Revolution as a way to reframe the myriad voices and movements that had battled over the future course of an emerging Soviet Russia until they were silenced under the Stalinist regime. The Chicago exhibition, on the other hand, offered an “antihistorical” presentation and discussion of post-revolutionary Russian art, clustered around specific “overlapping spaces” like theater, festivals, demonstrations, in order “to chasten the impulse to align this culture with the familiar historical teleology that begins with the heroic events of 1917, proceeds through reconstruction and Thermidor, and terminates in the Stalinist terror of the 1930s.”<sup>7</sup> Nuancing the now proverbial claims of Kirillov's “We,” these shows have drawn out some of the heterogeneity and paradoxes that defined the revolutionary era in the visual arts.

*New Narratives of Russian and East European Art: Between Traditions and Revolutions* builds on this momentum in the field of art history and the impulse in Slavic cultural studies to push beyond established or often repeated histories. The thirteen essays presented here collectively tackle the lingering points of contention, including periodization and historicity, regional exceptionalism, and transnational exchange. In looking at these well-known themes, the case studies draw attention to novel ways of considering issues related to modernity, canonicity, memory, and artistic agency across the region. In fact, one of the volume's major strengths and leitmotifs is the expansion of both the chronological and geographical frames of reference, which allow for robust approaches that can serve as models for future research.

To date, most art historical scholarship has focused either on a particular era, such as the imperial, early Soviet, Stalinist, late Soviet, or post-Soviet periods; a specific medium, such as the fine or decorative arts, film, photography, or architecture; or a discrete geographical context, such as Russia, Yugoslavia, or Central or Eastern Europe. Thus, for instance, over the past decade the field of Russian art has witnessed the publication of a series of monographs and anthologies, which together have generated important insights into Russia's cross-cultural exchanges with the West, its momentous contribution to international modernism, and the complex relationship between the Russian art world and spirituality, religion, nationalism, and politics.<sup>8</sup> Analogous re-evaluations—and often complete introductions—of East European art, spearheaded by pioneers such as Steven A. Mansbach and Piotr Piotrowski, have similarly illuminated the breadth of works and styles produced in regions long perceived as stagnant and separate, developing not only behind the West, but also behind Russia and the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> Such studies have considerably revised and corrected conventional art histories. Indeed, the sheer richness and vastness of material showcased in these publications demonstrate that there is an urgent need for new approaches and tools to accommodate a more sophisticated understanding of the events, figures, and institutions that drove and transformed the arts of the region. Moreover, as Jeremy Howard has persuasively demonstrated in his seminal account, *East European Art, 1650–1950*, examining these developments across, rather than within, national schools uncovers neglected histories, parallels, and differences.<sup>10</sup> Howard's aim was “to sweep away a few of the cobwebs that have covered certain calcified preconceptions for generations,” and to show the continuities of artistic processes across regional and cultural boundaries, and this volume continues his initiative.<sup>11</sup>

## Contesting Periodization: Towards a Stratigraphic History of Art

As the title suggests, *New Narratives of Russian and East European Art: Between Traditions and Revolutions* takes as its starting point the binaries within which art historians, whether Russian, East European, or Western, have operated and have grown accustomed to seeing the art of this region. These binaries—traditions and revolutions—are both chronological markers and, consequently, perceived aesthetic ones. As the recent centenary exhibitions reiterated, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 has been and continues to be seen by scholars as the principal chronological divide in Russian history—and by extension, art history—one that separates, as if by an ocean, what happened before from what followed: the past in the form of a declining Russian Empire, from the brief glory of dizzying artistic innovation, the creativity of which was curtailed by the rise of Stalinism, and the subsequent anti-aesthetic, “non-art” of socialist realism. This lingering divide is undeniably the result of politics and the Soviet rewriting of history: the Bolshevik Revolution marked the beginning of its story and everything was reconfigured and reformatted to fit a new socialist narrative. That carefully crafted rewriting made a lasting impact on Russian and Soviet art historiography, as a result of which much of the work of nineteenth-century artists was either reinterpreted as precursors to socialist realism and officially sanctioned artistic production or deleted from the annals of history altogether.

The current trend in scholarship on the social and cultural history of Russia and Eastern Europe has been to redefine the Bolshevik Revolution as an impermeable historical barrier, emphasizing instead the fundamental continuities between the late imperial and revolutionary periods, and revealing important connections and interrelationships previously unseen.<sup>12</sup> By inserting art and architecture into debates on the legacy of the 1917 Revolution, this volume makes the current shifts in cultural methodology that much more rigorous—testing them even further and accounting for their missing components. More specifically, the thirteen essays together argue for the existence of multiple aesthetic traditions and revolutions and penetrate into the productive fault lines that lie *between* them. The volume focuses on the modern period from the early nineteenth century until the present day, but while it maintains to some degree the expected separation in time between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and after, the individual chapters linger in the in-between spaces and interrogate the ideological and aesthetic underpinnings of tradition on the one hand and revolution on the other. What makes something revolutionary in art? What defines a tradition? How have ruptures or conventions been conceived over time and how have artists engaged with them?

A major theme that emerges throughout the volume is the question of artistic agency, whether in the imperial, Soviet, or post-socialist contexts. From censorship under the tsars to that of Alexander Lukashenko, much of the art from the region has been discussed in scholarship in antithetical terms as being either militantly defiant or, on the contrary, wholly complicit with authoritarian regimes. Yet, as several scholars including Molly Brunson, Aglaya K. Glebova, and Christina Kiaer have advocated, ostensibly propagandistic or ideological art often possessed important aesthetic and subversive qualities and the divisions between official and unofficial art worlds were—and remain—much more fluid than is currently understood.<sup>13</sup> By analyzing the loopholes within these larger metastructures and by transferring agency back to the artists and the works of art, essays in this volume by Allison Leigh, Galina Mardilovich,

Kristin Romberg, Maria Mileeva, and Katalin Cseh-Varga, among others, reveal both the artistic dynamism and the individual autonomy that has not received much attention until now.

Bringing together diverse and at times dissenting theoretical perspectives and paradigms, *New Narratives of Russian and East European Art* showcases cutting-edge research and novel ways of rethinking—to use Howard’s term—“calcified” art historical canons. To this end, the contributors bypass the well-trodden territory of the historical avant-garde to consider the aesthetic theories and practices that preceded and succeeded it, while at the same time enmeshing its polemics and production within broader artistic dialogues. Moving beyond the linear trajectories of pre- and post-revolutionary art, the volume adopts a circular or “stratigraphic” model—as proposed by Jane A. Sharp in her essay. This model allows scholars to examine in tandem artistic practitioners, movements, and institutions that are typically viewed in antithetical rather than dialogical terms.

### Exceptionalism versus Transnationalism: An Old Debate Revisited

Beginning with Peter the Great’s (1672–1725) Westernizing reign, generations of intellectuals have viewed the region as not belonging either to the great philosophical and cultural traditions of the West nor to those of the East. In the 1820s, the philosopher Petr Chaadaev (1794–1856) bemoaned that the country had never “walked hand in hand with other nations.”<sup>14</sup> Lamenting further, he claimed that Russia was “isolated by a fate unknown to the universal development of humanity” and had “nothing that is ours on which to base our thinking.”<sup>15</sup> Nearly 170 years after Chaadaev’s writings, the contemporary Russian artist Ilya Kabakov (b. 1933) continued to echo the sentiment of Russia lacking underlying universal philosophical principles and aesthetic traditions. Discussing the differences between Russian and Western conceptual art, Kabakov explained that in the Russian context

things, ideas, facts inevitably [...] enter into direct contact with the unclear, the undefined, in essence with emptiness [...] It is like something that hangs in the air, a self-reliant thing, like a fantastic construction, connected to nothing, with its roots in nothing [...]<sup>16</sup>

Whether articulated from the inside or the outside, or framed by declarations of superiority or inferiority, such discussions have been predominantly structured by notions of the region’s alterity to and divergence from the West. For example, in his influential 1984 essay, “Modernity and Revolution,” Perry Anderson attributed the unprecedented advent and ascension of the Russian and Soviet avant-gardes to the country’s lingering “traditional” and “backward” political, economic, and cultural institutions.<sup>17</sup> He argued that this allowed modernist aesthetics to flower “in the space between a still usable classical past, a still indeterminate technical present, and a still unpredictable political future,” resulting in a more compressed, rapid, and dynamic experience of modernity than in the liberal and industrialized West.<sup>18</sup> Although initially compelling, accounts like Anderson’s have since been persuasively challenged by historians such as Laura Engelstein and Michael David-Fox, who have advocated examining the historical development of Russian and Soviet modernity and its cultural production in relation rather than in opposition to the world outside of its borders,

stressing instead its interconnectedness and not its isolation.<sup>19</sup> David-Fox in particular has contested the idea of Soviet exceptionalism, proposing in its place the concept of “entangled modernities,” which entails a more thorough assessment of specificities and commonalities and is characterized by cultural circulation, borrowing, and interaction.<sup>20</sup>

This concept is not entirely novel and closely parallels the notions of “alternative” modernisms and multiple modernities that have been theorized at length in art history and literary studies by postcolonial scholars including Partha Mitter and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar.<sup>21</sup> Mitter’s groundbreaking study of artistic modernisms in Asia has convincingly contested the efficacy of using methodologies developed in the West for understanding modernist and postmodernist movements *outside* of the West and has demonstrated the urgent need to reconsider assumptions about artistic movements, events, and developments. Taking cue from these compelling revisionist accounts of global and decentered artistic modernisms, *New Narratives of Russian and East European Art* moves beyond the hackneyed categories of self versus other, the metropole versus the margins, and originality versus repetition that are still prevalent in Western art history and under which the art and architecture of Russia and Eastern Europe are typically subsumed. The application of postcolonial theories to Russian and East European art history is a fairly recent phenomenon and one that opens up promising methodological horizons, especially in relation to art produced in the former Soviet republics and the Eastern Bloc. By the same token, given the specific history of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and post-socialist countries, chapters by Steven A. Mansbach, Nikolas Drosos, Tatsiana Zhurauliova, and Ksenia Nouril push back and problematize the uncritical application of postcolonial studies to the East European context. Their approaches instead endeavor to uncover both the differences and the cohesions across Russian and non-Russian narratives.

To this end, the volume brings together imperial, Soviet, East European, and post-socialist case studies to highlight the presence of similar dialogues and breaks in the arts across the region. It demonstrates simultaneously the conceptual and material interconnections in artistic praxis and the parallels in the lived experience of individual artists. Essays on Russian art are set alongside case studies that center on East European architecture, artworks, and exhibitions. While far from being exhaustive or definitive, the choice to incorporate these case studies is meant to disrupt how we have grown accustomed to seeing the regions as monolithic, or siloed. These examples add texture and upset the center-periphery and neo-imperial paradigms often employed for assessing either Russian or East European art, whether vis-à-vis the West, or the Soviet Bloc. It is imperative to note that these regional binaries, like the chronological ones, are frequently arbitrary. As historian Alexei Miller asserts, “regional narratives are indistinguishable from imperial or national narratives” and “in many cases, the variety of formulas for national identity that united or divided adjacent groups, even in the second half of the nineteenth century, was very broad.”<sup>22</sup> He notes how these distinctions are a version of “mental mapping,” in which we project backwards contemporary and constructed notions of difference.<sup>23</sup>

It is also important to bear in mind that the pillar institution of artistic production in the imperial period was itself a cosmopolitan and hybrid space. As Rosalind P. Blakesley has shown, students at the St. Petersburg Imperial Academy of Arts were largely taught by foreigners and the institution itself sponsored many of its graduates to study and work abroad.<sup>24</sup> Some of the most successful nineteenth-century Russian

artists, several of whom appear in this volume in essays by Alison Hilton, Maria Taroutina, and Andrey Shabanov, were themselves born in the imperial “periphery” and often came from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Ilia Repin was Ukrainian; Mikhail Vrubel had Polish and Tatar ancestry. Vasilii Perov came from the small town of Tobolsk in Siberia; and Viktor Vasnetsov spent most of his youth in the distant northern province of Viatka. Furthermore, artists such as Karl Briullov, or others like Vasilii Vereshchagin and Ivan Aivazovskii, operated comfortably both within and outside the Russian Empire, living, working, and exhibiting in Rome, Paris, Munich, and even Constantinople, securing accolades across Europe, and in the case of the latter artist, executing commissions for the Ottoman Sultan as often as for the Russian Tsar.<sup>25</sup>

### Beyond the Metastructures: Canonicity and Oblique Perspectives

The volume is organized chronologically, with some of the case studies overlapping to underscore both the specificities and pluralism of concerns within and across temporal boundaries. Separated loosely by the habitual marker of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the essays are arranged in two complementary sections: “Mobile Margins: Artists, Artworks, and Institutions” and “Visualizing Ideology: New Systems, Cold War Aesthetics, and Post-Socialist Memory.” As the chapters illuminate, however, rather than reinforce the historical divide, the new narratives that emerge underline the commonalities and multiplicities of layers, and the diverse and rich possibilities of art history in reconsidering this region.

Two of the essays, for example, redraw the familiar boundaries between artistic movements and styles by taking up an intermedial line of inquiry. In Chapter 5, Maria Taroutina traces direct conceptual, material, and institutional links between the inventive majolica works created by Mikhail Vrubel in the late nineteenth century and the ensuing experimentation in porcelain production and industrial design during the Soviet period. She both challenges and nuances the entrenched modernist narratives that dissociate fin-de-siècle intermedial experimentation from that of the neoprimitivist, constructivist, and productivist avant-gardes. Comparably, in Chapter 3, Galina Mardilovich questions the distinction between realism and modernism and explores what lingers *between* tradition and innovation in the art of Ilia Repin. Analyzing the inclusion of specific images in the background of one of Repin’s definitive paintings, *They Did Not Expect Him* (1883–88), Mardilovich argues that rather than simply reproducing the social, political, and historical events of the time—as it has largely been interpreted in historiography—this work engages with and rewrites the Western modernist paradigm. The canvas and its intermedial dialogue in fact highlight the potential of Russian art’s intentional intellectual transformation of French modernism to its own ends.

Allison Leigh and Steven A. Mansbach in Chapters 1 and 6 respectively, also draw attention to the limitations of categories prevalent in Western art history. Taking up questions of canonicity and originality, Leigh offers a new reading of Karl Briullov’s enigmatic Orientalist painting *Bathsheba* (1832). Interrogating the instability of gender, race, and representation itself in the work, she argues that Briullov bridged the gap between classicism and romanticism, between Russia and the West. In rendering the artist and the painting the focal point, Leigh provocatively probes questions of aesthetic hybridity, syncretism, derivation, and copy. Mansbach similarly puts pressure on

the persistence of hermetic categories by analyzing the architectural idiom developed by the Slovene architect Jože Plečnik, who combined modern technologies and innovative engineering processes with antique references and nationalist historical forms in the first decades of the twentieth century. Plečnik's simultaneous commitment to ideological reactionism and progressive aesthetics not only resulted in a series of unprecedented and original architectural structures, but also challenged the dominance of a monolithic model of Western architectural modernism with its focus on rationalism, internationalism, and anti-historicism. Mansbach's scrutiny of Plečnik's architecture thus reveals the extraordinary breadth and variation of modernism itself.

Following this line of inquiry, Nikolas Drosos (Chapter 9) and Jane A. Sharp (Chapter 13) examine the alternative paths that modernism took in the communist and post-communist contexts, respectively. Drosos eloquently explains how the socialist neo-avant-garde complicates the standard retelling of Western postwar art history, while Sharp examines the ways in which nonconformist Russian artists debunked the "avant-garde's mythic status," exposing the persisting solipsism of modernist discourse. While the idea of Russian and East European art's alterity to and divergence from the Western canon in the second half of the twentieth century is not new, Sharp's and Drosos's essays add complexity to the existing historiography by focusing on the ways in which the artists themselves recast their relationships with the avant-gardes of the 1920s.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the narratives of autonomy and medium-specificity that habitually accompanied postwar abstraction in the Western context, Drosos shows how artists of the Yugoslavian group EXAT-51 defended abstract painting's potential for social efficacy, thereby continuing Soviet constructivism's prewar program well into the 1950s and 1960s. Equally, Sharp demonstrates how Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich strategically upend the persistent story of the sudden rediscovery and resurrection of the early Soviet avant-garde—and especially of Kazimir Malevich—following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Elagina and Makarevich thematize the now obscured, but real, connections that had linked their generation to that of the historical avant-garde, self-consciously reimagining their own place within a global art history.

An investigation of the micro—rather than the macro—realities of artists working within authoritarian political systems is likewise proven as a productive approach in Chapter 8 by Maria Mileeva and in Chapter 10 by Katalin Cseh-Varga. In her piece, Mileeva analyses the debates and activities in the 1930s of the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists (MOSKh) in order to determine how artists formulated the concept of socialist realism, in addition to the official directives issued by the Communist Party. Scrutinizing the various campaigns against formalism and naturalism, Mileeva exposes the shifting roles of artists in the construction and articulation of socialist realist aesthetics, helping to nuance the enduring binary narrative between modernism and official art dictated by political bureaucracy. In her essay, Cseh-Varga examines how the formation of a second public sphere in Hungary during the 1960s and 1970s under the rule of János Kádár diversified and resisted authoritarian domination in the arts. Rather than existing as an unofficial subculture or a parallel counter-culture, Cseh-Varga shows how the second public sphere constituted an integral part of official doctrines, often oscillating between system-non-conformism and state support. So, for example, party-funded locations were frequently used for neo-avant-garde exhibitions, such as in the case of the 1966 and 1978 shows of the Studio of Young Artists. Together, Mileeva's and Cseh-Varga's essays demonstrate the importance of analyzing



artistic production under socialism as a lived experience, where cultural politics were often dictated from below as well as from above, reflecting a complex and multivalent Soviet and socialist artistic subjectivity.

Several essays in the volume break original thematic and methodological ground by examining canonical artworks, artists, and movements from oblique perspectives. These case studies prove that even well-known figures and pieces can be reinterpreted and understood afresh when subjected to a new set of art historical questions. Kristin Romberg (Chapter 7), for instance, explores how Aleksandr Rodchenko's formal choices for his book cover design for Frederick Winslow Taylor's *The Scientific Organization of Labor* reinforced, redirected, and resisted the medialogical and ideological possibilities that were available to him at the time. Romberg introduces the idea of "binary inversion" as a novel mode for interpreting a number of Rodchenko's graphic works from the 1920s, where content and forms imported from Western bourgeois culture were inverted—materially and conceptually—and made refunctionable under socialist conditions. Going one step further, Romberg links this binary logic to the dominant paradigm of black-and-white mass-media of the interwar period—print culture, photography, and film—and lays bare the metastructural limitations within which Rodchenko and his contemporaries had to operate.

In Chapter 4, Andrey Shabanov takes up the late nineteenth-century art group the Partnership for Touring Art Exhibitions, or the Peredvizhniki, but examines it from an unprecedented vantage point. He investigates the group's intermediary role between the decline of official salon-style exhibitions and the rise of independent artist-run shows in late imperial Russia. Drawing illuminating comparisons between the Peredvizhniki and the various European secessionist outbreaks in Munich, Vienna, and Paris, Shabanov contends that the Partnership paved the way for subsequent modernist exhibition movements in Russia, while concurrently exerting a lasting impact on the development of Russian art criticism. The group's exhibitions, according to Shabanov, compelled critics to adopt a more subtle and syncretic approach in their reviews as a way of navigating differences in the increasing number of exhibitions in Russia.

Much like Shabanov, Alison Hilton (Chapter 2) generates fresh insights into the late nineteenth-century realist movement by scrutinizing the well-known works of established Peredvizhnik artists such as Perov, Repin, Vasilii Surikov, Nikolai Iaroshenko, and Konstantin Makovskii from the perspectives of musicology and gender studies. Focusing on the character of Iaroslavna from Aleksandr Borodin's epoch-making opera *Prince Igor*, Hilton discusses how the portrayal of a new kind of strong, independent Russian heroine—first thematized by Perov in his painting *Iaroslavna's Lament* (1880), and subsequently adopted by other realist painters—marked a tectonic shift in the traditional constructions of gender roles. Hilton shows that the radical recasting of gender norms that has been widely attributed to the practices and polemics of the "Amazons of the avant-garde" of the late imperial and early Soviet period, such as in the work of Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, and Varvara Stepanova, had already begun to be felt in the art world during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Tatsiana Zhurauliova (Chapter 11) and Ksenia Nouril (Chapter 12) demonstrate that the relationship between identity politics and artistic production is perhaps still more charged and complex in the post-Soviet context. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, contemporary artists in the former Soviet republics and the Eastern Bloc have tried to grapple both with the decades-long legacy of Russian political, cultural, and linguistic domination and the abrupt end of the Cold War and the ensuing

dizzying shift to global capitalism and internationalization. In their respective essays, Zhurauliova and Nouril discuss the works of the Belarusian Antonina Slobodchikova and Lithuanian Deimantas Narkevičius and explore how these artists have engaged with the search for a coherent national identity and the fraught discourses of post-communist memory. Zhurauliova analyzes Slobodchikova's 2016 performance piece, *The Vote to the Ground. Ashes to Ashes*, in which the artist deploys "silence" and "apathy" as motifs of resistance and protest against the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko. The author asserts that Derek Parfit's philosophical paradox, the so-called "nonidentity problem," provides a useful methodological framework for understanding the cyclical temporality in Slobodchikova's piece. Despite the wrongs of the Russian Empire and the Soviet past, Parfit's theory suggests that contemporary Belarusians are not, in fact, worse off than they otherwise would have been. It reorients Belarusian subjectivity from a narrative of perpetual victimhood to one of active agency. Taking a similar approach, Nouril shows how Narkevičius's short films *Once in the XX Century* (2004) and *20 July 2015* (2016) tackle both the material legacies of the Soviet period—still visible in the urban spaces of contemporary Vilnius and other Russian and East European cities—and the lingering Soviet nostalgia associated with them. Without offering any easy answers, Narkevičius investigates to what extent the institutional, aesthetic, and cultural forms of the Cold War period continue to structure, conceptually and materially, the experiences of former socialist countries in the twenty-first century. By paying close attention to the distinct contexts of post-communist Belarus and Lithuania, Zhurauliova and Nouril eschew treating the former Soviet republics and the Eastern Bloc as a homogenous unit and instead demonstrate the unique manner in which the implementation of state-sponsored socialism and its disintegration played out across the region.

By reinserting lesser-known figures and overlooked events into art historiography, and offering enriched interpretations of major movements and canonical figures, the essays in *New Narratives of Russian and East European Art* invite the reader to consider several critical questions: how did artists, critics, and theorists from this region engage with their own outsider status in relation to centers of West European artistic production? How did their art and writing respond to developments in international politics and address issues of imperialism, nationalism, and religion? How did they navigate the divisions between official and unofficial art worlds, especially after the rise of Soviet rule and in the wake of its collapse? Finally, how does a re-evaluation of the art world that emerged from these territories allow us to rethink some of the dominant categories, narratives, and classifications of Western art history? Addressing these and other questions, the authors capture some of the richness and dynamism of a growing field and produce a new set of discursive frameworks through which to understand Russian and East European art.

## Notes

- 1 Vladimir Kirillov, "We" (translated by Boris Dralyuk), in *1917: Stories and Poems from the Russian Revolution*, selected by Boris Dralyuk (London: Pushkin Press, 2016), 43.
- 2 E. Bogdat'eva, "Poeziia zolota i poeziia zheleza," *Griadushchee*, No. 3 (June, 1918): 13; A. Mashirov, "Mashinni rai," *Griadushchee*, Nos. 1–2 (1920): 1. For a detailed discussion of this subject, see Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910–1925* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

- 3 Boris Dralyuk, “Iron Flowers,” 1917: *Stories and Poems from the Russian Revolution*, selected by Boris Dralyuk (London: Pushkin Press, 2016), 40.
- 4 Anna Lawton, ed., “Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (translated by Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle), *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51.
- 5 In addition to Dralyuk, see also for example, Olga Sobolev, “The Symbol of the Symbolists: Aleksandr Blok in the Changing Russian Literary Canon,” in *Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry: Reinventing the Canon*, edited by Katharine Hodgson, Joanne Shelton, and Alexandra Smith (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 123–155.
- 6 For example, see John Milner, Natalia Murray, and Ann Dumas, eds., *Revolution: Russian Art, 1917–1932* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2017); Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Malevich* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd, 2014); Leah Dickerman and Matthew Affron, eds., *Inventing Abstraction: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art; Distributed in the United States and Canada by Artbook/ D.A.P., 2012); Matthew Witkovsky and Devin Fore, eds., *Revolutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test* (Chicago, IL: The Art Institute of Chicago; Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, and London, 2017); Angela Lampe, Serge Lasvignes, Bernard Blistène, eds., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malévitch: l'avant-garde russe à Vitebsk, 1918–1922* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2018), republished in English as Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922* (New York, NY: Prestel, 2018). The State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow featured several exhibitions on the occasion of the centenary of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, including *Someone 1917*, *The Winds of the Revolution. Sculpture of 1918 – early 1930*, and *El Lissitzky*.
- 7 Devin Fore and Matthew S. Witkovsky, “Introduction,” in *Revolutsiia! Demonstratsiia!*, 19.
- 8 Key recent studies in the field include Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007); Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield, eds., *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Dennis G. Ioffe and Frederick H. White, eds., *The Russian Avant-garde and Radical Modernism* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012); Rosalind P. Blakesley and Margaret Samu, eds., *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014); Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757–1881* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2016); Molly Brunson, *Russian Realisms: Literature and Painting, 1840–1890* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016); Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharov, eds., *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017); Kristin Romberg, *Gan’s Constructivism. Aesthetic Theory for an Embedded Modernism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019); Maria Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019); and, Andrey Shabanov, *Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia: The Peredvizhniki, a Partnership of Artists* (New York, NY; London: Bloomsbury Academics, 2019).
- 9 Steven A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe, From Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *Riga’s Capital Modernism* (Leipzig: Leipziger Univ.-Verl., 2013); Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion, 2011). Other important studies include Jan Cavanaugh, *Out Looking In: Early Modern Polish Art, 1890–1918* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000). See also Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art. Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule, 1956–1989* (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Éva Forgács, *Hungarian Art: Confrontation and Revival in the Modern Movement* (Los Angeles, CA: Doplehouse Press, 2016); Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); and Beáta Hock and Anu Allas, eds., *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).
- 10 Jeremy Howard, *East European Art, 1650–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 11 *Ibid.*, 1.

- 12 For a recent reconsideration of this chronological marker in cultural studies, see Theodore Weeks, *Across the Revolutionary Divide, 1861–1945* (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); and Matthias Neumann and Andy Willimott, eds., *Rethinking the Russian Revolution as Historical Divide* (London: Routledge, 2018). There have also been several excellent volumes that resulted from the *Russia's Great War and Revolution, 1914–22* project, which reconsider the role of World War I in Russia and the Bolshevik Revolution. See for example, Murray Frame, Steven Marks, et al. *Cultural History of Russia in the Great War and Revolution, 1914–22* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2014).
- 13 See for example, Molly Brunson, “Vasily Surikov and the Russian Point of View,” *Art History* 41, no. 5 (October, 2018): 894–921; Aglaya K. Glebova, “Elements of Photography: Avant-garde Aesthetics and the Reforging of Nature,” *Representations* 142 (Spring 2018): 56–90, and “‘No Longer an Image, Not Yet a Concept’: Montage and the Failure to Cohere in Aleksandr Rodchenko’s Gulag Photoessay,” *Art History* 42, no. 2 (April, 2019): 332–361; and Christina Kiaer, “Was Socialist Realism Forced Labor? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka,” *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 3 (2005): 321–345.
- 14 Petr Chaadaev, “Filosoficheskie Pis'ma: Pis'mo Pervoe,” quoted in A. F. Zamaleev, *Rossii glazami russkogo: Chaadaev, Leont'ev, Solov'ev* (St. Petersburg: “Nauka,” S.-Peterburgskoe otd-nie, 1991), 30–31.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ilya Kabakov, *Zhizn' mukh. Das Leben der Fliegen* (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1992), 247–249.
- 17 Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 144 (March–April 1984): 96–113.
- 18 Ibid., 109.
- 19 See for example, Laura Engelstein, “Culture, Culture Everywhere: Interpretations of Modern Russia, across the 1991 Divide,” *Kritika* 2, 2 (Spring 2001): 363–94; and Michael David-Fox, “The Implications of Transnationalism,” *Kritika* 12, 4 (Fall 2011): 885–904.
- 20 See Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).
- 21 For example, see Partha Mitter, “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *The Art Bulletin* 90 (2008) 4, 531–548, and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
- 22 Alexei Miller, “Between Local and Inter-Imperial: Russian Imperial History in Search of Scope and Paradigm,” *Orientalism and Empire in Russia*, ed. Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander Martin (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2006), 142, 148.
- 23 Ibid., 150.
- 24 See for example Blakesley, “Introduction,” *The Russian Canvas*, 1–7.
- 25 Briullov won a First Class Medal at the Salon of 1834 in Paris. Aivazovskii was awarded the Legion de Honeur in 1857 and became a member of the Amsterdam Academy of Arts and the Academy of Arts in Florence. Vereshchagin held highly popular solo exhibitions throughout the US and Europe, including in London, Vienna, and Paris.
- 26 For example, literary theorist Mikhail Epstein contended that unlike the “existence of a single postmodernism in the West [...] two separate postmodernisms arose in Soviet culture, one in the thirties and another in the seventies.” The first of these resulted from the sudden termination of modernist artistic practices under Stalin, and the second arose in the wake of the decline and ultimate collapse of the communist regime. See Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 210.



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Part I

# Mobile Margins

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# 1 Blood, Skin, and Paint

## Karl Briullov in 1832

*Allison Leigh*

Out of love of art, Briullov left his native land and went under an unfamiliar sky to seek not inspiration, but improvements.

—*The Northern Bee* (1835)<sup>1</sup>

At some point in 1832, the Russian painter Karl Briullov (1799–1852) abandoned a work he had been struggling with for about four years (Plate 1). The picture, known only as *Bathsheba*, contains two figures set amidst an abundance of green foliage in a lush grotto. One of the two figures is a large female nude with her legs crossed demurely away from the viewer as she reaches up to adjust her headdress. Her gaze is directed out of the painting as a faint smile breaks across her lips. Years later, having seen the work in Briullov's studio in Rome, the art critic Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906) described the effect this nude had on him:

[...] amidst dense greenery flashes a bright sunbeam and bathed in this ray sits a beautiful Bathsheba, naked, straightening a loose, thick braid; she sits ready to go into the water, to swim. Her face is surrounded by light and shadow and is framed by her raised hands; her body, like a young Venus, is exactly like a shining lily, blossoming and fragrant, against the dark green background of the thicket [...]<sup>2</sup>

The other figure in the painting, a young black servant, sits crouched in the pool of water at Bathsheba's feet, gazing adoringly up at her face. Behind and around these two figures are the clothes they have ostensibly just discarded. A large dragonfly hangs poised in the air floating above them.

Briullov kept this painting in his Rome studio for the remaining two decades of his life, but there is no evidence that he worked on it again after 1832. It lingered in the same unfinished state for many years; only finally selling to a collector just before his death. Again, it was Stasov who recorded the details of the sale:

In the spring of this year, three Russian travelers, having seen *Bathsheba*, came one after the other to beg Briullov to sell it. But it was Mr. Soldatenkov, a Moscow merchant who had also visited Briullov's studio, who, barely having seen *Bathsheba*, immediately bought the work. That very same day he took her to his place [...]<sup>3</sup>

Years later, Soldatenkov reported that when he bought the picture the hands were unfinished and the canvas was punched through in this area.<sup>4</sup> Apparently Briullov, in



a fit of exasperation, had thrown his boot at the face of his heroine with enough force to break the canvas.<sup>5</sup>

What was it about the process of bringing this particular picture about that could have caused Briullov such fury? Several of the artist's contemporaries described his temperament as choleric in nature, and he was known for reworking his pictures to some large extent—his 1821 painting of the appearance of the three angels to Abraham was reworked eight times before it satisfied the demanding painter.<sup>6</sup> But only *Bathsheba* vexed him to the point of such an outburst. This work was singular in the artist's oeuvre for receiving this kind of violent treatment and understanding why this particular painting caused Briullov exasperation provides insight into the problems he faced while working abroad in these years. For, *Bathsheba* is a testament to the fact that from a certain moment (and this moment is debatable), the artistic traditions of Russia began to profoundly merge with those of Western Europe in unprecedented ways. Hybrid styles were created as Russian artists studied and worked in foreign centers like Rome, and artworks like *Bathsheba* demonstrate the blurring of demarcations between cultures and movements which occurred as a result. This painting reveals the singularity of Briullov's position as a Russian artist and sheds light on issues of cultural hybridity that he experienced in this period. In this sense, *Bathsheba* is but one example of the ways Russian artists operating in foreign centers negotiated their indebtedness to the Academic training they had received while simultaneously absorbing the avant-garde practices they encountered abroad.

In Briullov's case, this meant bridging the growing gap between classicism and romanticism, and also finding an identity for himself as an artist that would bring him success both at home and abroad. Perhaps nowhere is this admixture of influences and negotiations more apparent than in his unfinished *Bathsheba*. Analysis of the circumstances under which the work came about force us to operate in a refreshing realm beyond the normalizing binaries of difference that have come to characterize investigations of Russia and Western Europe. An exploration of this work allows for a recognition of the shifting, multi-layered messiness that was and is contained in such binaries as East vs. West, real vs. ideal, and even male vs. female (as we shall see). This case study demonstrates that what is so often called East and West or orient and occident was actually the site of vibration between mutual displacements and contingent interests. At the heart of Briullov's painting project was a fundamental instability, one that grew from his attempts at cultural and personal self-definition in this moment.

### The Land of Depravity

Aside from what was reported by Stasov and Soldatenkov, we know very little about the early conception and development of *Bathsheba*. Briullov probably began the work sometime in 1828, amidst a flurry of activity which typified his late twenties. It was but one project among many which took shape while the artist was a pensioner in Rome, where he had been sent by the Society for the Encouragement of Artists after completing his studies at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg in 1822.<sup>7</sup> His letters from these years attest to the industriousness that characterized this period in his life. He wrote to his brother in March of 1825 enumerating the many commissions he was beginning: "[...] I am very busy here: Mr. Samarin ordered five pictures in different sizes, Mrs. Nesselrode ordered another three paintings ("National Scenes"),

like Samarin [...] Tomorrow I begin a portrait of Samarin in oil and a watercolor of Mishenka Samarin.”<sup>8</sup> Three months later he described even more works in progress in his letter to the Society:

[...] on the urgent request of Countess Pototskaya, I had to make her portrait; then Prince Meklenburgskii also commissioned his portrait. Now, besides the above-mentioned copy I am working on in the Vatican [of Raphael’s *School of Athens*], I have started several paintings in the Flemish genre (*quadri di genere*) and at the request of her Highness the Countess (M. D.) Nesselrode I am painting five pictures representing different national and characteristic scenes of Rome. His Highness Prince Golitsyn also wished to have two paintings in this style and his Excellency (F. V.) Samarin ordered from me five such paintings. His Excellency K. A. Naryshkin ordered two of the same picture, the subjects of which I am free to choose at will.<sup>9</sup>

The following year all this work would begin to garner him some success. His first serious undertaking in Rome, a picture called *Italian Morning*, had been completed in 1823 and sent back to Russia where it was exhibited by the Society for the Encouragement of Artists in St. Petersburg before being presented to Tsar Nicholas I.<sup>10</sup> Critics were enraptured. Pavel Svinin wrote in the February 1826 issue of the Petersburg literary journal *Notes of the Fatherland* (*Otechestvennye zapiski*):

This painting has been sent by [Briullov] from Rome and provides new testimony of the first-class talent of this young artist who is travelling at the Society’s expense [...] The picture demonstrates some truly magical painting [...] It’s a complete delight.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, the Society itself was pleased with his effort in this work:

The charming work [*Italian Morning*] captivated equally all members of the Society [...] your first work outside the country proves clearly those great hopes that the Society has for you and which you will surely justify our having without any doubt. The committee found in your work beauty of the highest degree [...]<sup>12</sup>

This was encouraging praise for a young artist, and he tried to repeat and prolong it. But he also admitted that his style was going through a change under the influence of the foreign capital. He wrote home describing *Italian Morning* as his effort “to make an experiment” (“сделать опыт”) in a new kind of painting.<sup>13</sup> He tried to replicate the success in a pendant entitled *Italian Midday*, a work he hoped to finish more quickly than *Italian Morning* while using his new experimental mode: “For the most faithful arrangement of shadows and light, I am working on this painting in a real garden vineyard.”<sup>14</sup> Both this and other letters from the time attest to his growing focus on light effects. He took to working more and more outside and directly from nature.<sup>15</sup> His initial triumph proved somewhat elusive though. The Society was concerned that his model for *Midday* had proportions that were “more enjoyable [приятных] rather than graceful,” and they indicated their expectation that Briullov would return to the traditional goal of art centered on “the most elegant forms.”<sup>16</sup>

Concerns like these highlight apprehension over the effects that foreign travel would have on Russian artists. The members of the Society feared Briullov was beginning to deviate from the classical norms that had characterized his training at the Russian Academy. They warned him in 1825 that he should avoid “the French style that one unfortunately now sees in almost all the works of young artists.”<sup>17</sup> They similarly warned his brother Aleksandr, who was also a pensioner in Italy at the time, to be wary as he travelled to Paris the following year: “Now you find yourself in the land of depravity, be careful not to let yourself become corrupted without realizing it.”<sup>18</sup> Even Tsar Alexander I expressed frustration toward the end of his reign over the effects that foreign travel had on Russia’s native sons: “I swear never to send another one to complete his studies abroad, because they leave as piglets and return as swine.”<sup>19</sup>

Somewhere amidst all this rhetoric and Briullov’s own desire to experiment with new styles and forms, he began painting *Bathsheba*.<sup>20</sup> The subject was certainly a safe choice. From the beginning of his time in Italy, he had shown an interest in these kinds of Biblical scenes. Letters from 1823 indicate that he had intended to produce a painting on the story of Judith and Holofernes, but abandoned the idea a few months later due to “the difficulty of lighting.”<sup>21</sup> The night scene required by the subject matter diverged too far from his interest in bodies “illuminated by the sun.”<sup>22</sup> His mentor, the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, suggested bathing the scene in light, but this seemed an alteration too great for Briullov and he sought other subjects.

*Bathsheba* struck the perfect balance. It brought together the two elements that had granted him the most success thus far. It allowed him to pair a Biblical subject of the kind that had earned him the gold medal at the Academy in 1821 with the light effects and frothy genre fare that had gained him such commendation in *Italian Morning*. The biblical narrative purportedly shown in the painting was the story of how King David, upon seeing the beautiful Bathsheba bathing, co-opted another man’s wife, sending her husband to his death so that he could possess her. But Briullov’s work is a complete deviation from traditional iconography. Earlier paintings of the subject by other artists consistently contained either King David spying on Bathsheba from afar or a letter indicating his request for her to visit him.<sup>23</sup> Briullov painted neither—making his abandonment of the earlier Judith and Holofernes theme all the more ironic considering it was the divergence from history that proved unacceptable to the painter. *Bathsheba* certainly stemmed from his earlier Italian paintings stylistically—it contained the same conflation of the exposed female body with the verdant natural setting, and it repeated the artist’s fascination with the play of sunlight and shadow on human form. But it also forged into new (and rather dangerous) territory—territory that might strike viewers in Russia as corrupted by what the Society member had called “the land of depravity.”

The Biblical subject matter was in this sense a kind of insurance policy. It allowed him a moralizing pretense for the depiction of a nude while protecting him from the sort of accusations that had resulted from *Midday* showing a body “more enjoyable than graceful.” The Soviet art historian Esfir’ Atsarkina argues along similar lines, citing the true motivation for the Biblical subject as Briullov’s desire to depict a naked body. For Atsarkina, *Bathsheba* “served as a kind of summation of Briullov’s creative searches in these years.”<sup>24</sup> This is certainly true, but there is nonetheless still more to the painting than this. What Briullov’s work revealed was his growing interest not just in the nude, but also in the eroticism accruing to the naked female form in this moment. In the 1820s, Briullov for the first time found himself steeped in the Western European

emphasis on female nudity, but not simply the *académie* nudes that harkened back to Renaissance classicism. Rome in these years was a hotbed of artistic influence and exchange, and Orientalism was gaining in force across Western Europe. The exoticism of Eastern life exerted a strong lure for artists—regardless of their national origin.

Briullov was no exception. Beyond the Biblical title and his desire to show the play of light on naked female flesh, *Bathsheba* is in many pivotal ways a typical Orientalist painting. It contains some of the main surface elements which serve to demarcate the type: oily black skin is pitted against the soft blond whiteness of a large female nude; an uneven power dynamic between adoring servant and aloof master charges the work with tension; a bubbling fountain (complete with phallic spigot) creates a metonymic referent to sex; and exotic clothing is strewn about to reinforce and emphasize the titillation of the nudity. None of this is innocent. And from 1832 on, more and more oriental elements like these began to creep into Briullov's work. His portraits increasingly contained black servants, his sitters became more frequently decorated in oriental garb (decorative turbans, peacock feather fans), the men smoked hookah pipes, and fountains were never far from view.

But these details are slightly different from the usual Western brand of classicizing Orientalism. Here and there a certain strangeness seeps in, as if Briullov was struggling to articulate a discourse alien to him, one whose viewpoint did not, and perhaps could not, quite congeal with his own.<sup>25</sup> *Bathsheba* loosely coincided with the parameters of what the art historian Norman Bryson has called “the orientalism of the painting,” but more than anything it manifests its own imitation.<sup>26</sup> It is an impersonation that is heavy under the pressure of the tradition it is trying to emulate. In this work, one sees Briullov grappling with where the classical training of his past meets with the Orientalism of Western Europe in his present. For him, this meant having to wrestle with where tradition met fantasy, or to put it more bluntly, where the real met the ideal.

Perhaps nowhere does this discrepancy intersect more than in the motif of bathing. *Bathsheba* is, on the one hand, a complete sexual fantasy (recall Stasov's description of her as “a young Venus [...] exactly like a shining lily”). She is all smiling suppleness, the contours of her plump body highlighted by a burst of sunlight as she readies herself to slip into the cool water. She is also, in that same moment though, an unclean body—one that is preparing to perform the most banal tasks associated with personal hygiene. That reality of dirt, of the unclean body, is actually oddly emphasized in the work. Briullov's inclusion of the sponge in the left hand of the servant stresses the act of scrubbing that will soon commence. This detail is not superfluous; it ruins the fantasy. It is too practical to be purely Orientalist fiction. It is rare to find this motif in erotic bathing nudes coming from France during this period. The sponge makes the painting a bit out of sync with Western European Orientalism; it reveals a stylistic mispronunciation on Briullov's part.<sup>27</sup> To put this detail in a larger context: it will take another *five* decades before artists like Edgar Degas begin to include elements such as a loofah-like sponge in their depictions of female bathers.

### Skin: “Arab Servant,” “Negress-Handmaid”

Perhaps the starkest testament to Briullov's misarticulation of the Orientalist mode exists between the two figures themselves: the black servant's hand on Bathsheba's thigh is a striking transgression of the normal Orientalizing order. It is a place where

narrative becomes unglued. It is not exactly arousing, but not entirely innocent either; it leaves the viewer searching for easy answers in the realm of complicated explanations. Is this figure a eunuch? Would a eunuch enter the water his mistress is to bathe in? Could it be a female servant? But if so, why is the figure so androgynous? Why give us but the sliver of an earring when we could have the fullness of an exposed breast? And if the figure is neither a eunuch nor a female attendant, then what is the alternative? A young naked male servant gazing at his mistress while occupying her bathing water? The latter seems out of the question.

Descriptions of the painting by contemporaries and later historians have brought little clarification. Few seem to want to deeply analyze the ambiguity of the figure's gender identity. Seeing the painting before Briullov's death, Stasov called the figure a "negress-handmaid" ("служанка-негритянка") and gendered her definitively as female. A commentator in 1832 called the figure in the water an "Arab servant" ("арапка").<sup>28</sup> Most later scholars follow similar suit: Atsarkina calls the figure an "Ethiopian handmaid" ("служанка-эфиопка") and references to similar black servants in Briullov's portraits were usually referred to in the 1830s as "Arab" ("арап").<sup>29</sup> The use of the Russian word *arap* or *arab* to describe black figures shows the tendency, as in other European societies, to fuse disparate racial and cultural types in this period.<sup>30</sup> But it brings us hardly any closer to understanding how the black figure was received in its own time.

Yet, the position and location of the black figure's hand are unmistakably meaningful. Briullov found ways to foreground it by placing it so centrally in the composition and by lighting that area so oddly. The shadow that the dark hand should cast is instead lit as if from underneath. Each digit is carefully delineated, emphasizing the act of its touching. Briullov made sure to include the thumb as it too reaches around and skims Bathsheba's flesh, just breaking the threshold of the red garment behind, as if to remind us of a hand slipping under, breaking the boundary where clothes and skin meet. As though this was not enough, the artist arranged Bathsheba's hair so that it too would mimic that dark hand. Her brown hair – very nearly the same tone as the servant's skin – cascades over her upraised arm and grazes her supple flesh just like another hand, again emphasizing sensual contact and heightening the eroticism of the painting.

The idea of corporeal connection is further emphasized by the strange viewpoint contained in the work. We as viewers are posited such that we are *in* this work with the two figures in a dramatic way. Briullov arranged the composition so we are bound inextricably in the narrative because to see them, we must be in the water as well. We are forced to be, like the black servant, occupants of Bathsheba's bathwater. There is no outside here. No place where we do not get wet. This was not a singular arrangement for the artist. Briullov seemed to love the possibilities that depiction of figures in water like this could provide. He displayed bodies time and again so that we see not only the bodies outside, dry and autonomous, but also bodies under water, inside its fluid impermanence. In real life, one cannot fully grasp the sight of what is under this liquid realm in the way Briullov has. The *tour de force* of water's magnifying and shifting indeterminacy is a realm that can only be perceived transitionally. A body underwater is distorted; it morphs and becomes subtly amplified as light penetrates it. But Briullov has done the impossible: gripping the sight of these bodies by depicting them as if unaffected by water's moving viscosity.

The artist would return to this motif of figures in water several times in the late 1820s and early 1830s: in a watercolor portrait of Prince A. G. Gagarin as a small

child (Figure 1.1) and in an oil portrait of the Marietti family from 1834 (location unknown).<sup>31</sup> The latter painting figured seven family members arranged around a small body of water in an outdoor landscape. One of the children sits naked in the water as another, a slightly older sibling, wades in behind him. The portrait of Gagarin is similar. A toddler sits radiantly happy in a shallow pool of water as a leaf floats across the surface of the water, poised as it slides along the liquid transversely. It is a detail that is easy to miss, bridging worlds as it curls up and out and over. The fish in the watercolor functions analogously. We know it must be under the water, swimming beneath the surface just a few inches from the boy's chubby baby leg. But the fish looks



*Figure 1.1* Karl Briullov, *Portrait of Prince A. G. Gagarin in Childhood (Child in a Pool)*, 1829, watercolor on paper, 23 × 25 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.

at the same time to be floating on the surface like the leaf, broaching the space between moisture and air.

In all of these works, Briullov is playing with the notion of connective worlds. The people in all of these paintings reside dually: in water and out of it, dry and wet at the same time. They are, in this sense, metaphors for the artist's own odd position culturally and geopolitically. They exist in a bifurcated manner as he did—a Russian living in Italy, a classically trained artist experimenting with romanticizing Orientalism. These bridge figures are, in an even larger way, like Russia in relation to Europe—they reside, as Russia did, half in and half out—West of the Ural Mountains, technically part of Europe, but East of that, the strange Orient, the Russian blood forever mixed with that of Mongol invaders, the Russian Orthodox religion with no Rome and no pope. Briullov's figures swim in the pond that was Europe, but they remain somehow also dry and separate from it. All of this harkens back as well to the mysterious underside of that dark hand, charged with tension and meaning, like the leaf arching across the surface—all existing doubly, operating mysteriously in multiple realms.

The *Bathsheba* painting is singular. It endures, even in its unfinished state, as an archetype for the enigma of such hybridity. It demonstrates what might be called *Russian Occidentalism*: the incorporation of Western or Occidental motifs and styles that still remain oddly other, perpetually bearing signs of Slavic alterity. Russian Occidentalist works like *Bathsheba* contain allusions to a tradition to which they never quite belong, and the differences to their original referents form a web of interlocking registers of always almost peculiarity. Briullov presented viewers with a world of amalgamations in this work, but in the end, they amount only to shifting reflections that never quite succeed in conjuring an embodied whole. As he sought to possess conventions that were foreign to him, namely those of Western European Orientalism, an unevenness became apparent. The realization only made the disparity continue to grow. It proved frustrating enough that he finally threw his boot at the source of his pain. Along that trajectory, a whole world of tradition was sliding open, and into the rupture, light was becoming refracted in the prism of repetition that was his painting practice.

### Paint, or the Orientalist Canon

Repetition is actually central to understanding the place *Bathsheba* held for the artist. For Briullov painted this strange scene not once, but twice (Plate 2). This fact is suppressed in almost all the literature on the work and even to some extent by the museums that own them. The one that the State Tretyakov Gallery perpetually keeps on display is the larger 1832 version (Plate 1). To my knowledge, the variant work, held in the collection of the State Russian Museum, has never been on public view, and few scholars mention its existence. A publication featuring the paintings, drawings, and watercolors by Briullov held in the State Russian Museum's collection lists the work as a “version [вариант] of the *Bathsheba* painting of 1832 held in the collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery” and dates it to the “1830s (?)”<sup>32</sup> The same publication further describes the smaller painting as possibly a finished oil sketch for the final work or alternatively as a reduced copy. This problematizes things for a number of reasons, and it is worth considering carefully the few disparities between the paintings.

Beyond the change in overall size, there are only a few qualitative differences between the two works. The smaller *Bathsheba* has a slightly higher viewpoint, the laces of the sandals extend further down in the larger work, the loop in the red cloth

on the far left is realized differently, as are the overall folds in the white and red fabrics on the left. But the most important difference is between the figures themselves. The variant Bathsheba is slightly thinner and younger than her 1832 counterpart; the black attendant is a bit older, more muscled, and the smile of this figure is toothier. Even more significantly, the black servant in the smaller version is more masculine, or perhaps it would be better to say, more firmly in the realm of the male. Looking at the variant work, one is struck by the similarity of the black servant to another black attendant in Briullov's oeuvre. It seems the artist used the same model for both *Bathsheba* and a servant in the portrait of the Russian socialite Countess Julia Samoilova that he was completing at the same time (Figure 1.2). The black figure in the Samoilova portrait is consistently identified as male in the literature on that painting.<sup>33</sup> Thus all the evidence points to the servant attending Bathsheba in the variant as being male. This may largely explain why the smaller version of *Bathsheba* has rarely, if ever, been on public view.<sup>34</sup> The variant work makes the gender contrast between the two figures clearer, and is all the more shocking for doing so.

There was precedent in both Russian and Western European painting for the motif of female figures accompanied by black attendants.<sup>35</sup> But looking back to earlier Russian works, one finds that the trope is by and large reserved for portraits of the tsar or tsaritsa.<sup>36</sup> These representations became especially prevalent during and after the reigns of Peter the Great (1672–1725) and his daughter Elizabeth (1709–62). Peter acquired a number of Africans to embellish his court, including an Ethiopian man he called Abram Hannibal, who had a distinguished career of service in Russia.<sup>37</sup> Aside from these depictions, however, only a handful of Russian paintings and engravings show a black male servant with a white woman who is not a member of the royal family.<sup>38</sup> Most stem from the eighteenth century and demonstrate how fashionable it had become for wealthy Russian noble families to retain a black servant or two in their household.

While space does not allow me to conduct a full survey of works containing such biracial dynamics in Russian art, it is notable that the gender of the black servants is consistently and firmly established in these representations, making the lack of resolution for the black figure in *Bathsheba* all the more unusual. The lack of gender clarity in Briullov's picture is especially extraordinary considering the fact that the black figure is completely nude only in his work. No other depictions from the time feature a servant without clothing. The nudity should make the figure the most firmly identifiable, but no matter how closely one examines the genital region of the black figure in *Bathsheba*, it reads dually either as possessing a phallic outline or as the shadowed pubic region of a young female figure. It is both and neither at the same time—a hybrid of neuter sexlessness. Even outside of the Russian artistic tradition, this ambiguity simply does not hold true among French artists depicting Orientalist subjects. In works by the leading Western European Orientalist painters of the nineteenth century—from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres to Jean-Léon Gérôme and even the lesser-known Édouard Debat-Ponsan—the black servants depicted are consistently and firmly gendered female. Additionally, they are most often not entirely nude like Briullov's figure is.

Gérôme's 1870 *Moorish Bath* is a good case in point (Figure 1.3). It comes nearest to the overall subject matter of Briullov's work and contains some of the same central elements: nude white woman, black servant poised to begin bathing her, clothes cast aside but still visible. Despite all the similarities in content, it nevertheless remains an entirely different painting. It does not possess any of the same gender ambiguity.





Figure 1.2 Karl Briullov, *Portrait of Countess Samoilova*, 1832-34, oil on canvas, 269.2 × 200 cm. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, Washington D.C. Photograph by Edward Owen. Photograph © 2019, Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens.



Figure 1.3 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath*, 1870, oil on canvas, 50.8 × 40.6 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Robert Jordan from the collection of Eben D. Jordan. 24.217. Photograph © 2019, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Gérôme's work, like so many others by French Orientalists, features a black servant with breasts fully exposed; she wears a great amount of exotic jewelry and a head-dress—all of which help to establish her as female. Gérôme's black servant lacks the fundamental equivocality of Briullov's dark-skinned figure as much as the Russian artist's work lacks the subtle violent degradation which so commonly runs through Gérôme's works.<sup>39</sup>

This essential fault line continues if one expands even beyond the Orientalist genre and into modernist permutations of the interracial service dynamic. The oddity of Briullov's painting becomes even more apparent if compared to Édouard Manet's *Olympia* from 1863 or to the same subject reinvented by Paul Cézanne in 1873–74. For even as brushwork was opening up and facture progressed ever more towards abstraction, one can still recognize the black servants in these paintings as female. Briullov's figure, on the other hand, is the absolute hybrid androgynous body in painted form. And it matters because that figure is emblematic of the entire work's existence as an amalgamation.

### Blood: Briullo, Briullov, Brulloff

In *Bathsheba*, Briullov sought to speak from the authority of an archive not his own. He was, as a Russian artist, bound by the burden of multiple traditions in a unique

way. In the 1820s, as he struck out on his own, he had to find a place for himself in a world that had suddenly become for him much larger. Living in Rome, he was exposed to the Western canon in a way that was new and profound. His letters attest to the excitement of these experiences. He wrote to his brother in 1829: “Tell Papa that I have finally ceased to be angry with his preference for England, Italy, and Rome—Rome, glorious Rome! Where Raphael and Michelangelo battled, each reaching for the laurel crown, challenging each other for the wreath of eternity [...]”<sup>40</sup> But Raphael and Michelangelo were not the whole story. For works by the great artists of the Renaissance were also intersecting with his exposure to contemporary painters from all over Europe working in Rome.

Other Russian artists in Italy in the same years as Briullov reported the mixing of nations that characterized life in the city. In his memoirs, the engraver Fedor Jordan, who knew Briullov well and arrived in Rome in 1835, wrote:

Two famous institutions known to every foreign artist, to anyone who visits Rome, are the Trattoria della Lepre and the Caffè Greco [where] you will find inhabitants of every country on earth. At every table they speak their own language, and among these Russian reigns supreme for the level of uproar and debate.<sup>41</sup>

Amidst this hubbub, Briullov had to find a way to locate himself artistically in relation to the Western works (both old and new) that he was absorbing. But he still owed a debt to Russia and his training at the Academy there.<sup>42</sup> To make matters worse, there was a lingering perception that Russian pensioners working in Western Europe were little more than slavish imitators of Western European works. A foreign visitor to Russia as early as 1812 stated the problem succinctly:

Every Russian is obsessed with copying the Frenchman, the Englishman or the German [...] If he is told that a work of art is by a native artist, he will without fail try to find its shortcomings and will insist that you can never expect anything good from a Russian [...] You come across this unfortunate conviction quite frequently. It drives painters and artists to despair [...]<sup>43</sup>

In the years Briullov worked on *Bathsheba*, the tension over foreign influences came to a climax. Surrounded by Western European works, but firmly grounded in the traditional classicism of the Imperial Academy, Briullov found himself caught between having outgrown his training and not wanting to be accused of mere imitative parroting. A biblical subject that let him experiment with the nude female form provided a solution, especially if he handled the content such that it indulged the taste for exoticism that was on the rise. Manipulating the traditional iconography of Bathsheba by adding a black servant provided him a means of exploring this new territory. And as an added bonus, this configuration would allow him to deny his own Eastern otherness. Blackness created a space in which he, as a Russian artist, became aligned more thoroughly with white Europeanism. That black servant in its very undecipherability created a space for him to explore self-definition in opposition. *Negritianka*, *efiopka*, *arap*—it did not really matter what the perception was—all of them were more “other” than he was.

Invoking Orientalism meant assuming a tradition of racism and conquest that was not his own though, and traces of the work he had to do to get there abound. To deny his own Eastern alterity, he had to over imply the difference of another.

This had strange, unresolvable consequences. In this realm of ethnic self-conception as comparative negation, there was no ultimate solution. Hence his inability to finish the work, his angry boot-throwing, and his bizarre copying of the subject despite its endless irresolution. Ultimately, what Briullov produced in *Bathsheba* showed his lack of fluency in the Western Orientalist mode. It was like a translation which failed as Briullov changed too many of the stress patterns, as he mispronounced and rearticulated the motifs in strange ways. Briullov's desire to work in the Oriental mode, to speak in its language, reveals a fundamental insecurity overall.

Translation proves a problem in Briullov's oeuvre as a whole. For there was one more major difference between the two versions of *Bathsheba* discussed earlier. The smaller "variant" version in the Russian Museum was actually signed by the artist, whereas the 1832 Tretyakov picture was not. In the variant, Briullov signed the work in red paint around the overflowing spigot on the far bottom left: **К. П. Брюлло**. And this brings to the fore a larger issue of cultural identity negotiation within the artist's body of work. At different times, in different pictures, Briullov chose to variously sign his works—more so than any other Russian artist I have encountered. Sometimes he used Cyrillic, signing either with just his initials **К. Б.**, or with different spellings of his name, either **Брюлло** or **Брюлловъ**.<sup>44</sup> If this amount of variation was not enough, he also sometimes used a Latin transliteration of his name, but again, with great variation in spelling: **Brullov**, or alternatively, **Brulloff**.<sup>45</sup> There is even one work from his Italy period that he signed **Бришка**—a diminutive version of his last name.<sup>46</sup>

These multiples and variations demonstrate Briullov's anxiety about his place as a Russian living in the West, an apprehension that may have been in his family for over a century. The artist had, in fact, been born and baptized Karl Pavlovich Briullo (Карл Павлович Брюлло). It was not until 1822 that Tsar Alexander I granted both Karl and his brother Aleksandr the name ending of "въ" (a Russification of the name) before their departure for Italy.<sup>47</sup> Even further back, the family's name had been yet another variation: **Bruleleau**. The family had originally fled France with other Protestants after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, eventually landing in Russia in 1773, when Karl's great-grandfather Georges began working at the St. Petersburg Imperial Porcelain Factory.<sup>48</sup>

All of these names and their various links with Eastern and Western cultures constitute something highly problematic for Briullov. For every time he signed his name to a painting, he evoked all these lineages of association and attempts at their translation. His various signatures demonstrate a desire to integrate and adapt to his circumstances; they attempt to substantiate and make public a new understanding of himself. In this sense, their multiplicity reveals a deep aspiration to gain belonging and a willingness to mold himself endlessly to fit Western standards (as he perceived them). Briullov was not the first, nor would he be the last, Russian artist to grapple with his signature and the various possibilities for its transliteration.<sup>49</sup> But the sheer diversity of forms his own name took over two decades demonstrates starkly his status as a culturally liminal artist. He remained persistently in-between, neither entirely Russian, nor European enough. The signatures are a testament to the profoundly insecure hybridity which resulted from existence on such a fault line.

The signatures show Briullov's multiple existences and the compound versions of *Bathsheba* likewise attest to his feeling of multivalence and equivocation. Brullov and Briullov, East and West, male and female, black and white—all demonstrate an anxiety about classification and definition. Every work proved but an evocation of something

else, and searching for an origin became like trying to fix the sight of an object at the bottom of a pool. In all of these works, Briullov showed himself caught in a vague middle, bound to the classical tradition he was outgrowing, seeking now to reorient himself by aligning against a more Eastern other, that of the Oriental, the dark-skinned, the exotic-erotic. But Briullov's articulation of the Oriental mode in *Bathsheba* was a translation of a Western European style that revealed an essential instability. French Orientalism or Russian Occidentalism, no matter what it is called, in the end painting *Bathsheba* meant integrating several disparate traditions. In the process, strange problems arose, ones that proved insurmountable for the artist. For as the influences grew, they became conflated with further multiplicities: the realness of the unclean body versus the fantasy of its nudity, the ambiguity of a black servant who is neither quite female nor male, the bodies half in and out of water, the versions and variants of the work itself, the array of Briullov's signatures. A constant wormhole, all that can ever really be glimpsed is the bridge between them all, moments where skin and blood and paint all mixed together to become something strange, but enduringly beautiful.

## Notes

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- 1 Anonymous, *The Northern Bee*, no. 5, 1835, quoted in N. G. Mashkovtsev, *K. P. Briullov v pis'makh, dokumentakh i vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (Moscow: Akademii khudozhestv, 1952), 36. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- 2 Vladimir Stasov, "The Last Days of K. P. Briullov and the Works Remaining After Him in Rome," from a letter to the editor of *Otechestvennye zapiski*, July 31 (August 12) 1852, quoted in Mashkovtsev, *Briullov v pis'makh*, 258. The complete essay can be found in Vladimir Stasov, *Sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg, 1894), Vol. I: 17–34.
- 3 Ibid., quoted in Mashkovtsev, *Briullov v pis'makh*, 258.
- 4 Soldatenkov told Pavel Tretiakov in 1891: "I bought Briullov's painting *Bathsheba* from him personally in Rome in 1852. The hands are unfinished—one of them was punched through [*probita*]," quoted in E. N. Atsarkina, *Karl Pavlovich Briullov: zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Isskustvo, 1963), 500.
- 5 Several sources report Briullov's action. In his *Material dlia istorii khudozhestv v Rossii* (published in Moscow in 1863), Nikolai Ramazanov noted that "...in a moment of dissatisfaction with the work, it was breached by a boot that was put into it by the artist..." (184). See Mashkovtsev, *Briullov v pis'makh*, 71, and also Galina Leont'eva, *Karl Briullov: The Painter of Russian Romanticism* (St. Petersburg: Aurora Art Publishers, 1996), 8.
- 6 On Briullov's temperament, see M. N. Zheleznov's "Review of Paintings" from 1898 (no. 27–33) in which he described the painter's "choleric character [*zbelchnomu kharakteru*]." See Mashkovtsev, *Briullov v pis'makh*, 249. On reworking paintings, see Galina K. Leont'eva, *Karl Pavlovich Briullov*, 2nd ed. (Leningrad: Khudozhnik, 1991), 8.
- 7 Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757–1881* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 142.
- 8 Karl Briullov to Aleksandr Briullov, Rome, March 1825, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, ed. I. A. Kubasova (St. Petersburg, 1900), 72–73.
- 9 Karl Briullov to the Society for the Encouragement of Artists, Rome, 17 July 1825, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 81–82.
- 10 Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, 142.

- 11 Pavel Svinin, "Vystavka iskusstvennykh proizvedenii ot Obshchestva pooshchreniia russkikh khudozhnikov," 70 (February 1826), 345, quoted in Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, 80.
- 12 Society for the Encouragement of Artists to K. P. Briullov, St. Petersburg, 1825, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 83.
- 13 Karl Briullov to the Society for the Encouragement of Artists, Rome, 17 October 1825, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 85.
- 14 Karl Briullov to the Society for the Encouragement of Artists, Rome, 24 October 1826, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 91.
- 15 Briullov describes working outside in these years and his pupil G. G. Gagarin attests to his *plein air* practice at the time. See Briullov's letter to the Society for the Encouragement of Artists on 24 October 1826, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 91.
- 16 Society for the Encouragement of Artists to Karl Briullov, 19 June 1828, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 102.
- 17 Letter from the Society for the Encouragement of Artists to Karl Briullov, 31 January 1825, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 80, quoted in Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, 145.
- 18 Letter from Petr A. Kikin to Aleksandr P. Briullov, 30 September 1826, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 89, quoted in Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, 145.
- 19 V. M. Faibisovich, "Aleksandr I i iziashchnye iskusstva", in *Aleksandr I: 'sfinks, ne raz-gadannyi do groba'*, ed. A. I. Barkovets et al. (St. Petersburg: State Hermitage Museum, 2005), exhibition catalogue 159, quoted in Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, 137.
- 20 By 1828 the artist was making studies for the work: a pencil drawing in the collection of the State Russian Museum shows two variants of the Bathsheba composition as well as studies of tree branches and geometric shapes (dated 1827–30) and two albums in the collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery (dated 1824–31) contain sketches for the work. See Atsarkina, *Briullov: zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 387, 481.
- 21 Karl Briullov to the Society for the Encouragement of Artists, Rome, 9 December 1823, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 34. He first mentions the Judith subject as the plot for a painting in a letter to P. A. Kikin, Rome, 10 October 1823. See *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 28.
- 22 Karl Briullov to the Society for the Encouragement of Artists, Rome, 9 December 1823, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 34.
- 23 Most scholarship on the painting simply recounts the biblical story of Bathsheba and King David without discussing Briullov's deviation from traditional iconography. One important exception which discusses the work in the context of other paintings on the subject is Margaret Samu, "Of Baths and Baniyas: Bathers in Russian Painting and Prints" (unpublished master's thesis, Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, 2004), 12–13.
- 24 Atsarkina, *Briullov: zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 62.
- 25 I am borrowing this notion of the struggle to articulate a discourse from Adrian Rifkin's discussion of the letters and notebooks of Ingres and Girodet. See Adrian Rifkin, *Ingres Then, and Now* (London: Routledge, 2000), 11.
- 26 Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 139.
- 27 A particular fascination with the unclean nature of the Oriental female body lingered in Briullov's works. Two watercolors and two unfinished oil paintings titled *By Allah's Order Underwear Should Be Changed Once a Year* were made in 1845 and demonstrate his continued interest in Eastern rituals of feminine hygiene. These works also notably show a nude white woman changing her linens with the assistance of a clothed black servant. The watercolors are in the collections of the State Tretyakov Gallery and the Russian Museum; the oils were listed as part of private collections in Atsarkina, *Briullov: zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 360.
- 28 Nikolai Ramazanov, *Material dlia istorii khudozhestv v Rossii* (Moscow, 1863), 184, quoted in Mashkovtsev, *Briullov v pis'makh*, 71.
- 29 Atsarkina, *Briullov: zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 62.
- 30 Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1986), 59.
- 31 A reproduction of the lost Marietti family portrait can be found in Atsarkina, *Briullov: zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 340.

- 32 V. A. Gusev, E. N. Petrova, and G. N. Goldovskii, *Karl Pavlovich Briullov: 1799–1852: Zhivopis'. Risunki i Akvarel' iz Sobraniia Russkogo Muzeia* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 1999), 170.
- 33 Kristen Regina uses male pronouns in her description of the figure. See Kristen Regina, “Love Letter to a Goddess,” *Apollo* 165, no. 544 (June 2007), 64. Contemporary viewers also typically gendered the black attendant in the painting as male. See the article “Barbiere di Siviglia” (20 September 1834) translated from the Italian by M. I. Zheleznov, which notes that the “noble lady” is “with a small arab [*s malen'kim arapom*].” Another article translated by Zheleznov, “Biblioteca Italiana,” (also from September 1834) mentions that the woman is accompanied by a “little arab [*arapchonkom*]. See Mashkovtsev, *Briullov v pis'makh*, 100, 102.
- 34 This probably also explains why the work is continually hung at such a high level in the State Tretyakov Gallery. The painting is decidedly difficult to view up close and can only be seen as a whole from more than ten feet away.
- 35 Jennifer Palmer has done important work on understanding this trope in French painting in an earlier period. See Jennifer Palmer, “The Princess Served by Slaves: Making Race Visible through Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Gender & History* 26, no. 2 (August 2014), 242–262.
- 36 See for example Georg Christoph Grooth’s *Portrait of Elizabeth Petrovna on Horseback Accompanied by a Negro Servant*, 1743 (State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) or Gustav von Baron Mardefeld’s *Peter the Great with a Black Page*, 1720 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).
- 37 Blakely, *Russia and the Negro*, xi, 14.
- 38 Examples of such works include the *Portrait of an Unknown Woman with an Embroidery Frame and an Arab Servant* made by an unidentified artist in the 1770s (State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) and an engraving of Princess Ekaterina Dolgorukaia with a black servant (reproduced in Blakely, *Russia and the Negro*, 14).
- 39 One of the few figures marked by the kind of gender ambiguity contained in Briullov’s work might be found in Eugène Delacroix’s *Massacre at Chios* of 1824 (Louvre Museum, Paris). Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby makes a claim for the male *académie* nude in the foreground of the painting having begun as a female model named Aspasia. She believes the figure morphed over time into the male that can now be found in the final work, but that it remains nonetheless a “decidedly hybrid character.” See Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 259–266. I also investigate Aleksandr Ivanov’s use of female models for male figures in *Picturing Russia’s Men: Masculinity and Modernity in 19th-Century Painting* (forthcoming from Bloomsbury in 2020).
- 40 Karl Briullov to F. P. Briullo, Rome, 3 December 1829, in *Arkhiv Briullovyykh*, 112.
- 41 Fedor Iordan, *Zapiski rektora i professora Akademii khudozhestv Fedora Ivanovicha Iordana* (Moscow, 1918), 149, quoted in Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, 114–15. For more on Iordan’s time in Rome, see Galina Mardilovich, “Reproducing *il primo quadro del mondo*: Fedor Iordan’s engraving of Raphael’s *Transfiguration*, 1835–1850,” [www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick](http://www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick) (3) 2016, special issue *Mobility of Artists in Central and Eastern Europe between 1500 and 1900*, eds. Aleksandra Lipińska and Stéphanie Baumewerd.
- 42 Until he severed ties with the Society for the Encouragement of Artists in 1829, he was still dependent on them for financial support. *Bathsheba* was one of the first works he tried to bring to completion once he had finally struck out on his own.
- 43 I. Rua, *Vospominaniia o kampanii 1812 goda i o dvukh godakh plena v Rossi* (St. Petersburg, 1912), 117, 119, quoted in Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, 167.
- 44 To cite but one example of each: *Portrait of a Man* (1838, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) is signed with just his initials “К. Б.”; *Bathsheba* (1830s, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg) is signed “К. П. Брюлло”; *Portrait of the Sculptor I. P. Vitaly* (1836–37, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) is signed “К. Брюлловь.”
- 45 *Portrait of a Gentleman* (1826, watercolor sold at Sotheby’s London in May 2002) is signed “Brullov”; *Portrait of O. I. Orlova-Davydova with her Daughter* (1834, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) is signed “Brulloff.”
- 46 *Woman at Window* (1826, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg) is signed “Бришка.”

- 47 Galina Georgievna Sorokina, *Pushkin: Neizvestnoe ob izvestnom: izbrannye materialy, 1994–1998* (Moscow: Avtograf, 1999), 107.
- 48 Leontyeva, *Karl Briullov*, 8.
- 49 Ilya Repin would later in the century sometimes sign his works twice (in both Cyrillic and Latin letters). This kind of double signature can be seen clearly in his *A Parisian Café* (1875, Private Collection). For an assessment of the meaning of the dual signature in this work, see my essay: “Il’ia Repin in Paris: Mediating French Modernism,” *Slavic Review* 78, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 434–455.



## 2 Iaroslavna's Lament and Its Echoes in Late Nineteenth-Century Russian Art

*Alison Hilton*

*Prince Igor*, considered the first heroic opera on a Russian theme, embodied profound changes in concepts of nationalism and heroism in the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> While Aleksandr Borodin (1833–1887) worked on the opera in the 1870s, artists such as Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926), Vasilii Vereshchagin (1842–1904), Vasilii Surikov (1848–1916), and others were also producing major paintings on themes of war, conflict, and sacrifice, confronting the tragic events of their time. Borodin introduced a powerful new voice in Iaroslavna, the wife of Prince Igor, who becomes defender of her city. The story, based on a version of a medieval tale, is set during the late twelfth century, when tribes from the East were invading Russian territory. Prince Igor decides to march against them, but is defeated and captured, leaving the small city Putivl to face disaster. Iaroslavna's aria at the end of the opera gives a new meaning to heroism. Women were rarely protagonists in either opera or painting on historical themes, but they appeared as witnesses and mourners, adding universality through their identification with the sorrowing land. But the painter Vasilii Perov (1834–1882), much like Borodin, portrayed the heroine on the battlements of her city (Plate 3), a strong, upright figure strikingly different from his previous images of women as victims. The significance of Iaroslavna for Borodin, Perov, and their contemporaries is the focus of this chapter. Examining her role through perspectives of musicology, art history, and gender studies sheds light on the sweeping social and cultural changes in late nineteenth-century Russia.

Several interlocking elements set Borodin's opera and Perov's painting of Iaroslavna within a framework of tensions between old and new ideas about Russia's historical destiny. Historicism and often medievalism were part of a process of creating and promoting national identities in the arts of many countries in this period, and the anonymous *Tale of Igor's Campaign* was of great interest in Russia in the 1870s. Interpretations of early history in literature and historical painting of Russia centered around the formation of Kievan Rus' in the tenth through the twelfth centuries and the periods of encounters with Western European powers and resulting changes in identity in the sixteenth century and after. By the mid-nineteenth century, interpretations of earlier periods were shaded by awareness of contemporary political and social issues, especially those connected with wars in Europe and Central Asia. For historians and artists more concerned with contemporary issues, the condition of women became a barometer for the health of the nation as a whole. On the one hand, peasant women and the urban poor embodied endless suffering, while on the other, the gradual rise of educated and strong women seemed to offer promise of social progress for the future. Equally, for creative artists, particularly members of the so-called national schools of

composers and painters, known as the Mighty Handful (*Moguchaiia kuchka*) and the Wanderers (*Peredvizhniki*), it was essential to develop not only relevant content but appropriate styles of presenting both traditional Russian themes and contemporary issues.<sup>2</sup>

Russian composers and artists drew upon the defining cultural values embodied in the early Kievan warrior tradition. The song of the bard Boyan, heard in the opera and portrayed by Viktor Vasnetsov in his later painting *Boyan* (c. 1910–12), is clear, positive, and enduring. The valiant comradeship of the *druzhina*, the princely retinue, the core of chronicles and folk legends of pre-Mongol Russia, have counterparts in the West, in the roughly contemporaneous Arthurian and Roland cycles, and later in the Ossian saga. Perennially appealing, these portrayals of warriors are one dimensional and, ultimately, false.<sup>3</sup>

What is missing from these pictures? The physical reality behind the glory of battle meant brutality for the dead, wounded and captives, and devastation for the land. Women are absent from scenes of military comradeship. They appear, usually marginally, as victims and mourners. Yet the themes of loss and lamentation, already voiced briefly in the twelfth-century Tale and a few later chronicles, became almost unavoidable in the nineteenth century, after years of wars in the Balkans and Central Asia. Mourning women became prominent in mid-century realist paintings by members of the *Peredvizhniki*, colleagues of the Mighty Handful composers.

Artists treated the subject of war from dual perspectives, expressing the reactions of those left behind as well as those going to battle in distant lands. Among the best-known realist works on the subject, Konstantin Savitsky's *To the War* (1880–87) and Iliia Repin's (1884–1930) *Leave-taking of the Recruit* (1879) describe the frantic fear of the ordinary peasant recruits and their families. Ivan Kramskoi's *Greeting the Returning Army* (1878) contrasts the celebration for returning troops with the private sorrow of the woman weeping in the shadowed interior. The most compelling anti-war works were by Vasiliï Vereshchagin and include the unforgettable *Apotheosis of War* (1871) as well as a series of ruthlessly accurate records of the campaign around Plevna in the Russo-Turkish War between 1878 and 1880. His best-known battlefield scenes, *Skobelev at the Shipka Pass* (1878–79) and *The Vanquished: A Panakhida* (1877–79) filled the foreground with fallen bodies and aroused extreme reactions. *The Road of War Prisoners* (1878–79) shows a stretch of the road from Plevna to the Danube strewn for at least thirty miles with the frozen bodies of wounded Turkish prisoners. Although Vereshchagin himself had tried to help the dying, his painting shows no action, just the aftermath of the death march. The artist wrote that the bodies were “crushed into the snow” by passing gun-carriages so that it was “impossible to extricate them without spoiling the road.”<sup>4</sup>

Vasnetsov responded to these difficult images with sympathy, but quite differently. He ennobled their moral content: from disillusionment to doom, from hideous pain to patriotic sacrifice. *After the Battle of Igor Sviatoslavich with the Polovtsians* (1878–80) (Figure 2.1) is not realism but poetic idealization.<sup>5</sup> Both Vasnetsov and Vereshchagin lay claim to universality, and they do so by combining extreme concreteness of detail with a very broad horizon. The emphatic horizontality of their respective compositions implies continuity beyond the frame, a device used repeatedly by realist artists and writers, regardless of whether the subject is historical or modern. For example, Repin's contemporaneous *Religious Procession in Kursk Province* (1881) shows how the superstition of peasants and the greed of timber merchants despoiled



Figure 2.1 Viktor Vasnetsov, *After the Battle of Igor Sviatoslavich with the Polovtsians*, 1878–80, oil on canvas, 205 × 390 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.

a vast landscape; a few years later, Sergei Ivanov's *On the Road: Death of a Migrant* (1889) sets the meaningless death of a migrant settler against a broad, flat steppe, in a composition almost duplicating Vasnetsov's. All these works tie the human tragedy to the land.

The lowly role of women emphasized in these harsh scenes of contemporary suffering is based on a long tradition in academic historical painting. Female victims abound in scenes of war, natural disaster, and martyrdom. For example, Karl Briullov's *Last Day of Pompeii* (1833) and Konstantin Flavitskii's *Christian Martyrs in the Colosseum* (1862) feature conventional prostrate or writhing female bodies. Suffering as the inevitable condition of women remains a key element in mid-to-late nineteenth-century realist painting. The endurance of peasant women is part of the endurance of the land as portrayed in genre scenes such as *On the Road* or Perov's *Accompanying the Dead* (1865), which depicts a peasant woman on a sledge with her husband's coffin. Vasilii Surikov's historical painting, *Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy* (1879–80), a subject close to that of Musorgsky's opera *Khovanshchina* (1872–80), makes the connection even stronger by setting the victims and mourners against the Church of Saint Basil, a symbol of old Moscow. In the Igor Tale, as the women lament the defeat of their ruler's army, their words of sorrow that their husbands cannot be brought back to life are broadened in lines of verse which convey how their anguish "spread flowing over the Russian land."<sup>6</sup> This identification of the mourning women with the sorrowing land remains a powerful motif in Russian literature, art, and opera.

There is a still more powerful element, summed up by the lament of Iaroslavna, near the end of the Tale in Borodin's opera.<sup>7</sup> The wife of Prince Igor stands alone at dawn on the ramparts and calls upon the wind, the river Dnepr, and the bright sun to answer her demand to know why the powers of nature have conspired in the disastrous defeat.

Iaroslavna likens herself to a bird (a seagull or a cuckoo, depending on interpretation) flying along the rivers to find her prince and cleanse his wounds. It is an active, not a passive image, and the verses are closer to incantation than lamentation.

Borodin worked out this positive role of Iaroslavna more extensively than the textual source, and it is the significance of Iaroslavna for the late nineteenth century that I want to examine. Borodin's opera departed in several ways from traditional presentations of military heroism, humanizing Igor by making him respond to the sufferings caused by his campaign.<sup>8</sup> This shift required the introduction of a new type of heroism, specifically that of Iaroslavna. The human faults of Igor, the expanded role of Iaroslavna, and the bold character of her Polovtsian counterpart, the Khan's daughter Konchakovna, allowed Borodin to express themes that were not part of the medieval Tale, but were important in his own time.

The main part of this essay focuses on a group of paintings that seem related to the character of Iaroslavna as presented by Borodin. One such example is Vasilii Perov's *Iaroslavna's Lament* (1880) which embodies similar questions about Russian history, the nature of heroism, and the roles of women. This colorful, rhapsodic image is dramatically different from Perov's many sympathetic, but mostly dark, portrayals of downtrodden women. As one of the last paintings he completed, the work represents a search for the meaning of Russian history, comparable to the fascination with national origins and identity expressed in music and literature. We can see both Perov's and Borodin's Iaroslavnas not as isolated figures but as akin to other powerful female characters depicted in art during the 1870s and 1880s. Examining these works in light of the opera invites new interpretations of their subjects, so a summary of the themes and action of the opera is essential background.

Most significant for Borodin's interpretation are certain scenes that were not part of the medieval Tale and that were introduced either by Borodin himself, or by Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906), the scholar, critic, and champion of the “mighty handful” and the *Peredvizhniki*, who wrote the original outline for the libretto. Borodin had asked for advice about a Russian subject for an opera as early as 1869, and Stasov thought of the *Tale of Igor's Campaign* as the perfect match for Borodin's talent: “broad, epic motives, nationalism, variety of characters, passion, drama, the oriental.”<sup>9</sup> At this time, operas on Russian subjects were even rarer than academic paintings on early Russian history; Mikhail Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* and *Ruslan and Liudmila* were virtually the only models for national opera.<sup>10</sup> Stasov's scenario was based mainly on the tale of medieval Russia *Slovo o polku Igoreve*, known in English as *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, *The Lay of the Host of Igor*, or *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, supplemented by another early text, the Hypatian Chronicle. The story is exceptional in that it concerns a defeat, not a victory. Igor Sviatoslavich, prince of a small city near Chernigov under the domination of Kiev in the late twelfth century, faced the threat of invasion by one of the many tribes moving into Russian territory, the Polovtsians or Kumany. Igor decided to march against them with only his own troops. He was captured, along with his son, spent perhaps a month or several months among the Polovtsians, and was treated honorably, having promised not to escape. Meanwhile, the prince's second wife Efrosinia Iaroslavna remained at home. The Tale does not treat her as a significant character, but Stasov and especially Borodin gave her more importance as the figure who holds her people together despite the scheming of her brother Vladimir of Galicia, known as Galitsky, also absent from the medieval Tale.

The critic sketched a scenario based on the Tale and other chronicles. In Stasov's outline, Act I centers on Iaroslavna, Act II on Igor in the Polovtsian camp, and Act III again on Iaroslavna and the city of Putivl. Stasov envisioned that after Prince Igor's departure, Iaroslavna is alone in her terem.<sup>11</sup> She has a dream of ill omen, and in the next scene Galitsky strides in and declares that he will now rule as prince because Igor must be dead. Merchants and boyars also report the defeat and imprisonment of Igor and his son. Galitsky's followers acclaim him and only the court women mourn Igor. Iaroslavna secretly sends for Ovlur, a Polovtsian captive devoted to Igor and Iaroslavna, who agrees to help Igor escape. Act II devotes several scenes to Prince Igor, the Khan Konchak, and the love story between the Khan's daughter, Konchakovna, and Igor's son, Vladimir. Igor has been treated as a noble hostage; the Khan urges him to forget Russia and join the Polovtsians as a chieftain. Igor thanks him, but remains devoted to Iaroslavna. Crowds of Polovtsians enter and dance; then more troops come in with prisoners. Igor vows to save Russia or die. Then Ovlur arrives to tell Igor about Galitsky's abuses in Putivl, and Igor finally agrees to break his pledge and try to escape. The last scene at the edge of the Polovtsian camp shows Igor and his son sneaking past the guards. Konchakovna appears and holds Vladimir back, while Igor flees with Ovlur. Act III opens on the ramparts of Putivl at dawn, with Iaroslavna's lament, taken directly from the poem. She hears horses approaching, recognizes Igor, and runs to greet him joyously. Iaroslavna and Igor plan how to overthrow Galitsky and then return to fight off the Polovtsian invaders. The final scene takes place two years later, when the traitors are imprisoned and the city celebrates the wedding of Vladimir and Konchakovna.

Borodin began working from Stasov's outline, but made several changes over the years. He composed several pieces in the fall of 1869, including Iaroslavna's dream in the first act and one of Konchakovna's songs, before setting the opera aside, for his chemistry laboratory and teaching duties. In 1874 he overhauled Stasov's outline, removing the wedding feast at the end, and adding a prologue showing Igor's departure for war and the appearance of the ominous eclipse (a scene taken directly from the Tale). This addition shifted the emphasis and had the virtue of presenting Igor as a real person and making the struggle between Iaroslavna and Galitsky psychologically convincing. Borodin tightened the narrative, removed and added a few characters, and also took out Iaroslavna's deliberate planning with Ovlur to rescue Igor, which might have become too static. But he added considerable material and musical originality to the scenes among the Polovtsians. Like many of his composer colleagues and Stasov himself, Borodin was fascinated by the exotic cultures of Central Asia, and the most successful parts of the opera, often performed on their own as concert or ballet pieces, are "In the Steppes of Central Asia" and the "Polovtsian Dances."

Borodin's sporadic work schedule meant that there were several gaps in the storyline. He explained, "I can write music only when I'm just too unwell to lecture or go to the laboratory."<sup>12</sup> In April 1875, he reported finishing the initial march of the Polovtsians, Iaroslavna's aria, Iaroslavna's lament in the last act, a female chorus and some dances of the Polovtsians. At the end of summer 1879, almost a decade after he began, he wrote to Stasov that he had "made a real character of Vladimir Galitsky," with the cynical boasting song in Act I and his scene with Iaroslavna. Most of the work, even major pieces, remained unorchestrated until Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov pushed him to finish a few of the songs—among them the scene of Iaroslavna with

her maidens, Galitsky's boasting song, and Iaroslavna's lament—so that they could be performed at the Free School of Music concerts organized by Stasov in 1876 and 1879. Perov and other artists, who often attended these concerts, may have heard Borodin's pieces then. The difficulties Rimsky-Korsakov and his student Alexander Glazunov faced in completing the opera after Borodin's sudden death in early 1887 are documented, but it is important that both collaborators confirm that most of their work was on the Overture, and Acts II and III, whereas Borodin's Prologue, the first scene of Act I, and all of Act IV were left unchanged.<sup>13</sup>

Borodin generally agreed with Stasov's interpretation of the story and he certainly shared Stasov's interest in historical sources, ethnography, and folk songs, and felt the attraction of the ancient, Asian setting, with its vast spaces and extreme contrasts. The conflict and coexistence of pagan and Christian communities, seen both in the contrasts of the Polovtsian and Russian choruses and in the differences between the impulsive bravery of Konchak and Konchanka and the responsible leadership of Igor and Iaroslavna, was a key theme in mid-nineteenth-century Russian historical writing, as well as in art. However, the Galitsky scene was a new contribution, not part of the medieval Tale. In fact, it seems so modern in comparison with the sometimes archaic story that it is worth considering the effect on a nineteenth-century audience of Galitsky's cynical confidence and especially of his creepy insinuations to Iaroslavna: "Your husband left a long time ago... It must be boring for you to be alone." Even without the music and acting, the contrast in character between the siblings, and Iaroslavna's justified outrage are extremely convincing.

Developing the nontraditional character of Galitsky not only added complexity to the story but deliberately introduced an issue of great importance to Borodin, Stasov, and many of their associates: commitment to education and opportunities for women. Nadezhda Stasova, Vladimir's sister, was a noted pioneer in women's higher education. Repin drew her portrait for a testimonial in her honor, presented at the graduation ceremony of the Higher Women's Courses in 1889.<sup>14</sup> Poliksenia Stasova, Stasov's sister-in-law, was also active in women's education. Her daughter Elena Stasova became a socialist revolutionary in the late 1890s, joined Lenin's party and served on the Central Committee during the Bolshevik Revolution. Borodin himself was introduced to women's educational issues in 1858 while at Heidelberg University by Ekaterina Protapova, whom he later married. Partly through her instigation he became involved in efforts to organize a Women's School of Medicine in St. Petersburg, where he taught the women's courses from the mid-1860s until his death. Although women still did not enjoy the full benefits of matriculation in universities or professional schools, their presence was conspicuous. Among the many depictions of educated young women are Repin's painting of a medical student, quite possibly one of Borodin's, working on a cadaver, *In the Laboratory* (1881)<sup>15</sup> and Nikolai Iaroshenko's most controversial and famous image, *Kursistka* (1883) (Figure 2.2) showing a student in the recently opened Women's Higher Education Institution striding forward with an armful of books, making it clear that by studying she was "going against" traditional expectations of a bourgeois marriage.<sup>16</sup> The prominence of women in progressive circles, even in the revolutionary cell responsible for assassinating Tsar Alexander II, is attested by the many women agitators and prisoners painted by Repin, Iaroshenko, and Vladimir Makovskii. In Repin's initial sketches for *They Did Not Expect Him* (1883–88), the returning political exile was a young woman.<sup>17</sup> This progressive, but complex and tragic image was a readily recognizable one.



Figure 2.2 Nikolai Iaroshenko, *Kursistka*, 1883, oil on canvas, 134 × 83 cm. Kiev Museum of Russian Art, Kiev. Photograph © Alison Hilton.

At the same time, these artists were looking at the conditions under which ordinary women lived, focusing on poverty and hopelessness. Alcoholism was a favorite theme, with its special burden on women, as in Makovskii's "*I won't let you!*" (1892) and Perov's more somber *Last Tavern at the Edge of Town* (1868) in which a peasant woman huddles on a sledge, waiting while her husband gets drunk. Another theme with many variations is the social exploitation of educated women. Perov's *Governess arriving at the Merchant's House* (1866), like a Russian variant of a scene by Charles Dickens whom Perov admired, may be slightly overstated, but it certainly involves the viewer in the poor governess's plight: which to fear more, the gross merchant or his horrid children?

The ultimate statement of misery and debasement is Perov's *Drowned Woman* (1867) (Plate 4).<sup>18</sup> The woman has killed herself for the traditional reason—shame. One might see this as a sequel to any number of scenes of harassment or seduction. Iaroshenko later offered one of the most explicit: *Thrown Out (At the Station)* (1883). Perov's lack of any special drama, the indifferent watchman and the cool morning light suggest that this is an unremarkable occurrence. The theme was an international one in the mid-nineteenth century, in literature as well as painting. When he began working on the subject, Perov included a descriptive setting, an arched bridge and a crowd of onlookers gathered around the body. He also made sketches of a related subject, *Woman about to throw herself into a river* (1879) (Figure 2.3). But the finished work



Figure 2.3 Vasilii Perov, *Woman about to throw herself into a river*, 1879, oil on canvas, 56.5 × 41.7 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Photograph © 2019, Alison Hilton.



remained the more condensed and final image of death. According to his contemporary, art historian Nikolai Sobko, Perov drew upon Thomas Hood's poems "Song of the Shirt" (1843) and "Bridge of Sighs" (1844, translated 1847), which were very popular in Russia in the 1860s. He would also have known prints of British works on the subject of suicide by Gustave Doré and George Frederick Watts. Watts's *Found Drowned* (1850) based on "The Bridge of Sighs," with the lone dead figure and grimy brown tonality, may have suggested the form for Perov's final treatment.<sup>19</sup>

Laconic in the extreme, nearly monochromatic and oppressively horizontal, Perov's canvas is one of the first in which death is laid out so uncompromisingly. He set the scene firmly in Moscow, with the towers and church domes glinting behind the early morning haze, a deliberate underscoring of the distance between official religion and human charity, as we will see when we look at the painting in the context of Perov's late work. The presence of *Drowned Woman* in Pavel Tretiakov's gallery, along with the war pictures by Vereshchagin, underscores the difference between these uncompromisingly realist works and the detailed but nonrealist, epic images of death in battle by Vasnetsov. Despite the compositional similarities, the message of a moral difference between male soldiers fallen in battle and a female suicide fallen through sin is inescapable. For Perov, the horizontal composition not only contributes to veracity, but also underlines the fact that he is showing not a single incident, but the overall condition of women. In contrast, Iaroshenko's *Kursistka* and other paintings of positive female figures tend to accent the women's strength through vertical compositions; this is also true of Perov's *Iaroslavna*.

The themes of death, oppression, and desperate resistance took on distinct forms depending on the gender of the main participants in both genre and historical painting. A few historical paintings give perspective to representations of contemporary women and suggest possible prototypes or companions for the rise of *Iaroslavna*. Few artists took on subjects from Kievan Russia. An exception is one drawing by the academic painter Viacheslav Shvarts, famous for sumptuous and archaeologically correct scenes of old Muscovy. His *Lament of Iaroslavna* (1866), depicts a figure huddling against a stone wall, gazing sadly over the steppe. But other periods offer an enrichment of the strong woman motif comparable to the evolution of the image of the male warrior. Among early nineteenth-century historical works, the most famous image of a powerful woman, Dmitrii Ivanov's *Marfa Posadnitsa* (1808) depicts Marfa Boretskaia, elected mayor of the medieval republic of Novgorod, as a "personification of courage" in neo-classical style. Her story, told by historian Nikolai Karamzin, was recommended in a book on "Subjects for Artists."<sup>20</sup> Flavitskii's *Princess Tarakanova* (1864), depicts a bold pretender to the Russian throne arrested on Catherine II's orders and imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress. The desperate scene of the woman trying to escape the floodwaters surging into the cell was romantic fiction, but emotionally effective. In contrast, Nikolai Ge's *Catherine II at the Tomb of Empress Elizabeth* (1874) is dignified and somber but clearly frames the upright figure of the future ruler of Russia. All these works have a subtext, the perils in the transition of power, an obsessive theme in Russian history.

Nearly contemporaneous with Borodin's opera, Surikov's *Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy* (1879–81) and Repin's *Tsarevna Sophia* (1879) (Figure 2.4) deal with the conflicts between old and new ways and between the powerful individual and the Russian masses. Surikov's monumental canvas, the first of what Stasov termed "operatic" works, depicts Peter the Great's revenge against the warrior-caste supporters



Figure 2.4 Ilya Repin, *Tsarevna Sophia*, 1879, oil on canvas, 204.5 × 147.7 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.

of the Tsarevna Sophia, Peter's older half-sister and rival for the throne. (Peter had defeated Sophia, imprisoned her, and exiled most of the Streltsy, but they mutinied, and were again suppressed and executed in mass hangings in 1698.) Surikov's painting shows the Streltsy just before execution, together with their women and children, in front of St. Basil's Cathedral, while Peter and his supporters stand apart, by the Kremlin wall. It was one of few works to show the progressive Peter in an ambivalent light: if his reforms were necessary, they were also catastrophic for many. As in Musorgsky's *Khovanshchina*, the populace makes up the "choral element" that Stasov called the key to Russian art. For his portrayal of Tsarevna Sophia, Repin immersed himself in the historical period, as Surikov and Musorgsky did the same year, but he was interested in exploring the character of "this most talented, fiery, and passionate woman of ancient Russia," in Stasov's words.<sup>21</sup> The situation is inherently shocking with the dark interior of a tower in Novodevichy Convent and the lighted window revealing the blurred shapes of the dangling heads of Sophia's supporters. But the overall effect is tightly controlled. For the fierceness and intensity, the artist relied not on theatrical gesture, but on women friends who willingly entered into the spirit of Sophia. Valentina Serova, a composer, critic, and political activist was the ideal model.

Similarly, Surikov's *Boyarinia Morozova* (1887) focuses on an individual who embodies the conflicts between old and new values. In the reign of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, father of Peter the Great, the Patriarch Nikon sought to unify the Russian church by persecuting the "Old Believers." The noblewoman Morozova was a threat to Nikon's plan. Tsar Alexei had Morozova arrested, interrogated under torture, and driven through Moscow chained to a peasant sledge, subject to the jeers of the populace, before incarcerating her in a remote village. Surikov first pictured Morozova seated on a bale of hay, so that she has some dignity, and more of the people respond to her; later studies vary, with more jeering, but also respectful young women and a "holy fool" offering a blessing. In the final painting, she is placed low in the sledge, isolated from both mockers and sympathizers, but her right arm is held above all the heads in the Old Believers' sign of blessing, and she stares fiercely at the icon on the wall. One contemporary of the artist, the exiled revolutionary Vera Figner, saw Morozova not only as a religious fanatic but as a fellow sufferer, like many imprisoned and exiled after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881.<sup>22</sup>

Though historical scenes before the rise of Muscovy are rare in Surikov's work, early in his career he sketched an episode from the time of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, and around 1909, he became interested in the legends of Olga, the powerful ruler of Kiev in pre-Christian times. One watercolor sketch for an unfinished work shows *Princess Olga Meeting the Corpse of Igor I* (1915). Surikov's main source for historical scenes was Ivan Zabelin, who published two massive volumes, *Home Life of the Tsars* and *Home Life of the Tsaritsas* in 1862, and other works examining the role of Russian women in history. It was Zabelin's idea to compare Boyarinia Morozova and Tsarevna Sophia to Olga, who by all accounts, including the medieval Primary Chronicle (1040–1118), was shrewd and ruthless. After Igor of Kiev died in battle, the victorious Drevlians came to claim Olga as consort for their own Prince. Olga welcomed them with honor, and declared that she would not let them enter the city on horseback or on foot, but would have her people carry them in their own boat. The embassy, "puffed up with pride," was brought in to the court, and immediately dropped into a deep trench to be buried alive. Another time, Olga received the Drevlians and invited them to bathe; she then gave orders to burn the bathhouse.

Eventually, she massacred some 5,000 of Drevlian soldiers, burned their city, took slaves and tribute, and established laws.

Resourceful and cruel, Olga embodied the heroic ideal of pre-Christian Russia. Zabelin and many late nineteenth-century readers believed that in pagan Russia, women filled active social roles, running businesses and families, and even waging war and ruling states. Ironically, it was Olga's conversion to Christianity in 955, celebrated in paintings by Vasnetsov and others, that led to the Kievan princes' adoption of Byzantine laws, which enforced male authority and restricted women to separate spheres. For noblewomen, this meant the seclusion of the terem or the convent. Numerous academic paintings take up this theme, sometimes with a good deal of relish at the passive purity of the women, for example Grigorii Sedov's *Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich Chooses a Bride* (1882) and Konstantin Makovsky's *Kissing Ceremony* (1895). Works by Perov, a sketch done in 1879, and a later work by Surikov, offer more thoughtful responses to the issues. Surikov's last completed work, *Tsaritsa Visiting a Convent* (1912), painted while he was working on *Olga*, follows Zabelin's explanations of the rules for royal women. Daughters of the Tsar could not marry foreign princes because the church prohibited marriage to those of non-orthodox faith, but they were also forbidden to marry Russian boyars or princes for reasons of state, to avoid the danger of rivals for the throne and resulting political instability. Tsaritsas were thus obliged to enter monastic life and, in preparation, they would make gifts and endowments to the chosen convent and visit it often. In Surikov's painting, the young tsaritsa, sheltered and virginal, steps forward hesitantly to meet the somber nuns among whom she will spend her life. The visual and psychological theme of the picture is contrast, not only between the young girl and the nuns, but also between the intense atmosphere created by the candles and glowing icons, and the cold knowledge that life in the convent will be no more spiritually fulfilling than life in the terem. Rejecting this fate, the seventeenth-century rebels Boyarinia Morozova and Tsarevna Sophia strove to break this stranglehold and claim the right of leadership, in religion or in statecraft. Their failure made them grotesque, like untamable natural forces rather than social beings. These personifications of rebellion, and those of unwilling acceptance, all contribute to our understanding of Iaroslavna.

Perov's Iaroslavna is different from the other historical portrayals of women. There is no archaeologizing background: only the ramparts of Putivl, and the seagulls essential to her song.

One reason for this simplicity may be that Perov thought of Iaroslavna not only as a historical figure, but as akin to women of his own time, sister of the weaker but enduring women in his genre paintings. Visually, thematically, and even circumstantially, this painting is connected with his other works dealing with women and their destinies. Perov painted *Iaroslavna's Lament* in 1880 over a sketch done the previous year of a woman poised on the steps of an embankment, about to throw herself into the river. Since the canvas is in a private collection, we do not have x-rays, but the composition was probably similar to his 1879 sketch of a woman about to throw herself into a river or to a pencil study, showing the woman actually pushing off.<sup>23,24</sup> The pose of this more active figure, especially the upraised chin, is almost identical to Iaroslavna's. It was then no coincidence that Perov reused the 1879 canvas. Iaroslavna was literally an answer to the despair of the lost woman about to drown herself.

The choice of Iaroslavna as a subject also seems to be part of Perov's efforts to identify and understand a spiritual strength in Russian history, a search increasingly

important near the end of his life, when he was already suffering from tuberculosis. Best known for his genre pictures and portraits, Perov became interested in the peasant rebellion led by the Cossack Emelian Pugachev early in the reign of Catherine II, a subject connected with liberal sympathies of his own time. He sketched and painted several versions of Pugachev during the 1870s, in preparation for *Pugachev's Judgment* (1879). His major historical work, *Nikita Pustosviat. Disputation over Faith* (1880–81) depicts a leader of the Old Believers debating in the presence of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, enemy of Morozova and the Old Believers. Displaying every characteristic of academic historical painting, the work contrasts with Perov's acerbic critiques of the clergy early in his career. But he was clearly interested in the continuing relevance of traditional religious issues, as a contemporaneous drawing suggests: *Disputation over Faith (Scene in a railway car—conversation of students with a monk)* (1880). One highly polished and dramatic painting, *The First Baptism in Kiev* (1880) presents Perov's visions of the origins of Russian Christianity.

The intermingling of religious subjects and scenes from real life becomes poignant in a group of Perov's works showing women suffering for their faith or because of their doubts. A sketch, *On the Eve of the Taking of Vows. "To be or not to be"* (1870s), shows a young woman standing upright with hands clasped in front of her, still uncertain. The majority of works in this group are horizontal in composition, emphasizing the finality of sacrifice. *Pilgrim in a Field. On the Path to Eternal Salvation* (1878–79) and related sketches employ the same format with a low horizon and prone figure as the two contemporaneous works on traditional religious subjects, *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* (1878) and the unfinished *Deposition from the Cross or Lamentation* (1878). Even more strikingly, *Pilgrim in a Field* recalls Perov's *Drowned Woman*, lying face-up on the Moscow embankment. The dead religious pilgrim is surrounded by nature, meadow flowers and a few crows in the distance, contrasting with her heavy clothing and rigid face and hands. Almost hidden in a pouch slung over her shoulder is an icon of the Mother of God of Tenderness, which she has carried throughout her journey. The icon could be the symbolic counterpart of the church domes in the mist behind the drowned woman. The mournful birds are also present as in the city, but wildflowers replace the river mud. An inconspicuous detail in *Drowned Woman* now becomes important: under her right arm, crushed and torn, are petals of a white lily, a symbol of purity and especially of the Virgin. It seems a hideous irony.

In 1881, Perov published a short story called "Fanny under No. 30," about the drowned woman. Fanny was a prostitute, an artist's model on the side. One day, she got a glimpse of the painting for which she was posing and, to her horror, recognized the Mother of God. With her simple piety, she could not reconcile her sinful life with the holy image; and, in agony at the blasphemy, she ran away to drown herself. The narrator, the painter, finally sees her body in a slot in the morgue and, in turn, is filled with remorse.<sup>25</sup> Perov's *Drowned Woman* stands on its own, but the story underlines the more complex issue of the discrepancy between human charity and official religion, and between the truths of art and the facts of life. It also ties the woman's suicide to *On the Eve of the Taking of Vows*, in which the woman about to commit herself to religious life resembles the sketches of a woman on the embankment, about to throw herself into the river, as well as to *On the Path to Eternal Salvation*. All convey the message that women's choices lead only to dead ends.

Perov's *Iaroslavna's Lament* is a positive, defiant rejection of these choices. Obviously *Iaroslavna* is neither a prostitute nor a postulant nor a pilgrim, but the

daughter of the ruler of Kiev, of the highest social and political status in early Russia. Yet she is forced to confront abuse both sexual and political by her nasty brother Galitsky, and to face the loss of her husband and of her freedom. If Iaroslavna denies the role of the passive victim, her lament also calls up a shaded image of the once proud and battle-happy Kievan warriors. The mournful battlefield scene by Vasnetsov, *After the Battle of Igor Sviatoslavich with the Polovtsians* and the same artist's ponderous, doom-filled *Warrior at the Crossroads* (1882), though poetic and idealized, testify to deep concerns about conflict and sacrifice as central to Russia's historical destiny. These images throw into relief the heroic nature of Perov's and Borodin's Iaroslavna. She has earned the right to stand on the ramparts at dawn, as a symbol and beacon for the citizens of Putivl, and call upon the wind, river, and sun. Her voice rises above the city with its plots and fears, and out across the steppes above the groans of prisoners and chants of the Polovtsians. Visually, this erect and exultant Iaroslavna is an embodiment of her song.

## Notes

- 1 My interest in Iaroslavna's Lament dates to the Dallas Opera's revival of Borodin's opera marking the one hundredth anniversary of its debut and a related symposium, November 8–11, 1990. I wish to thank the symposium director Jon White and the many presenters of talks on Kievan history, literary sources, Russian opera, and material on the first productions.
- 2 The role of Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906) in defining the nature of Russian national music is treated in many sources. The *Mighty Handful* or *Mighty Five* included Cesar Cui, Mily Balakirev, Modest Mussorgsky, Alexandr Borodin and Nikolai Rimskii Korsakov. The realist painters whom he championed most consistently, the *Peredvizhniki* (Association of Traveling Art Exhibitions), included Viktor Vasnetsov, Vasilii Surikov, Vasilii Perov, Ilia Repin, and others mentioned in this essay. It is worth noting the close connections and friendships among artists, composers, writers, and supporters such as Stasov, Pavel Tretiakov, Savva Mamontov, and Mitrofan Beliaev, who promoted Russian music abroad. Repin in particular corresponded with and painted or drew portraits of many composers, including Borodin. See G. A. Tiuneneva, "Muzyka v zhizni Repina," in *Khudozhestvennoe nasledstvo. Repin*, eds. I. E. Grabar' and I. S. Zil'bershtein (Moscow, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1948), I: 544–579, with a photograph of Repin in his studio at Penaty with his life-size portrait of Borodin (1902, Institute of Literature, Akademii Nauk SSSR).
- 3 For the historiography of the Tale, see Vladimir Nabokov's introduction to his translation: *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, tr. by Vladimir Nabokov (1960) republished (Woodstock, NY: Ardis, 2003), 7–21. I use this edition for references to the text below. The authenticity of the text of the Tale that survived into the nineteenth century is still in question. A sixteenth-century version of an earlier Tale was discovered in 1797, published 1800, but soon disappeared, perhaps destroyed in the Moscow fire of 1812. The possible faults of the text are not relevant to the story as interpreted by Stasov and Borodin. A discussion of the Tale as both a cultural monument and a source for new art written soon after Borodin's and Perov's death is the chapter "Slovo v noveishikh proizvedeniakh iskustva [sic]" in E. V. Barsov, *Slovo o polku igoreva kak khudozhestvennyi pamiatnik Kievskoi družhinnoi rusi* (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografiia, 1887), I: 460–462.
- 4 Vereshchagin kept notes at the time of the campaign and included details about this painting and a companion work, *A Resting Place of Prisoners* (1878–1879) in the catalogue of his American exhibition, *Vassili Verestchagin Collection* (New York, NY: American Art Galleries, 1891), 61–62. The State Tretyakov Gallery presented many paintings in Vereshchagin's *Turkestan, Balkan War and Russo-Turkish War* series in an encyclopedic exhibition in 2018.
- 5 Janet Kennedy also discussed Vasnetsov's and Vereshchagin's interpretations of war and their reception in her paper "Staging Russian History: History Painting, Heroism, and the Russian Theater 1880 to 1913" at the 1990 symposium on *Prince Igor*.

- 6 *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, trans. V. Nabokov, 48, lines 41–42; the entire passage of choral lamentations, lines 300–350 is full of nature imagery, e.g. “and the tree with sorrow bends to the ground.”
- 7 *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, 66–67, lines 690–730. A recent article interprets the description of Iaroslavna on her tower, and the poetry of the lament itself as a combination of pagan and Christian personifications: both as the pagan Slav's Mother Earth and as the Christian Mother of God, symbolized by both a physical church and a tower of protection. See Jeannine Vereecken, “Jaroslavna, Voice of the Russian Earth. A Contribution to the Interpretation of the Igor Tale,” *Russian Literature*, LXVI (2009): 483–494. Cori Ellison, in her paper “Russian Vocal Tradition” at the *Prince Igor* symposium, discussed traditional folk elements of Iaroslavna's aria in the opera, reflecting laments sung at weddings, funerals, and departures for war, and suggested that with this song Borodin was trying to forge a new path, with the verse structure and tonal intervals distinct from most pieces earlier in the opera. See also Jennifer Fuller, “Epic Melodies: An Examination of Folk Motifs in the Text and Music of *Prince Igor*,” in *Intersections and Transpositions: Russian Music, Literature and Society*, ed. Andrew Wachtel (Chicago, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 33–57.
- 8 In his talk “Was Igor a Superfluous Prince?” at the *Prince Igor* conference, Nicholas Riazanovsky noted that Igor sought personal glory and was humbled in defeat, but since he escaped by craft and returned to his city, he gained a distinctly Slavic hero's status.
- 9 Gerald Abraham, “The History of *Prince Igor*,” in *On Russian Music* (London: Wm. Reeves, 1935), 148. Abraham was the first to document the opera's origins and history in detail. Stasov discusses Borodin's compositions in the context of the other Mighty Handful composers and national elements in music in “Twenty-five years of Russian Art: Our Music” (published 1882–83) reprinted in Gerald Abraham, ed., *Vladimir Stasov, Selected Essays on Music*, trans. Florence Jonas (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1968), 108–110. Stasov's emphasis on “the oriental” reflects an important theme in Russian arts, related to ongoing military campaigns in the Caucasus and Central Asia. For a summary of orientalism in music see Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music* (Berkeley, and Los Angeles, CA; London: University of California Press, 2002), 80–83.
- 10 In broad outline, Stasov's plan was for twelve scenes forming three acts, with a prologue, summarized in Abraham, “The History of *Prince Igor*,” 149–152. Other material on Borodin's work on the opera is in M. Zeltin, *The Five* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1959); B. Asaf'ev, *Izbrannyye Trudy*, v. III, Kompository “Moguchei Kuchki,” in V.V. Stasov, *Izbrannoe*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk, 1954). A recent summary and discussion of the opera's history is Harlow Robinson, “‘If You're Afraid of Wolves, Don't Go into the Forest.’ On the History of Borodin's *Prince Igor*,” *The Opera Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1990): 1–12. Robinson notes the connection to Glinka: Stasov and Borodin first discussed the idea at the home of Glinka's sister, Liudmila Shestakova. Borodin dedicated the opera to Glinka.
- 11 The term “terem” refers to separate living quarters occupied by elite women in Russia during the Muscovy period.
- 12 Borodin's statements, the summary of his process of composition and the major tasks of orchestration and organization by Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov is based on Abraham, “The History of *Prince Igor*,” 148–152, which also cites Stasov's memoirs of Borodin.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Repin, *Ovation for N. V. Stasova* (1889, Institute of Literature, Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg). See I. S. Zil'bershtein, “Novye stranitsy tvorcheskoi biografii Repina,” in *Khudozhestvennoe Nasledstvo. Repin*, eds. I. E. Grabar' and I. S. Zil'bershtein (Moscow, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1948), I: 183–185.
- 15 See Zil'bershtein, “Novye stranitsy,” 179. The painting was in the A. L. Miasnikov collection, Leningrad at the time of publication, 1948.
- 16 Gleb Uspenskii, “Po povodu odnoi malen'koi kartinki,” in *Otechestvennye zapiski*, no. 2 (1883): 557–558. The institution, known as the Bestuzhev Courses in St. Petersburg, emphasized the sciences, and Borodin taught chemistry there. Iaroshenko's model, Anna Diterikhs, became active in public education for women. For revolutionary themes and images of progressive women in the work of Repin, Iaroshenko, Makovskii and others see

- Alison Hilton, "The Revolutionary Theme in Russian Realism," in *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*, eds. Henry Millon and Linda Nochlin (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1978), 108–128.
- 17 Hilton, "The Revolutionary Theme," 113, 120 discusses the evolution of this figure. For more on Repin's *They Did Not Expect Him*, see Galina Mardilovich's essay, "An Exercise in Looking: Iliia Repin's *They Did Not Expect Him*" in this volume.
  - 18 Two versions and a preliminary study in this format exist as well as sketches of variations on the theme of a fallen woman's suicide. See note 22 below.
  - 19 Vladimir Petrov, *Vasilii Perov. Tvorcheskii put' khudozhnika* (Moscow: Trilistnik, 1997), 112–114, discusses this work. The author's catalogue essay for the major exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery, *V. Perov. Vystavka proizvedenii k 150-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1988), 33–34, includes additional material on Perov's sketches and references to Hood. For broader background on the relationship of Perov's and Iaroshenko's works to British prototypes see Linda Nochlin, "Lost and Found: Once more the fallen woman," *The Art Bulletin* 60, no. 1 (March 1978): 139–153. For a recent treatment of the fallen woman in Russian nineteenth-century literature, see Colleen Lucey, "Violence, murder, and fallen women: prostitution in the works of Vsevolod Garshin," *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 58, no. 4 (2016): 363–385. The article provides extensive discussion and bibliography on prostitution in St. Petersburg and in the work of Russian writers including Nikolai Gogol, Fedor Dostoevskii, and specifically two stories by Vsevolod Garshin, "An Occurrence" (1878), and "Nadezhda Nikolaevna" (1885).
  - 20 See Alla G. Vereshchagina, *Khudozhnik, Vremia, Istoriia*. (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1973), 23–25, on historical sources, Ivanov's classical style and symbols of heroism, and 63–64 on Ge's intention to show political tension through contrasting postures.
  - 21 Vladimir Stasov, "Khudozhestvennye vystavki 1879 goda," in V.V. Stasov, *Izbrannoe* (Moscow, Leningrad: Akademiia Nauk, 1950), I: 122–123.
  - 22 Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1927), 142–143.
  - 23 See Petrov, *Vasilii Perov. Tvorcheskii put' khudozhnika*, 64–96, discusses most of these works in the context of Perov's spiritual and artistic searches at the end of his life.
  - 24 The sequence among the various pencil and oil sketches related to the young woman about to drown herself and the painting *Iaroslavna's Lament* is very complex. Several are illustrated and annotated in the Tretyakov exhibition catalogue *V. Perov, Vystavka proizvedenii k 150-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia*, 154–155, 182–184, and in A. A. Sidorov, *Risunok Russkikh Masterov. Vtoraia polovina XIX veka* (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1960), 151, 154. The most developed sketch, *Woman about to throw herself into the river* (1879) (Figure 2.3), is painted in dark blue-gray for the background and a warm brown for the woman's clothes and the balustrade of the steps to the river, with large, expressive brushstrokes, and there is at least one related pencil sketch. A pencil sketch, *Petitioners* (1879–80, State Tretyakov Gallery) included a separate paper with sketches for *Woman about to throw herself into the river*, discovered during restoration in 1982. Another sketch of this subject was painted over by Perov as the ground for his *Lament*. During the same period, Perov made a highly finished drawing of a nude woman with upraised arms (1879, State Tretyakov Gallery), suggesting a new interpretation of the suicide.
  - 25 Vasilii Perov, "Na nature, Fanni pod No. 30," in *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, nos. 1, 2 (1881). Perov published five other stories in the journal in 1881–82, some of them related to his paintings. See chronology by N. Zograf in *V. Perov. Vystavka proizvedenii k 150-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia*, 67.



### 3 An Exercise in Looking

#### Ilia Repin's *They Did Not Expect Him*

*Galina Mardilovich*

The painting *They Did Not Expect Him* (“Ne zhdali,” 1883–1888; Plate 5) by Ilia Repin (1841–1930) has come to be viewed as representative of late-nineteenth-century Russian art. Produced during a period of intense national upheaval—beginning with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, followed by repression, the coronation of Tsar Alexander III in 1883, and finally, amnesty for revolutionaries—the canvas depicts the unanticipated return home of a political exile. As sunlight peers through French windows, the exile, wearing a brown overcoat and an uneasy look, walks through the doorway and catches his family and servants off-guard. Largely perceived within its political and historical contexts, *They Did Not Expect Him* has been lauded by both Russian and Western scholars as the quintessential work of what has become known as Russian realism.<sup>1</sup>

While not denying the work's political and historical significance, this chapter moves past this assessment to examine more closely the aesthetic qualities of the canvas, which have often eluded scholars. Because of art historians' focus on the enigmatic dynamic between the returned exile and his family, the work's inherent tension between content and form has not been fully appreciated. For there is a certain discomfort in the contrast between the dark-clad exile standing in that doorway and his family's sunlit room with its vibrant blue and violet wallpaper. One is struck by the brightness, colors and *how* Repin's canvas is painted when looking at it in person and not in reproduction. In fact, it takes a minute to start noticing *what* is painted. Repin seems to have given equal weight to the narrative as to his mark-making in producing this work. This conscious emphasis and apparent disconnect are more characteristic of modernist art with its overt questioning of the very practice of art making than the realism Repin's painting has been understood to exemplify. This chapter lingers on this aspect of the canvas—its disjuncture—as a method to push beyond the long-held reading of *They Did Not Expect Him* as unproblematically realist. By looking closely at the painting and its painterly qualities, especially its myriad conspicuous details and treatment of space, the following analysis proposes a defining role for the canvas in the opening up of Russian art to modernism, or, more accurately, to multiple modernisms.

Traditionally, *They Did Not Expect Him* has been discussed together with Repin's other major work, *Ivan the Terrible and His Son, Ivan, November 16, 1581* (1881–1885; Figure 3.1). Exhibited a year apart—*They Did Not Expect Him* in 1884, and *Ivan the Terrible and His Son* in 1885—both canvases were the stars at their respective debuts at the annual show of the Partnership for Touring Art Exhibitions (Tovarishchestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok, with its members commonly referred to as Peredvizhniki). While in *They Did Not Expect Him*, the focal



Figure 3.1 Ilya Repin, *Ivan the Terrible and His Son, Ivan, November 16, 1581*, 1881–1885, oil on canvas, 199.5 × 254 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.

point is the intimate yet indefinable moment in which family dynamics are thrown into question upon the return of an exile, in *Ivan the Terrible and His Son*, the viewer is confronted by the moment of horror when a father grapples with the consequences of striking and ultimately killing his heir. Both caused an uproar among the viewing public. The artist and historian Alexandre Benois (1870–1960) later recalled that the appearance of *They Did Not Expect Him* in St. Petersburg was “sensational on the highest level [...] There was not a gathering, in which the painting was not discussed [...]”<sup>2</sup> The following year, *Ivan the Terrible and His Son* almost supplanted that furor when people supposedly fainted in front of the canvas on seeing its graphic nature. The underlying references to regicide, imprisonment, and Russia’s all-too-recent past were hard to ignore—although the parallels were not acknowledged in public commentary on the paintings due to strict censorship.<sup>3</sup>

Both *They Did Not Expect Him* and *Ivan the Terrible and His Son* have been viewed as Repin’s direct response to the political events around him. Scholars have frequently underscored, for example, that Repin’s decision to move from Moscow to St. Petersburg in September 1882 was motivated by his desire to be in the middle of the action so to speak; he had written in letters about feeling energized by current events, how he could not avoid thinking about them.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, these momentous canvases have been seen as part of Repin’s sympathies with the revolutionary, populist ideals of the Russian intelligentsia. *They Did Not Expect Him* and *Ivan the Terrible and His Son*

were the first on that topic to be exhibited, although arguably, they expanded his earlier treatment of the subject in paintings such as *Refusal of a Confession* (1879–1885), *The Propagandist's Arrest* (1880–1891), and even *The Annual Meeting in Memory of the French Communards* painted in France in 1883.<sup>5</sup> Unlike their precedents, these two works, with their non-anecdotal treatment of the subject and their grand, almost life-size scale have been regarded as *historical* rather than genre paintings—with *They Did Not Expect Him* categorized as a “historical painting on a contemporary subject”<sup>6</sup>—a fact that has certainly given the paintings more critical and art historical weight.<sup>7</sup> This categorization has also meant that the narrative of these ambitious works has been seen as the key to understanding the paintings, and as such, historians have focused on identifying the precise story portrayed. They have repeatedly claimed that Repin was preoccupied with rendering the psychological drama and trauma not simply of the figures represented, but of the Russian people as a whole: the political turmoil of the nation presented through the personal relationships of those depicted. This is all to say that the analysis of these paintings has become entrenched in historical, political terms and engrained within the specific development of Russian realism.

A handful of scholars have reached beyond this familiar reading, however, and noted the ambiguity of *They Did Not Expect Him*. David Jackson points that the iconography, so unlike typical Peredvizhnik or Repin's canvases in its fullness of detail, remains equivocal.<sup>8</sup> He in part excuses the unclear meaning to Repin reworking the canvas on several occasions: between 1883 and 1888, the artist is known to have repainted the exile's face four times—a fact that Soviet scholars have used as proof of Repin's interest in accurately capturing the character of a revolutionary, and Western scholars have examined as an example of Repin's own uncertainty as an artist.<sup>9</sup> A few scholars have picked up on the odd dynamic between the narrative and style in the painting as well. In his 1902 *History of Russian Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, Benois recollected his impressions on seeing *They Did Not Expect Him* when it was first exhibited: “In *Ne zhdali* our eyes skimmed over the stilted melodrama, over the relatively superficially created types, but with pleasure stopped on the excellently painted interior, on the bold colors, on the fresh, pure painting.”<sup>10</sup> Alison Hilton comments on the work's almost impressionist style in her study of the artist.<sup>11</sup> She cites that Repin's biographer Igor Grabar even likened the style of the painting with one of Russia's first recognized impressionist works, *Girl with Peaches* (1887), produced shortly thereafter by Repin's one-time student, Valentin Serov (1865–1911).<sup>12</sup> Like Serov, Repin relished painting sunlight and the juxtapositions of patterns in *They Did Not Expect Him*, and delighted in the very process of playing with colors. Jackson too observes that the aesthetic qualities of the painting, with large blocks of pure color painted with a quick, loose hand, cannot be ignored, although he does not elaborate.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Repin's emphasis on aesthetic qualities, so puzzling at first glance, hint at a particular strategy in *They Did Not Expect Him*. In the painting, with a steady and confident maneuvering of the brush, Repin painstakingly savored portraying the textures of the white jacquard tablecloth, the patches of black against the black of the figures' clothing, and most of all, the patterns and rhythmic plays of color of the wallpapers. Repin's almost sensuous facture in the blues, the whites, the pinks, and the violets of the two wallpapers fills and embraces the space. He took pleasure in depicting the sunshine coming from outside, as noted in the delicate slivers of reflection on the open doorframe. Outside too, the colors are vivid: the green of the grass

visible behind the balustrade is so bright, it competes for attention with the crimson hem of the tablecloth in the lower right of the painting. Repin's handling of the paint here is even freer, and part of the wooden, brown balustrade, slightly hidden behind the French doors, has been intentionally made blue—a cognizant mark, a signature by Repin to say that he alone, as the artist, decides what and how to paint. What is then perhaps most unexpected is what can only be called an intrusion of a different painterly genre, with its joyous treatment of a bourgeois interior, on the serious and tense subject produced on such a large scale. Indeed, all the ways in which the painting has been rendered create a heightened sense of instability between the heavily politicized content and the work's saturated and lively coloring, between the figures and the setting, between the content and the form.

This instability and stress on facture, so curious in *They Did Not Expect Him*, when looked at closely, disrupt the usual reading of the painting as historical or political, aligned as it has been with *Ivan the Terrible and His Son*. Instead, it shifts the focus of the analysis to its painterly qualities, and to the canvas as a work of art rather than merely an artifact of its time. It becomes more productive then to reconsider the work's relationship to an earlier version. For there is another version of *They Did Not Expect Him*, which many have perceived as an oil sketch or a preparatory study—*They Did Not Expect Her* (Plate 6); a closer look at the differences between the two reveals Repin's own development as an artist and not simply his decisions to better represent a revolutionary ethos.

Much smaller in scale at only 45.8 by 37 cm, *They Did Not Expect Her* is more in line with Repin's earlier genre paintings of revolutionaries. It depicts a similar scene: presumably a revolutionary figure, a young woman, finding three different, slightly over-dramatized reactions in a domestic interior filled with signifiers of both bourgeois comfort and clear meaning—the only recognizable picture on the wall, for instance, depicts an erupting volcano, the violence and surprise of which resonate in the facial expressions. In this version, the viewer is also taken by the light and colors, but the style, how it is painted, blends with the content. Its quick impressionistic brushwork is used to unite the painting: the four pairs of eyes are interlocked as the imaginary four walls of the room, covered in bright blue wallpaper and separate from the viewer's space. According to dated preparatory drawings, Repin began this version in 1882.<sup>14</sup> The location of the interior has been identified as his dacha in Martyshkino, where he went that same year.<sup>15</sup> This interior, or the physical setting for this moment of confrontation, in the first and the second versions of *They Did Not Expect Her/Him* is the same. Yet, there are meaningful changes: aside from the change in scale and of the central figure from a woman to a man, the chair in the foreground has been altered, there are more figures in the second version and some have been amended, the space in general has been widened as if to accommodate more things, the subject has been visually separated from the background, and the pictures prominently on display on the walls have been replaced and made clearer.<sup>16</sup> What do these changes signify? Can these works even be considered versions of the same painting?

Repin's response to the latter question would probably be “no.” In a letter to the renowned collector of Russian art, Pavel Tretiakov (1832–1898), who was planning to buy both versions of *They Did Not Expect Him* and *Ivan the Terrible and His Son* in late 1885, Repin wrote, pleadingly: “The little picture *Ne Zhdali* in its initial version, I would never wish to see in your gallery: it would weaken the impression from the large

painting and would inhibit them both. Dear God, do not buy it [...] They [would] hang by artist; same context; this is extremely unpleasant.”<sup>17</sup> Here, in these frank sentences, one can start to perceive how separate, in a way almost unrelated, Repin came to see these two versions. What happened between the painting of these two works that might illuminate their distinctiveness from one another in the artist’s mind? If our understanding of the dating of these versions is correct—with the first painted sometime between 1882 and early 1883, and the second, larger version from the fall of 1883 until February 1884 when it was exhibited—between these two sets of dates, Repin journeyed for almost two-months through Europe with his longtime mentor, the critic Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906). This trip was to have significant repercussions for both *They Did Not Expect Him* and Repin’s self-assessment as an artist.

Repin had longed to return to Europe and travel with his friend Stasov who could serve as an informative guide, being familiar with European cities and museums. The artist’s first and only major sojourn to Europe was ten years prior, when he lived in Paris between 1873 and 1876 as a pensioner of the Imperial Academy of Arts.<sup>18</sup> Having been heralded the harbinger of a Russian national school in art for his painting *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870–1873) and been awarded the prestigious academic stipend, Repin had embarked on his first visit with excitement. He eagerly soaked up what he found, immersing himself in study, visiting museums, galleries, and artists’ studios. He socialized with fellow painters, Russian and foreign alike, and with famous Russian ex-patriots like Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883), who introduced him to French dignitaries such as Emile Zola (1840–1902), whose work and criticism Repin admired and later followed from Russian publications.<sup>19</sup> Encouraged by Aleksei Bogoliubov (1824–1896), with his friend Vasilii Polenov (1844–1927), Repin painted *en plein air* during a long summer excursion to the coast of Normandy, maintaining that this was one of the most instructive periods of his artistic career.<sup>20</sup> Later in 1874, invigorated by his encounters with new ideas and contexts, he undertook a large canvas on a contemporary French subject, *The Paris Café* (1874–1875), for which he was chastised by some Russian friends and critics, and which he, foregoing the Academy’s rules, submitted to the Salon in 1875.<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, Repin is credited as one of the few Russian artists at the time to acknowledge the innovation of Edouard Manet (1832–1883) and the impressionists—to whom he erroneously referred in his letters as “empressionalists”—having seen exhibitions of both.<sup>22</sup> At one point, he even declared that he painted a portrait in two hours “à la Manet.”<sup>23</sup> In his letters back home, he remarked that “there was something there” in the way these French artists approached art. His self-appointed mentor Stasov, as well as his teacher-mentor Ivan Kramskoi (1837–1887), was horrified by Repin’s actions and aesthetic pursuits. In a famous incident, to halt his interests and to put him in his place, Stasov went so far as to publish heavily edited excerpts from Repin’s early letters while the artist was still abroad, in which he came off as deriding contemporary European art.<sup>24</sup> These corrective criticisms and reprimands, together with his inability to secure a buyer for *The Paris Café*, left Repin uneasy about his achievements and time in Europe, and he returned to Russia rather deflated.

For years, however, Repin had yearned to travel again, and especially go to Spain and see Velazquez’s paintings in person. Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier notes that Repin’s interest in the Spanish artist probably stemmed from his earlier interest in Manet, who had been such an ardent admirer of Velazquez.<sup>25</sup> In 1881 Repin had written to Stasov

saying that while he knew all Velazquez's works through photographs, it was not the same as seeing the originals since he considered photography to provide "a very weak interpretation of this genius's coloring."<sup>26</sup> (This seems prophetic in light of our current consideration of Repin's own work which has likewise been misrepresented by reproductions that have proven incapable of capturing the lively coloration of the original.) Thus, when an opportunity came up for Repin to join Stasov on the latter's travels through Europe, he jumped at the chance.

There are scant known letters from Repin during this trip to Europe, and we can loosely piece his reactions only from those written on his return, but there are numerous letters from Stasov written to his friends and family and the critic's diary that chronicles the pair's movements.<sup>27</sup> The two left Russia in late April 1883, and before returning to St. Petersburg by mid-June, visited Berlin, Dresden, Kassel, Amsterdam, Haarlem, The Hague, Antwerp, Brussels, Paris, Madrid, Toledo, Cordoba, Seville, Granada, Barcelona, Genoa, Milan, Venice, Verona, and Munich. In each city, they whizzed through museums, exhibitions, galleries—a whirlwind tour of art—saw plays and met locals. Through Stasov's letters, we learn that when it came to art, he and Repin did not always see eye to eye.<sup>28</sup> While they often agreed on the poor quality of Salons and exhibitions of contemporary art, they nevertheless clashed in their opinions of more canonical artists. Repin was enraptured with Frans Hals, for instance, but was not impressed with the Rembrandts he saw in the Netherlands—a reaction which dismayed Stasov. Stasov in particular was shocked that Repin was not as beguiled with Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* as he himself had been, considering it a personal favorite.<sup>29</sup> Stasov thought Goya's frescos in San Antonio de la Florida Chapel in Madrid were rather weak, which in turn upset Repin to the point that the artist walked away in anger.<sup>30</sup> And while Stasov encouraged the artist's enthusiasm for Velazquez, even helping him secure access to the Prado after hours so that Repin could make copies after his works, the critic nonetheless mocked his friend's enthusiasm.

The issue of greatest contention for the pair was the place of content in art. Stasov, in the midst of publishing his momentous essay on Russian painting, sculpture, and architecture, "Twenty-Five Years of Russian Art," and of developing his work on contemporary European art of the last thirty years (a piece he never realized), held strongly to the idea that content is the crux of art, its true meaning, and the source of its capacity to demonstrate urgency and national character—it should be stressed here that Stasov's dominance in the historiography in part explains the lingering content-driven readings of nineteenth-century Russian art.<sup>31</sup> Repin, however, could not dismiss so easily the value and importance of aesthetics, of how a work is painted, and of how the artist handles his medium. Regarding Goya's frescos, for example, Stasov admitted they were beautifully colored, but "paltry in content."<sup>32</sup> Regarding Velazquez, in a letter to his brother, the critic wrote that the Spanish artist was "poor in imagination" and that the reason Repin esteemed him so highly was because "he, too, is deprived of any gift of poetic creativity"—a harsh criticism of his star pupil, even if written in the heat of an argument.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the impassioned discussions did not deter the artist from his beliefs, as indicated by the fact that Repin kept his copies after Velazquez with him until his death.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Stasov's letters reveal an assertive Repin, self-assured in his pronouncements and firmer in his opinions than the young artist was in Europe during the 1870s; the arguments between the artist and the critic, and more broadly the entire trip, necessitated a new kind of self-understanding for Repin. No longer a student, he

made bold judgments and stood by them, even if they upset and refuted his mentor, as the latter's letters so often confirm. As a critic, Stasov, who was fifty-nine at the time of the trip, remained unwavering in his nationalistic agenda throughout his life. In contrast, Repin, ever the curious and eager mind, continued to question and experiment in art well into his fifties in the late 1890s.

The growth of Repin's self-assertion and confidence as an independent artist over the course of his trip with Stasov is discernable in the changes made in *They Did Not Expect Him*, painted shortly after their return. While the painting's premise is largely the same as in the earlier version, its form is reworked. First, the canvas's very enlarged size makes a more pronounced claim as a painting. The canvas now commands the viewer's attention, with the space between the viewer and the work conflated so that the viewer is invited to step into the tableau. Second, the loose, impressionistic brushwork has been replaced with a steady, solid hand. The facture, vivid color palette, careful study of light, create a tension between the setting and the heavy narrative playing out in the middle of the room—as if Repin lays out his arguments with Stasov and puts into question the critic's very beliefs.

As a result of these changes, the painting's many newly added objects—painted with unmistakable clarity of detail—act as clues to Repin's ruminations on the issues that came to a head during his trip: the relationship between Russian and European art, art's place in Russian culture, and even the very possibilities, visual and otherwise, of art. The map of Imperial Russia on the wall on the left, for instance, is cut off by the painting's frame, which on the one hand creates the illusion of real space continuing beyond the picture plane, while on the other, dramatically curtails, physically, the very expanse, richness, and potential of Russian land. The truncated map faces the likewise truncated French doors, which so alluringly lead to the sunlit world outside. The confection of different styled chairs in the room, too, offer food for thought: the chairs on the very left and the right are cut off by the picture plane in a manner reminiscent of the distinctly abbreviated objects in works by Edouard Manet or Edgar Degas (1834–1917). The heavy armchair in the foreground is oddly incongruous with the table as an appropriate seating option. Here too there is a clue: its conspicuously frayed hem, centrally positioned close to the viewer's space, invites us to reach out and tug it, asking us to unravel the whole work.

The pictures displayed so prominently on the walls also offer clues to Repin's pre-occupations at the time and help us to begin that unraveling. Here we find printed reproductions of well-known portraits of Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) and Nikolai Nekrasov (1821–1878) flanking a large print of *Golgotha* after a painting by Carl von Steuben (1788–1856). On the side wall hang the widely circulated photograph of Tsar Alexander II on his deathbed and the map of Imperial Russia mentioned earlier. Scholars have argued that these images are meant to underline the revolutionary zeal of Repin's painting with the two portraits of the poets in particular corresponding to the highly-charged political context of the time: both Shevchenko and Nekrasov were renowned literary figures who had written extensively on populism and national identity, and became symbolic figureheads in their advocacy for liberal ideals.<sup>35</sup> Nekrasov was also a long-time collaborator of Nikolai Chernyshevskii (1828–1889), one of the people who was granted amnesty following the coronation of Tsar Alexander III, while Shevchenko, like Chernyshevskii, was arrested in the late 1840s for inciting political unrest. The inclusion of the image depicting Christ at Golgotha is supposedly meant to reinforce ideas of righteousness and of self-sacrifice for the betterment of the people.<sup>36</sup>

As some scholars have pointed out, the use of these images bears a strong correlation to Kramskoi's *Nikolai Nekrasov at the Time of His "Last Poems"* (1878; Figure 3.2), in which the poet composes his work under the bust of Vissarion Belinskii (1811–1848) and portraits of Nikolai Dobroliubov (1836–1861), a follower of Chernyshevskii, and of the Polish nationalistic poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855)—all used to heighten the overall sentiment of that painting.<sup>37</sup> The images in *They Did Not Expect Him* have consequently been understood as Repin's use of a common trope to emphasize the moral of his painting as well as his reference to and reverence for his teacher.

This assessment of Repin's inclusion of the printed works, however, only engages superficially with the meaning and full purpose of the images. Repin's choice to depict Golgotha and the portraits of Shevchenko and Nekrasov—and not other figures such as Dobroliubov or Chernyshevskii, for example—on the brightly colored wallpaper was similar to that conscious blue mark he left on the balustrade. It was an act of artistic and intellectual agency, and it is important to consider the precise details of these images in the context of Repin's views on art as a creative process and the place of art in society.

The European journey, coupled with his arguments with Stasov, seemed to have propelled Repin to question the value of both art criticism and traditional art training. Shortly after his return, Repin enthusiastically wrote to Tretiakov about his impressions of the tour. In a letter from 10 July 1883, the painter recounted his thoughts on

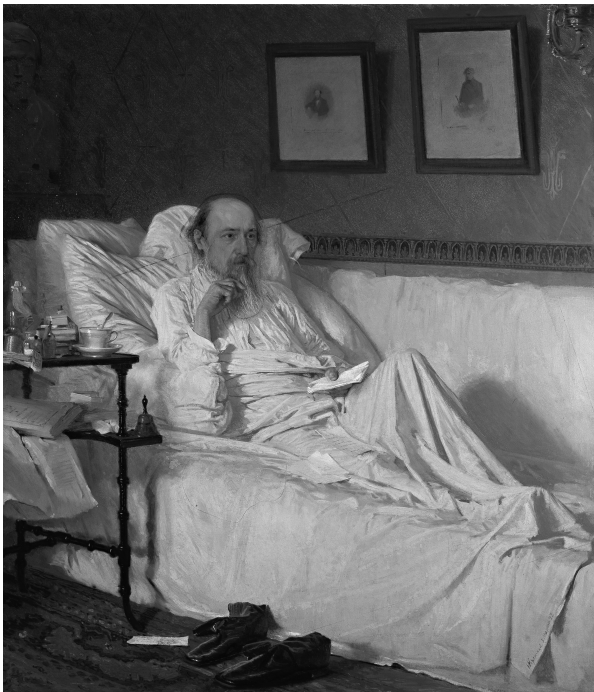


Figure 3.2 Ivan Kramskoi, *Nikolai Nekrasov at the Time of His "Last Poems"*, 1877–1878, oil on canvas, 105 × 89 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.



what he saw, made a few passing comments about museums, which were increasingly full of “trash” (“хлам”), and then broached the topic of art criticism. About the latter, Repin wrote that the main aim of contemporary art criticism should be to differentiate between what he called “innate talents” (“врожденные таланты”) and “artificially trained” artists (“искусственно воспитанных”)—certainly this must have been part of his discussions with Stasov. Building on his comment, Repin exclaimed, “Alas! Our critics are too ignorant to understand the essence [“суть”], that is so difficult to grasp sometimes even by the artists themselves [...]”<sup>38</sup> He continued to explain that art had become more of a trade (“ремесло”), where schools, such as the Academy, increasingly espouse something that cannot truly be taught. Here he made an interesting comparison: “Could there be a school for poets? Could the government give money to prepare the Pushkins, Shevchenkos, Lermontovs, Nekrasovs?! That would be such nonsense.”<sup>39</sup> He then asserted: “Time will give birth to them [people with innate talents], the demand of society, the inner life of society; and will give birth to not so many; because not so many are needed. And no one even thinks of the various ways to artificially train people into poets! But into artists?!?”<sup>40</sup> This shift in perspective, of comparing artists to poets, led him to reflect on the constraints of conventions, perhaps even on the accepted freedom of the artist’s experimentation in mark-making with the poet’s play with words and composition. In short, Repin’s inclusion of Shevchenko and Nekrasov in place of the earlier version’s depiction of an erupting volcano is no mere reference to the revolutionary ideals of the sitters, but flows from Repin’s meditations on art at that time. Rather than simply enhancing the social meaning of the work, which the image of the volcano in the earlier version would have achieved, the chosen portraits present Repin’s commentary on what it means to be a true artist, a natural-born, great artist of his time, and on the importance of art more generally. Repin here is working through his ideas in images rather than words.

The arrangement of the poets’ portraits and their relation to *Golgotha* further confirm a more artistic (as opposed to socio-political) reading of the wall’s decoration. Repin’s Nekrasov is portrayed in sharp profile; although a clear reference to the subject of Kramskoi’s painting, Repin cut off any direct engagement of the poet with the room or the viewer.<sup>41</sup> Repin then mirrored the well-known image of Shevchenko so that both poets face the print of *Golgotha*. The portrait of Shevchenko is indeed the mirror image of Kramskoi’s 1871 painted portrait of the poet, which he had also produced as an etching that year, and which Shevchenko himself etched in 1860, all of which were based on Andrei Denier’s earlier photograph of the Ukrainian artist. By deploying and subverting Kramskoi’s trope and subjects, Repin manipulated the work of his mentor to serve his own compositional purposes. What is more, the print towards which the poets direct their gaze is one of particular significance to Repin’s own development as an artist. Repin is known to have reproduced it on numerous occasions, including while he was still a young artist-in-training in Chuguev. In his memoir *The Far and the Near (Dalekoe blizkoe)*, Repin recalled finishing another artist’s mural that reproduced Steuben’s *Christ on Golgotha* from a print back in August 1861.<sup>42</sup> Seen from this personalized perspective, the print serves as a reminder to Repin—and to us—of his own starting point, and perhaps as a way to interrogate the value of the different kinds of artistic training, before and at the Academy. This painted version of the print then clearly signifies more than the Christian symbolism in *They Did Not Expect Him*. In depicting the two portraits and the print arranged as such, Repin elevates painting as an art form. He used his artistic license to invert the commonly presumed power

dynamic in Russia between literature and art. Poetry now looks to the visual arts for inspiration, in awe of its capabilities.

Repin's *They Did Not Expect Him* has been compared to several works in terms of its composition, as well as spatial and figural organization, with the artist having borrowed or referenced elements from other paintings. In addition to Kramskoi's *Nekrasov at the Time of His "Last Poems"*, Repin's canvas has been compared to Aleksandr Ivanov's *The Appearance of Christ to the People* (1837–1857), Rembrandt's etching *Christ Presented to the People* (1655), and Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (1656)—the latter rightfully so, given Repin's recent exhilaration at seeing the artist's work in person.<sup>43</sup> To this list, we should also add Manet's *Portrait of Emile Zola* (1868; Figure 3.3), which Repin would have just seen with Stasov in Paris at the *Portraits of the Nineteenth Century* exhibition, and possibly during his earlier academic sojourn.<sup>44</sup> Manet passed away only weeks before Repin and Stasov arrived in France, and undoubtedly Repin would have been aware of this fact since he considered him the artist to whom the future of art belonged.

The correlation of Repin's *They Did Not Expect Him* to Manet's portrait of the French critic might initially appear to be tangential. The latter has been extolled as a key work in upending the traditional portrait genre, with Manet himself celebrated as a pivotal artist in the development of modernism, whereas Repin was—and remains—a Russian artist entrenched in Russia's national narrative of realist art.<sup>45</sup> On looking

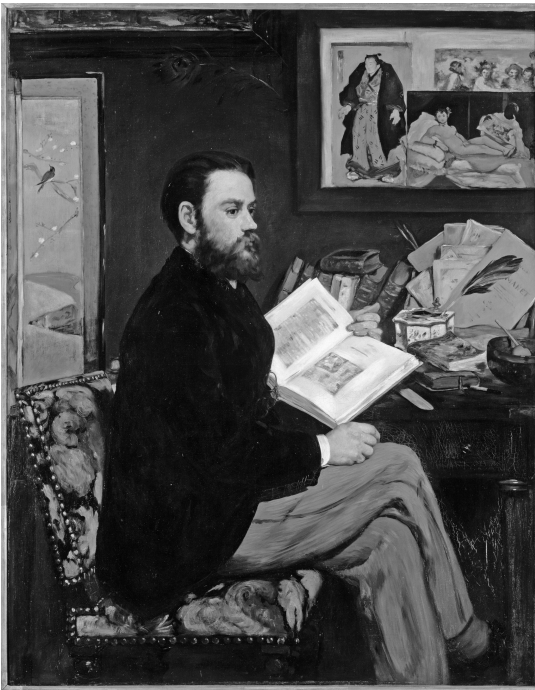


Figure 3.3 Edouard Manet, *Portrait of Emile Zola*, 1868, oil on canvas, 146.5 × 114 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photograph © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

closely, however, the echos between the two works become undeniable: the new large scale of Repin's painting loosely corresponds to Manet's large canvas; the blocks and layers of blacks in Repin's figures parallel the blacks of Zola's jacket; the added brocaded armchair is a modified version of Manet's; and the strong vertical lines of the door recall the dissecting line of the French artist's Japanese screen. Similarly, the cause of Repin's contemplation and resulting aesthetic choices in *They Did Not Expect Him* were the result of his fraught relationship with Stasov, his most avid critical support, which closely parallels Manet's own relationship with his faithful supporter, the critic Zola. Most notably, the correlation between the two works is visible in the strategically placed printed images in the background on the right of each painting. In both cases, the images are strongly tied to the artists' personal visual vernacular, and it is these details that reveal a wealth of clues to the layers of meaning embedded in the respective works.<sup>46</sup>

There is nevertheless an important difference: whereas Manet's painting's most striking feature is its novel treatment of the setting, consciously merging the portrait of Zola into the background, Repin's canvas starkly separates the subject from its background.<sup>47</sup> Whereas Manet's work essentially transforms a portrait into a still life by flattening space, Repin's becomes a carefully constructed test in balancing the importance of content and form by almost highlighting—literally, with sunshine and brightly colored wallpaper—the very space between them. This separation in *They Did Not Expect Him*, when considered in comparison to Manet's painting, appears incompatible with our accepted understanding of the development of modernism: experimentation with form, incessant preoccupation with execution, and the intellectual rupture with the past. And yet, as indicated throughout this essay, Repin was irrefutably engaged with modernist idioms and contemporary Western ideas. During his trip with Stasov, he was discovering his own complex opinions about the different components of art, its development, and its value. Could this analysis of intertextuality, with Manet's painting at its center, then offer us new ways of seeing *They Did Not Expect Him*?

Let us return for a moment to the clues in Repin's painting, the portraits of Shevchenko and Nekrasov and the print of *Golgotha*. All three are inversions of either a known painting, a print, or a photograph, and this leads us to uncover yet another issue raised by Repin—the concept of copying, or of reproducing. *Golgotha*, the painted-print-after-a-painting, for one, certainly references not just Repin's own artistic background, but also the long-established practice of copying in art in Russia, as well as in Europe. Engrained during academic training, the practice of copying carried beyond the boundaries of traditional training, with artists like Manet and Degas continuing to copy Old Masters, such as Velazquez and Rembrandt, well into their prime. On his trip to Europe, Repin too, as already mentioned, made several copies after paintings. Copying others' work had a specific purpose: to understand and master the visual language of established artists in order to move beyond it. Repin later noted to his students that “no matter how enchanting you find an artist of an old school, it is essential that you free yourself from his influence quickly and stand on your own feet, [y]ou must ruthlessly destroy the slightest similarity to him and strive only toward your own ideas and tastes, whatever they may be.”<sup>48</sup> When seen from this angle, artists' nods to others' work demonstrated the complexity inherent in the practice, and inspired reflections on the nature of and distinctions between copying, citation, and appropriation—an integral part of the questioning that has been a marker of modernism. To use Repin's language, modern artists such as Manet made copies

relentlessly to build layers of reference in individual works only to “destroy” them. In using citation, artists contested and activated the process of looking in art; in layering, reconstructing, and destroying, they also exposed the artifice of mimesis. While citation has been considered by scholars as clever and cunning in European painting and as an expression of the modernist idiom, in Russian works, they have been viewed dismissively (when noted at all) as self-conscious or derivative, as if Russian art cannot engage with others’ works on an intellectual level. But, as shown in this essay, Repin’s *They Did Not Expect Him* participates on multiple levels in the witty intertextuality of Russian and modernist European art. The painting does not *look* like European modernism, but it does intellectually tackle aspects of the same questions. The layers of reproduction contained within the details of Repin’s painting, engage in modernist artistic practice, and transform it into his own Russian syntax. Through an exploration of the relationship between content and form, Repin borrowed from, or copied Manet’s *Portrait of Zola*, and yet destroyed the similarities, pushing beyond the European model of modernism and to forge a space for Russia to create its own.

*They Did Not Expect Him* sits uncomfortably within the confines of Russian realism. Indeed, the characterization of Repin’s canvas as an exemplar of Russian realism unravels when we pull on that frayed hem and when the painting itself becomes the focal point of its own analysis. Realism has been convincingly defined as a search for truth in expression, and the resulting fraught and often self-conscious exploration of the limits of artistic representation. In Russia’s mature development of realism, that limit of representation is often seen as the struggle between the aesthetic and the ideological.<sup>49</sup> In *They Did Not Expect Him*, that relationship is not one of struggle, however, but of equilibrium. The painting is free from any restraints and instead asserts the power of Repin as an artist—one who is able and eager to leave his mark on wallpapers and balustrades. The disconnect between the aesthetic (form) and the ideological (content) is actually reconciled in the very careful balance between the two. What at first appears like tension in the painting in fact creates an opening for new possibilities in Russian art. The space between content and form created in *They Did Not Expect Him* reveals new insights into the plurality of modernism, its beginnings, failures, and developments. In being a problematic example of realism, *They Did Not Expect Him* liberated Russian painting from its insular path, and pivoted it, opened it, towards a different kind of modernism, a Russian modernism.

## Notes

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1 See for example Alison Hilton, “Scenes from Life and Contemporary History: Russian Realism of the 1870s–1880s,” in *The European Realist Tradition*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 187–214; Tat’iana Iudenkova, “Kartina I. E. Repina ‘Ne zhdali’: Khudozhestvennoe samosoznanie obshchestva 1880-kh godov,” *Iskusstvovedenie*, no. 2 (1998): 376–407; or, David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 67–77.

- 2 Alexandre Benois, *Aleksandr Benua razmysshliaet...* (Moscow: "Sov. khudozhnik," 1968), 189, as quoted in Iudenkova, "Kartina Repina," 380. (Unless otherwise noted, translations are author's own.)
- 3 For more on censorship in the press and the works' perceived analogies to contemporary events, see Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990), 118; Molly Brunson, "Painting History, Realistically: Murder at the Tretiakov," in *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture*, ed. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Margaret Samu (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 98; Molly Brunson, *Russian Realisms: Literature and Painting, 1840–1890* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), 146–151. On seeing *Ivan the Terrible and His Son* exhibited, the chief procurator of the Holy Synod, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, wrote to Tsar Alexander III condemning the work for its analogy to recent events. As a result, the painting was removed from the exhibition and prohibited from travelling to other venues.
- 4 L. Rozental', "Ne zhdali" kartina I. E. Repina (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Iskusstvo," 1947), 10; L. V. Andreeva, "Kartina I. E. Repina 'Ne zhdali,'" in *Tipologiiia russkogo realizma vtoroi poloviny XIX veka*, ed. G. Iu. Sternin (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1979), 226; Alison Hilton, *The Art of Ilya Repin: Tradition and Innovation in Russian Realism* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1979), 129–130; Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 116–118.
- 5 See for example Andreeva, "Kartina," 226–227, 229–230; Hilton, *Art of Ilya Repin*, 130–140; Alison Hilton, "The Revolutionary Theme in Russian Realism," in *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*, ed. Henry A. Millon and Linda Nochlin (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1978), 114; Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 118.
- 6 Yelena Nesterova, *The Itinerants: The Masters of Russian Realism: Second Half of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, trans. Paul Williams and Jovan Nicolson (St. Petersburg: Aurora Art Publishers, 1996), 76.
- 7 A rare exception is Dmitri Sarabianov, who in his English-language introduction to Russian art, categorizes *They Did Not Expect Him* as painting in which "genre closely approached history painting." Dmitri Sarabianov, *Russian Art: From Neoclassicism to the Avant-Garde, 1800–1917* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1990), 144.
- 8 David Jackson, *The Russian Vision: The Art of Ilya Repin* (Schoten, Belgium: BAI, 2006), 152–155.
- 9 See for example Rozental', *Ne zhdali*, 18–19; N. Iu. Zograf, "Novye podgotovitel'nye raboty k kartine I. E. Repina 'Ne zhdali,'" in *Ocherki po russkomu i sovetskomu iskusstvu*, ed. T. M. Kovalenskaia (Leningrad: "Khudozhnik RSFSR," 1974), 155–168; G. A. Nedoshivin, "Obraz revoliutsionera u Repina," in *Iz istorii zarubezhnogo i otechestvennogo iskusstva: Izbrannye raboty*, ed. G. A. Nedozhivin (Moscow: "Sovetskii khudozhnik," 1990), 168–182; Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, "Repin's Search for the Revolutionary's Image in 'They Did Not Expect Him,'" *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* XCI, nos. 1312–1313 (May–June 1978): 207–212; Hilton, *Art of Ilya Repin*, 148–150; Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 119; Jackson, *Russian Vision*, 153. At one point, Repin modeled the central figure on his friend Vsevolod Garshin (1855–1888), whose portrait he completed in 1884 (now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).
- 10 Alexandre Benois, *Istoriia russkoi zhivopisi v XIX veke*, 2nd edition (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Respublika," 1998), 267.
- 11 Hilton, *Art of Ilya Repin*, 157–158.
- 12 Ibid., 228–230.
- 13 Jackson, *Russian Vision*, 154.
- 14 There is a drawing of the figure of the seated woman, signed by Repin and dated 1882, in the collection of the National Gallery in Prague.
- 15 Zograf, "Novye raboty," 161.
- 16 For some of the analysis behind the possible reasons for Repin changing the central figure from a woman to a man, which is not discussed in this chapter, see O. Liaskovskaia, "Proizvedenie I. E. Repina 'Ne zhdali' i problema kartiny v russkoi zhivopisi vtoroi poloviny XIX veka," in *Gosudarstvennaia Tret'iakovskaia galereia. "Materialy i issledovaniia."* ed. E. Butorina (Moscow: "Sovetskii khudozhnik," 1958), II: 102–105; Hilton,

- Art of Ilya Repin*, 141–144; Henk van Os, “A First Experience with a Masterpiece by Ilya Repin,” in *Ilya Repin: Russia’s Secret*, ed. Henk van Os and Sjeng Scheijen (Groningen: Groninger Museum, 2001), exh. cat., 12–13; Jackson, *Russian Vision*, 151–152.
- 17 Letter from Ilya Repin to Pavel Tretiakov, 24 December 1885, as quoted in Liaskovskaia, “Proizvedenie,” 104, and in Andreeva, “Kartina I. E. Repina,” 225. The painting *They Did Not Expect Her* was bought by the Ukrainian art collector V. Khanenko in 1899.
  - 18 For more on his time in Paris as an academic pensioner, see Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 47–67; Jackson, *Russian Vision*, 42–71.
  - 19 Between 1875 and 1880, Emile Zola published sixty-four articles under the general title “Letters from Paris” (Parizhskie pis’ma) in the Russian periodical *The Herald of Europe* (*Vestnik Evropy*). Seven of these articles were centered on art. For Zola’s criticism and impact in Russia, see M. K. Kleman, “Nachal’nyi uspekhn Zola v Rossii,” *Iazyk i literatura* 5 (1930): 271–328; M. Kleman, “Emil’ Zola v Rossii,” *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, no. 2 (1932): 235–248; John McNair, “‘Zolaizm’ in Russia,” *The Modern Language Review* 95, no. 2 (April 2000): 450–462. For more on Zola’s art criticism in Russia, see Alison Hilton, “*Le Messenger de L’Europe*: Zola’s Art Criticism beyond Paris,” in *Emile Zola and the Arts*, ed. Jean-Max Guieu and Alison Hilton (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1988), 60–72; Rosalind P. Blakesley, “Emile Zola’s Art Criticism in Russia,” in *Critical Exchange: Art Criticism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Russia and Western Europe*, ed. Carol Adlam and Juliet Simpson (New York, NY: P. Lang, 2008), 263–284.
  - 20 I. S. Zil’bershtein, “Novye stranitsy tvorcheskoi biografii Repina: Repin v Parizhe (Novonaidennye raboty 1873–1876 gg.),” in *Repin: Khudozhestvennoe nasledstvo*, eds. I. E. Grabar’ and I. S. Zil’bershtein (Moscow-Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1948), I: 129; Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 55–56. In addition to his time in Veules, Repin claimed that earlier in Chuguev and his summer on the Volga studying the barge haulers were the most instructive periods of his artistic development.
  - 21 As an academic pensioner, Repin was not allowed to exhibit any of his work without prior approval by the Academy.
  - 22 For a discussion of Repin’s reactions to the impressionists and contemporary Western art, see Alison Hilton, “The Impressionist Vision in Russian and Eastern Europe,” in *World Impressionism: The International Movement, 1860–1920*, ed. Norma Broude (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), 375–381; Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 52–57; David Jackson, “Western Art and Russian Ethics: Repin in Paris, 1873–76,” *The Russian Review* 57 (July 1998): 403. For a more general discussion of Russian artists’ relationship to contemporary European art in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Rosalind P. Blakesley, “‘There is something there...’: The Peredvizhniki and West European Art,” *Experiment* 14, 1 (2008): 18–56. For an excellent analysis of and Repin’s commentary on Turgenev’s shifting opinions on contemporary French art and the role of Zola in those changes, see I. S. Zil’bershtein, “Otnoshenie Turgeneva i Repina k sovremennomu frantsuzskomu iskusstvu,” in *Repin i Turgenev* (Moscow-Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1945), 80–93.
  - 23 Ilya Repin in a letter to Vladimir Stasov, 12 October 1875, as cited in Zil’bershtein, “Novye stranitsy,” 147; Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 53; Jackson, “Western Art and Russian Ethics,” 406–407; and, Jackson, *Russian Vision*, 58. There is an on-going discussion whether the resulting portrait was of his wife Vera or of his daughter Vera.
  - 24 Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 62–63.
  - 25 *Ibid.*, 114; see also, Hilton, *Art of Ilya Repin*, 157.
  - 26 I. S. Zil’bershtein, “Puteshetvie I. E. Repina i V. V. Stasova po zapodnoi Evrope v 1883 godu,” in *Repin: Khudozhestvennoe nasledstvo*, ed. I. E. Grabar’ and I. S. Zil’bershtein (Moscow-Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1948), I: 434.
  - 27 For a complete historical account of Repin and Stasov’s trip through Europe in 1883, see Zil’bershtein, “Puteshetvie,” 429–524.
  - 28 In their work, Fan Parker and Stephen Jan Parker also discuss some of the disagreements between Stasov and Repin during this trip. See Fan Parker and Stephen Jan Parker, *Russia on Canvas: Ilya Repin* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), 73–77.

- 29 Zil'bershtein, "Puteshetvie," 449.
- 30 Ibid., 481–483.
- 31 Stasov's essay "Twenty-Five Years of Russian Art" was published in *The Herald of Europe* (*Vestnik Evropy*) in its November-December issue of 1882, and in February, June, and October 1883—the same periodical that had earlier published Zola's "Letters from Paris." Reprinted Vladimir Stasov, "Dvadtsat' piat' let russkogo iskusstva," in *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1952), II: 391–522.
- 32 Zil'bershtein, "Puteshetvie," 482.
- 33 Ibid., 476.
- 34 Ibid., 477.
- 35 See for example Liaskovskaia, "Proizvedenie," 109; and Hilton, "Revolutionary Theme," 120.
- 36 See for example A. N. Savinov, "Zametki o kartinakh Repina. IV. 'Golgofa' K. K. Shteibena v kartine 'Ne zhdali'," in *Repin: Khudozhestvennoe nasledstvo*, ed. I. E. Grabar' and I. S. Zil'bershtein (Moscow-Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1949), II: 332–333.
- 37 See for example Hilton, *Art of Ilia Repin*, 146–147; Hilton, "Revolutionary Theme," 120.
- 38 Ilia Repin, "P. M. Tret'iakovu, 10 iulia 1883g.," in *I. Repin: Izbrannye pis'ma v dvukh tomakh, 1867–1930*, ed. I. A. Brodskii (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Iskusstvo," 1969), I: 284.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Alison Hilton notes that Repin's image of Nekrasov is taken from a drawing of the poet by Kramskoi. See Hilton, "Revolutionary Theme," 120.
- 42 Ilia Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1953), 71; Hilton, "Revolutionary Theme," 121; Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 119.
- 43 See for example, Andreeva, "Kartina," 231–232; Liaskovskaia, "Proizvedenie," 113; Hilton, "Revolutionary Theme," 121–124; Valkenier, *Ilya Repin*, 119, 123.
- 44 During his time in Paris as a pensioner, Repin visited Manet's exhibition at the Durand-Ruel gallery with Stasov and Sergei Tretiakov. See Zil'bershtein, "Otnoshenie Turgeneva i Repina," 90; Hilton, *Art of Ilia Repin*, 78; Jackson, *Russian Vision*, 58.
- 45 It should be noted that others have also perceived an intellectual as well as aesthetic relationship between Repin's and Manet's works. In his study of Repin's time as a pensioner, for example, David Jackson compares Repin's paintings of that period with that of Manet's. He especially likens the sensibility and approach of Repin's *The Paris Café* to Manet's contemporary work. See Jackson, "Western Art and Russian Ethics," 394–409. See also the recent analysis of *The Paris Café* and Repin's earlier awareness of Manet in Allison Leigh, "Il'ia Repin in Paris: Mediating French Modernism," *Slavic Review* 78, no. 2 (summer 2019): 434–455.
- 46 For a discussion of the meaning of images in Manet's painting, see Theodore Reff, "Manet's Portrait of Zola," *The Burlington Magazine* 117, no. 862 (January 1975): 34–44; Anne Higonnet, "Manet and the Multiple," *Grey Room* 48 (summer 2012): 102–116.
- 47 Reff, "Manet's Zola," 35.
- 48 A. A. Kurennoi, "Vospominaniia o I. E. Repine," in *Novoe o Repine: Stat'i i pis'ma khudozhnika, vospominaniia uchenikov i druzei, publikatsii*, ed. I. A. Brodskii and V. N. Moskvinov (Leningrad: "Khudozhnik RSFSR," 1969), 182, as translated in Hilton, *Art of Ilia Repin*, 207.
- 49 Brunson, "Repin and the Painting of Reality," in *Russian Realisms*, 127–161.

## 4 “Is Disagreement among Artists a Good Thing?”

### The End of Salon-Type Exhibitions in Russia and Western Europe

*Andrey Shabanov*

In the future, of course, even more so than today, those who have something in common will draw closer together, and those who are distant from each other will diverge even further.<sup>1</sup>

—Vladimir Stasov, 1894

While disagreements between artists never failed to persist and flourish throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, it was the exhibiting context of these disagreements that eventually went through a paradigmatic change. Originating with the French Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in the late seventeenth century, the first regular, secular, and official exhibition of contemporary art was designed to demonstrate the achievements of the institution’s academicians, fellows, and students to the general public—this exhibition was later called the Salon. Throughout the eighteenth century, other European countries followed suit and adopted the salon-type show, along with the French Academy’s training model and aesthetics (i.e. the hierarchy of artistic genres, prominence of classical historical subjects, etc.).<sup>2</sup> As a consequence of the democratizing principles of the French Revolution, in 1791, the Salon was opened to all artists, French and foreign alike, regardless of membership in the Academy. Given the continuing French cultural hegemony in Europe, the opening up of the Salon became one of the factors that catapulted its status to being the main exhibition space of the Western art world, and which affected its shift from a forum of public enlightenment to principally a marketplace in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> For a long period of time, the Salon—the state-sponsored, centralized, and all-inclusive exhibition space—became the main showroom for confrontations and changes in contemporary styles and movements. For example, one may recall the legendary battles of the classicists and the romanticists in the Salons of the late 1820s. It is only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the Salon’s monopoly on exhibiting these artistic conflicts was contested, both by private and government initiatives. An increasing number of independent artist-run societies initiated alternative exhibitions; galleries also began to exhibit those rejected from official shows for being too innovative in their pictorial language. Likewise, others started to sense that to be more visible in the art market, it was more commercially viable to stay away from bazaar-like Salons. The impressionist shows (1874–1886) are representative of both these types of reasoning.<sup>4</sup> Yet, these alternative exhibitions were a marginal feature by comparison to the aesthetic and marketable might of the Salon. A major threat to the Salon’s authority



eventually came from even larger international exhibitions, or more specifically, from the Fine Arts Sections, which were inaugurated in Paris with the Exposition Universelle of 1855.<sup>5</sup> In the end, the last decade of the nineteenth century saw the momentous finale of the monopoly of the main official exhibition, the Salon, and in the same place this tradition had been established—Paris. Soon after, many other European countries once again followed the French example.

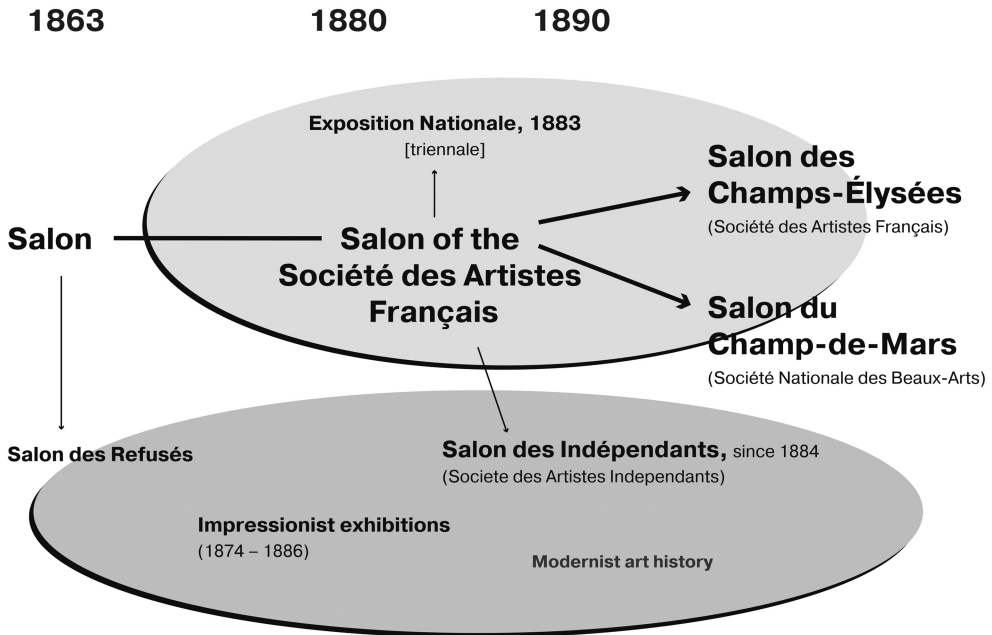
In his 1894 essay “Is disagreement among artists a good thing?” the art critic Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906) not only outlined a response to this fundamental change in the Western art world, but also connected that development to Russia for the first time.<sup>6</sup> In an extensive account, he described the splits within the Paris Salon of 1891 and the Glass Palace (Munich Glaspalast) in 1893, while presenting these two cases as significant victories for progressive realist artists over the old, classical, academic system. Yet Stasov’s ultimate point was more ambitious and somewhat patriotic in intent: he assigned to the Partnership for Touring Art Exhibitions (Tovarishchestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok) the pioneering role in what would later be called the secessionist movements in Western and central Europe.<sup>7</sup> The Partnership, founded in 1870, had been a group of Moscow and St. Petersburg artists who organized touring art exhibitions around the provinces and became known as the Peredvizhniki (often referred to in English as the Wanderers or Itinerants).<sup>8</sup>

Subsequent scholars have unanimously discredited Stasov’s argument. In addition to the oversimplified and biased character of his essay, they believed that the critic connected developments that had nothing in common. Indeed, for a long time the Peredvizhniki were considered an altruistic, public-spirited, and critically minded realist art movement. Hence, in contrast to the scholarly attention given to connections between individual Peredvizhniki members and the Western art world,<sup>9</sup> no serious attempts were made to reflect on the significance of the group as a long-term exhibition enterprise within Russia,<sup>10</sup> let alone relate it to broader European developments.<sup>11</sup> The Peredvizhniki by default have become an ostensibly unique Russian institutional phenomenon in the eyes of both Russian and Western scholars. As for the major European secessionist movements, modernist art history has favored not so much the early instances of the splits in Paris and Munich, but rather the later developments embodied by the Wiener Secession. Joseph Maria Olbrich’s manifesto-like Secession building, the works of Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) and other leading members of the group, exhibition designs, posters and catalogues, and the group’s official magazine, *Sacred Spring* (Ver Sacrum), conveyed a bold, coherent, and unmistakably new aesthetic agenda, which seemed to have colored the perception of the entire secessionist movement.<sup>12</sup> As far as Russia is concerned, it was Sergei Diaghilev’s Mir iskusstva group (also known as World of Art) that has been seen as the principal Russian version of this larger pan-European development.<sup>13</sup> Mir iskusstva made its first public appearance around the same time as the Wiener Secession, while Diaghilev (1872–1929) was undoubtedly aware of the earlier Salon du Champ de Mars and the Munich Secession: he mentioned them in one of his inaugural statements in order to underscore that his new exhibition society was in line with the European trend of the time. Mir iskusstva was enthusiastic about new art, including *plein air* painting, impressionism, the symbolist and art nouveau movements, as well as applied arts. Akin to major European secessionist movements, the Russian group was also deliberately international, if not on the walls, then on the pages of its official magazine of the same name (and which, it should be mentioned, was designed after the German art nouveau magazine *Pan*).<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on new research, the present essay takes Stasov’s argument as a departing point and reevaluates it from a novel, institutional perspective. In particular, this chapter explores the so-far neglected intermediary role that the Peredvizhnik project played between the decline of the official salon-style exhibition and the rise of independent artist-run shows in late imperial Russia. It is this intermediary role that makes the Peredvizhniki case in certain respects comparable to European secessionist outbreaks, no matter how aesthetically divergent they otherwise appear to be.

It is worth recalling how the major European secessionist outbreaks emerged and took shape as institutions. To put it simply, they were a culmination of long processes within which the organization of the official salon-style show gradually passed from a government structure to private artists’ unions, although the state continued to subsidize the event. In German-speaking countries, this process began with the foundation of the General German Art Association (Allgemeine Deutsche Künstlergenossenschaft) in 1856 and its local chapters that soon after began to take over cities’ salons.<sup>15</sup> In Paris, the government ceased to organize the Salons in 1880, delegating this task to the newly formed Society of French Artists (Société des Artistes Français).<sup>16</sup> Consequently, it was mainly disagreements among artists who now ran those official shows that led to their ultimate fragmentation. Thus, one of the triggers of the conflict within the Salon became the question of whether the jury should count or ignore the awards and privileges which artists began to receive during Expositions Universelles, when they were submitting works for Salons. This conflict resulted in the split in 1890, when a large group of established artists, headed by Ernest Meissonier (1815–1891), who were in favor of counting the international awards and privileges, broke away from the Société des Artistes Français, which had been responsible for running the official Salon de Champs-Élysées in the Palais de l’Industrie. The newly registered Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts (National Society of Fine Arts) launched its own concurrent annual public exhibition then at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Champ de Mars. This show was quickly referred to as the Salon du Champ de Mars to distinguish it from the original Salon (Figure 4.1).<sup>17</sup> This unprecedented split from the most influential exhibition in the Western world provoked a similar schism in Munich two years later. Here, more than a hundred prominent artists led by Fritz von Uhde (1848–1911) resigned from the Munich chapter of the Allgemeine Deutsche Künstlergenossenschaft to form the new association, Verein Bildender Künstler Münchens (Munich Society of Visual Artists). The aim was to organize annual shows independent from the city’s official exhibition at the Glaspalast and critics immediately called this new exhibition the Münchener Secession.<sup>18</sup> The financial and critical success of the Paris Split and the Munich Secession inspired further artistic divisions in Western and Central European countries.<sup>19</sup> As previously mentioned, the Vienna Secession turned out to be the most emblematic among them, yet institutionally, it developed along similar lines: it was launched in 1897 by the Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs (Union of Creative Artists of Austria), which had split from the Gesellschaft Bildender Künstler Österreichs (Society of Austrian Artists), which ran the major official exhibition in the Künstlerhaus Wien.<sup>20</sup>

Against this background, one may observe a difficulty in drawing institutional parallels between Russia’s Mir iskusstva and secessionist outbreaks elsewhere. Being largely a personal initiative of Diaghilev, Mir iskusstva was not an artist-run break with or *secession* from an official, salon-style academic exhibition, nor did this Russian group have any intention of contesting the monopoly of that exhibition. All



*Figure 4.1* The end of the Salon in Paris.

this was instead achieved one and a half decades earlier by the Peredvizhnik group; and *Mir iskusstva*, along with other artist-run societies in Russia, rather than instigating it, enjoyed the fruits of that centrifugal development fueled by the Peredvizhniks in exhibiting practices.

The Peredvizhniks and their seminal public break in 1876 with the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg were a product of a significantly restricted art world structure compared with Western Europe. Similar to elsewhere, in Russia the practice of regular official exhibitions emerged soon after the foundation of the Academy of Arts in 1757.<sup>21</sup> Uniquely for Russia, however, this state-sponsored exhibition was not only supervised by the Academy, but also always held in the same building—an aspect that in the eyes of contemporaries connected the show with the government-backed institution. It is true that with the foundation of the Society for Encouragement of the Arts in 1820 and the Moscow Society of Art Lovers in 1860, alternative exhibition venues appeared in both St. Petersburg and Moscow. However, these exhibition spaces were operated by Maecenas-type societies and almost right from their inception, relied on state subsidies and enjoyed Imperial patronage.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, these two additional exhibiting venues extended the official exhibition structure rather than questioned the leading role of the Academy. From a wider European perspective, neither St. Petersburg nor Moscow hosted any international fine art exhibitions until the 1890s, or had a dealer-gallery system of any sort, which could have shaken or at least corroded the hegemony of the official show—as was the case in Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

In such a restricted institutional context, it was a group of Moscow and St. Petersburg artists that eventually made use of the newly liberalized political climate

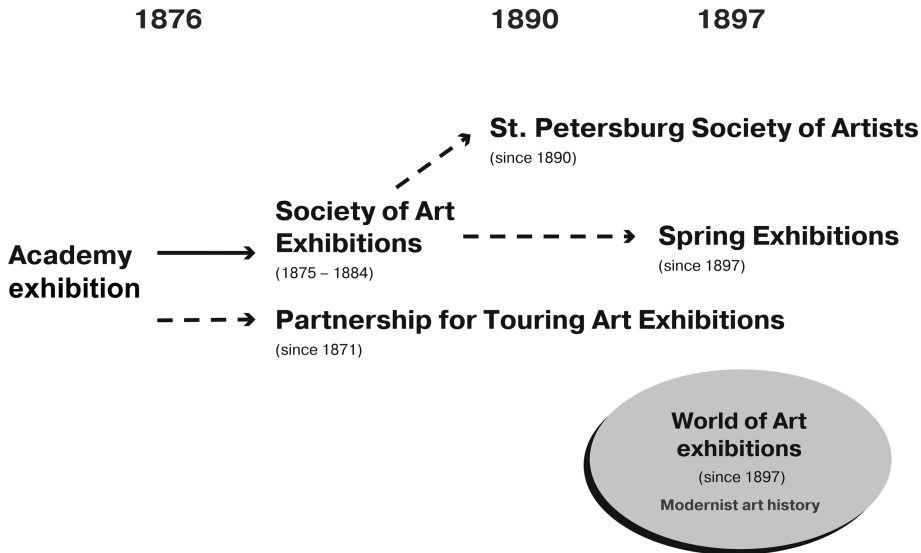
of the 1860s and in 1870 launched the first independent artist-run exhibition enterprise in tsarist Russia. This Partnership for Touring Art Exhibitions had the sole purpose to show and sell paintings around the empire. For ideological reasons Soviet scholars, following Stasov, ascribed an altruist ethos and a rebellious realist agenda to this group—a notion that was effectively questioned by Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier and subsequent researchers.<sup>24</sup> Altruism and any radical aesthetic commitment could hardly have been a priority for artists in an essentially authoritarian country. In fact, the primary initial concern of the group was the creation of a viable exhibition enterprise. To be commercially viable and politically acceptable in this context, the Peredvizhniki had no other option but to be aesthetically open and diverse. At least in the first decades, the Partnership staged stylistically and thematically heterogeneous displays, which featured all major pictorial genres. It is true that the critical and realist agenda began at some point to constitute a significant element in the Partnership’s venture, but that was only possible within a more pragmatic and heterogeneous whole of the group, which grew in size, prominence, and bureaucracy.<sup>25</sup>

Of particular relevance here is that the Partnership staged its first four shows on the Academy’s premises, and these were successful both among critics and the public. What ensured this success was the Partnership’s rule that in order to be included in its exhibitions, paintings must “not have been previously exhibited in public” (including at the Academy shows).<sup>26</sup> Quite predictably, this quality of novelty weakened the concurrent annual academic exhibition. Hence, within a matter of a few years, state officials made a significant effort to convince the Peredvizhniki to merge with the Academy’s official show, at least in the capital, in order to represent all the major developments in Russian art. This proposal did not work for the group for commercial and ideological reasons; thus, after 1875 the group was no longer allowed to use the Academy’s building for its shows.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, the very fact that the Peredvizhniki’s earliest shows were organized within the Academy’s domain greatly contextualized their public reception. It was only with the Partnership’s fifth show in 1876—the first to be held outside of the Academy—that critics finally recognized the independent character of the Peredvizhnik enterprise. In the words of the influential newspaper of the time, the *Voice* (Golos):

The public has become used to visiting spring exhibitions at the Academy. One exhibition, among others, opened in 1871. Visitors attended it in large numbers and with enthusiasm, but only a few knew that it was not like previous Academy exhibitions, that its aims and organization were different. In the eyes of the public, the touring exhibitions were simply Academy’s exhibitions. They opened in the Academy halls and consisted of works by artists, the majority of whom already possessed Academy titles. This close connection between the touring exhibitions and the Academy has been broken: the fifth exhibition is displayed at the Academy of Sciences. The Partnership is now beginning a fairly independent existence; it is becoming a specific organism.<sup>28</sup>

Even the most established critics were taken aback by what they regarded as the sudden and unprecedented “split” (*raskol*) in the “artistic family,” in the Russian “small artistic anthill,” and the emergence of two annual concurrent shows (Figure 4.2).<sup>29</sup>

There are several parallels that should not be ignored between the *raskol* in St. Petersburg and what Peter Paret has summarized as the characteristic features of



*Figure 4.2* The end of the monopoly of the Imperial Academy of Arts exhibition in St. Petersburg, Russia.

the major European secessionist movements.<sup>30</sup> The most significant among them was that these artist-run splits had effectively ended the long-standing monopoly of the single official, salon-type exhibition, originating with an Academy. The new groups did so by successfully launching an alternative annual exhibition to the official show. Stasov reasonably mentioned in his 1894 article that the Parisian Salon had witnessed several previous breakaways, foremost the Salon des Refusés in 1863 and, especially the Salon des Independents which began to operate in 1884, but these did not lead to any major fragmentation of the Salon itself. To question the hegemony of the official show, the secessionist exhibition had to match the official show’s all-inclusive scope and stature, while surpassing it in all other respects: stricter selection, smaller size, better design, established names, and novel aesthetics although still within expected norms. As Robert Jensen argues, “despite the coincidence of the rise of Secessionism with important changes in aesthetic norms that we associate with the expansion of modernism in the visual arts, the Secessions were not inherently cause nor even the most important vehicle for aesthetic modernism.” In other words, the secessionist exhibition had to be “an independent alternative, but no less prestigious, to the identity of the academician.”<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the artists behind the three schisms—in St. Petersburg, Paris, and Munich—were largely established, professionally recognized names in all major pictorial genres. For example, of the fifteen founding members who signed the Partnership charter, eight held the titles of academicians (Vasilii Perov, Lev Kamenev, Aleksei Savrasov, Ivan Kramskoi, Mikhail P. Klodt, Ivan Shishkin, Aleksei Korzukhin and Valerii Iakobi), and three were professors (Nikolai Ge, Mikhail K. Klodt and Konstantin Makovskii).<sup>32</sup> Among the founding members of the Salon du Champ de Mars were painters Meissonier, Albert Besnard (1849–1934), Carolus Duran (1837–1917),

Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852–1929), Henri Gervex (1852–1929), Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898), and Alfred Philippe Roll (1846–1919), as well as sculptors Jules Dalou (1838–1902) and Auguste Rodin (1840–1917)—all critically acclaimed.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the memorandum of the Munich Secession listed dozens of names of “royal professors” and “honorary members of the Royal Academy of Arts,” such as Gotthard Kuehl (1850–1915), Albert Keller (1844–1920), and Franz von Uhde, along with, less honored then, but more familiar now, Max Liebermann (1847–1935), Louis Corinth (1858–1925), and Franz Stuck (1863–1928).<sup>34</sup> It is true that the Peredvizhniki, at least in their first decades, and the European secessionist outbreaks attracted representatives of the newest trends in art, but these new voices were subsumed into an already diverse, heterogeneous, and familiar whole.

Even if these Russian and European artists appeared radical, it was largely on account of their claiming better and more direct control over the showing and selling of their works. To quote the Munich secessionists’ first public announcement: “We, the artists, want to be masters in our own house! No longer do we wish to be controlled by painting lawyers and parliamentarians!”<sup>35</sup> Compare this with Grigorii Miasoedov’s (1834–1911) reasoning behind the foundation of the Partnership: “Why do artists themselves not collect revenue from their works?”<sup>36</sup> In this respect, the Peredvizhniki and the European secessionist movements shared much in common with other emerging private exhibitions in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Those developments were all linked to changing patterns of patronage, to the significant increase and diversification of urban society and, accordingly, of the art market.<sup>37</sup> In such a novel social context, artists attempted to shape themselves as “a professional class, as legitimate members of an expanding middle-class culture, alongside other residents of professionalism such as doctors, lawyers, and university professors.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, as Paret argues, when the fine arts had for such a long period been dependent on the government and affiliated with it in so many ways, launching any major private art exhibition could become politicized. Indeed, artists eagerly desired to be emancipated from the paternalistic academic system as well as from the commercial and bureaucratic monopoly of the state in order to cultivate a more knowledgeable art public of their own and to foster private patronage. This change in attitudes and policies to the official art establishment could easily be interpreted in political terms.<sup>39</sup> Significantly, in the case of the Peredvizhniki and all major secessionist outbreaks, the government made an evident effort to reconcile the splits within the major official exhibition, even if to no avail. And, despite all these ‘radical’ inceptions, the separatists always became the new establishment.<sup>40</sup>

Drawing any further parallels between the Peredvizhniki and the European secessionist movements is rather problematic. Nearly two decades separated these developments and the contrasting institutional frameworks within which they emerged and evolved. By the time of the first major secessionist outbreaks in Paris and Munich, the Partnership in Russia had become a respectable, socially influential, and also notoriously conservative exhibition platform. Perhaps the most apparent manifestation of the latter quality was the balloting process, which preceded the Partnership’s every new show during the late 1880s and early 1890s. The Peredvizhnik members voted to accept or reject paintings proposed by external exhibitors, who primarily represented a younger generation of artists. As the final results of the balloting were documented in the minutes of the Partnership’s General Meetings, we have statistical evidence that artists who favored novel artistic tendencies, including the *plein air* approach,

impressionist, and symbolist experiments, found it the most difficult to get into the Peredvizhniki's shows. At different times, these included Isaak Levitan (1860–1900), Valentin Serov (1865–1911), Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939), Mikhail Nesterov (1862–1942), Andrei Riabushkin (1861–1904), Aleksandr Golovin (1863–1930), Sergei Maliutin (1859–1937), and Leonid Pasternak (1862–1945) among others.<sup>41</sup> Tellingly, one such dramatic balloting, in 1889, even resulted in a group of rejected artists asking the Partnership for permission to display their unwanted paintings in a special “*refusés*” hall, a request that was ironically refused.<sup>42</sup> The French word here clearly referred to a series of notorious incidents within the Paris Salons in the second half of the nineteenth century (including the above mentioned Salon de Refusés of 1863), which became a common departing point for the exhibition-based modernist art history.<sup>43</sup> That is to say, by the early 1890s, the Partnership's shows, matching the scope and conservative approach of the official academic exhibition, denied novel modernist tendencies, which the emerging European secessionist movements stood for or are now historically perceived to signify. The Peredvizhniki's exceptionally long lifetime also seems contrary to the traditional understanding of secessionist groups elsewhere. The Paris Split and the Munich or Vienna Secessions came to an end only a decade or so after their foundation, splitting up yet again into something else. The Partnership continued to operate until 1923 alongside many other exhibition societies, including avant-garde ones, which appeared in Russia in the early twentieth century.

But however different the Peredvizhnik exhibition project and the major European secessionist movements were in other respects, by the turn of the century they all nonetheless played a similar role in the tectonic shift in the established exhibition system. By effectively ending the long-standing practice and monopoly of the main official show, with its claim to being the supreme source of artistic legitimacy, these new artist-run initiatives fostered the idea of an independent exhibition as the principal instrument of artistic self-legitimization and marketing. This intermediate institutional role may not have looked so bold and distinctive in the case of the Salon du Champ de Mars in Paris or the Munich Secession, which emerged within a more elaborate, compound, and international context, but that certainly appeared to be the case with the Peredvizhniki in Russia.

Catalyzed by the Partnership's commercial and critical success, the official, salon-type academic exhibition gradually and steadily declined in Russia. Forcing the Peredvizhniki to leave its premises, the Academy inescapably prompted the emergence of a new artistic center in a physically different location, and thereby overlooked the chance to represent major trends of Russian art at least under its roof. Instead, the Academy did its best to upgrade its annual exhibitions. It did so by delegating the whole process to a supposedly independent group of artists, officially registered under the name of the Society of Art Exhibitions from 1875 onwards.<sup>44</sup> However, members of this society were regular participants in the Academy's shows and adhered to its aesthetic, and the whole enterprise was sponsored and supervised by the Academy. The Society of Art Exhibitions stopped showing student works, implemented a stricter selection process, and refined the overall design of the display. Yet, all these improvements proved to be insufficient in competing with the Partnership's shows, which continued to attract emerging generations of artists of the time. Between 1876 and 1883, the Society of Art Exhibitions organized seven annual shows on the Academy's premises before the group ceased to operate in 1884. Soon after, to catch up with the Peredvizhniki, the Academy undertook its own version of touring exhibitions.

The idea was in the air as early as 1884, but the first such tour took place in 1886–87, with the same stopping cities as the Partnership, including Odessa and Kharkov among others. The second tour, of 1888–89, covered an even broader geography, but nothing suggests that this was successful or a continued endeavor.<sup>45</sup> These and other failures on the part of the Academy prompted its radical reform, which was realized in 1894.<sup>46</sup> In this process, several prominent former and current members of the *Peredvizhniki*, such as Arkhip Kuindzhi (1842–1910), Ilia Repin (1844–1930), Vladimir Makovskii (1846–1920) and Ivan Shishkin (1832–1898), were invited to take teaching positions, and the result of these changes could be observed soon after in the Academy’s annual exhibitions. Starting with 1897 and instigated by Kuindzhi, the artist-run Spring Exhibition (*Vesenniaia vystavka*) replaced the annual academic exhibition. Along with established names working in the academic style, the new show featured a younger generation of artists, including Filipp Maliavin (1869–1940), Konstantin Somov (1869–1939), Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947), and Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva (1871–1955). The show was neither too conservative and academic nor too progressive in the eyes of critics, one of whom observed in 1898 that the Spring Exhibition was “like many others, organized by a private society or even individual.”<sup>47</sup>

Concurrently, during the 1890s, the art scene in Russia began to witness the rise of independent exhibition societies, which consisted of artists who used to be major exhibitors at the Academy’s shows and were representatives of the academic aesthetic. The earliest of these was the St. Petersburg Society of Artists, which at the moment of its foundation in 1890 comprised more than fifty members, including Lev Lagorio (1827–1905), Arsenii Meshcherskii (1834–1902), Aleksei Kivshenko (1851–1895), Konstantin Kryzitskii (1858–1911), Iosif Krachkovskii (1854–1914), Konstantin Makovskii (1839–1915), Genrikh Semiradskii (1843–1902), and others.<sup>48</sup> From 1891, this group regularly organized exhibitions in St. Petersburg on the premises of either the Society of Encouragement of the Arts, the Academy of Sciences, or the elite department store *The Passage*, as well as in Moscow and occasionally in the provinces. Five years later, the Society of the Artists of History Painting was established in Moscow. As the name suggests, it was designed to promote history painting, the apex of the academic hierarchy of genres; and it did so for several years in Moscow and occasionally in the provinces. The membership body included around forty St. Petersburg and Moscow artists, among them Stepan Bakalovich (1857–1947), Fedor Bronnikov (1827–1902), Vasiliu Vereshchagin (1842–1904), and Semiradskii, to name but a few.<sup>49</sup> Thus, instead of being exclusively and physically affiliated with the state-sponsored Academy, by the 1890s, the classical, academic style became one of the products of the art market, competing now on equal terms (and quite successfully) with other emerging exhibition societies in Russia.

It should also be noted that the decline of the official show largely correlated with the waning status of the Academy’s premises as a modern exhibition space. The institution began to host its shows in what at the end of the eighteenth century was seen as cutting-edge contemporary architecture—Vallin de la Mothe’s gigantic classicist building on the banks of the Neva River in St. Petersburg, and which signified the might of Empress Catherine the Great’s imperial Russia. However, a hundred years later, those exhibition halls must have looked outdated by comparison to the modern and purpose-built structures of the Society of Encouragement of the Arts in the early 1890s and the Grand Exhibition Hall of the Stieglitz Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts in 1898. (By contrast, in order to reinforce its authority and appear relevant, the



Parisian Salon moved its exhibition space to the architecturally and technologically up-to-date premises of the Palais de l'Industrie soon after it was built for the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855; similarly in Munich, the large and cutting-edge Glaspalast hosted the official shows commencing 1854.<sup>50</sup> In Russia, these brand-new exhibition spaces, with their modern facilities, electric lighting, iron and glass roof construction, buttressed, at least architecturally, the status of events held there, as well as the groups associated with those events as the new centers of artistic gravity. Thus, the Society of Encouragement of the Arts became a residence for the Peredvizhniki's shows from 1896 onwards, and the Grand Exhibition Hall accommodated Diaghilev's first *Mir iskusstva* exhibitions.

The success of the earliest independent, artist-run initiative of the Partnership not only hastened the decline of the official academic show, but also exerted an emancipatory effect on the whole exhibiting practice in late imperial Russia. Artists increasingly began to perceive the exhibition as the principal tool to promote their particular aesthetic agendas (whether academic or modernist, and everything in between), as well as to market their works, which was of vital importance for Russian artists in light of the total absence of the dealer-gallery system.

Indeed, the ensuing generation of Russian artists launched their exhibition groups either openly inspired by or in apparent opposition to the Peredvizhniki. The earliest two examples were the Kiev Partnership for Art Exhibitions and the Partnership of South-Russian Artists, founded in Kiev in 1887 and in 1890 in Odessa respectively—in two Ukrainian cities where the Peredvizhniki regularly exhibited during their tours of the provinces. Enthused by the Peredvizhniki, these two groups retained their largely regional significance.<sup>51</sup> A somewhat different motivation lay behind the foundation of the Moscow Partnership of Artists in 1893.<sup>52</sup> In response to its inaugural show, a critic noted that this new exhibition “has something in common with the foundation of the Peredvizhnik exhibitions” twenty years ago, when “young forces, looking for new directions in art, broke away from the Academy of Arts and launched their own exhibition,” and now the Moscow Partnership is “repeating” the Peredvizhnik story on “a smaller scale.”<sup>53</sup> The critic observed that the new enterprise arose out of a lack of any alternative exhibition space, where the Moscow Society of Art Lovers and the Peredvizhniki failed to meet interests and expectations of the younger generation of artists. Notwithstanding the largely eclectic character of its displays, over time, the Moscow Partnership became a significant launching platform for major Russian representatives of impressionist and symbolist art movements, including Konstantin Korovin, Viktor Boris-Musatov (1870–1905), and Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910). Another truly innovative feature of this exhibition enterprise was its promotion of applied art objects along with conventional fine artworks. The Moscow Partnership's economic viability appeared to be sufficient enough to operate until 1924, running shows in Moscow, and occasionally in St. Petersburg, but less so in the provinces.<sup>54</sup> Diaghilev's *Mir iskusstva* made its first public debut five years after the Moscow Partnership, and did so in explicit antagonism towards the Peredvizhniki, and quickly became yet another magnet for young artists.<sup>55</sup> After another five years, in 1903, the *Soiuz russkikh khudozhnikov* (Union of Russian Artists) unified participants of two disintegrating groups, *Mir iskusstva* and the *Soiuz 36* (Union of 36).<sup>56</sup> And so on and so forth. The subsequent groupings and splits led to further Russian avant-garde movements and their exhibitions, many of which have received extensive scholarly attention. However, what has been

overlooked is that it was the foundation of the Peredvizhnik exhibition project created the basis for novel institutional conditions that enabled all of these aesthetically self-legitimizing, and commercially self-promoting exhibition practices to develop in late imperial Russia.

Equally significant is the fact that the Partnership’s shows seemed to affect the practice of art criticism in Russia. Indeed, in as much as artists were ready to take initiative into their own hands, critics too had to be prepared to perceive and conceptualize those new artistic developments. These were slow and interrelated processes. For instance, although the Partnership’s split from the Academy in 1876 caused a great point of contention, the critics at the time did not perceive that conflict in aesthetic terms. According to the prominent critic, Adrian Prakhov (1846–1916):

The biggest news in the Russian art world this time [...] [is] the matter which is not artistic at all: the division (*razdelenie*) of our artists into two societies; the division, which is based neither on any difference in *artistic* sympathies, understanding, taste, nor even on any difference in goals or ambitions, since both societies in essence follow one and the same motto. This division is based on external reasons, which have nothing to do with art [...] We see such division as something [...] arbitrary [...] the reasons for such a split (*raskol*) will fade away and the Russian artistic family, in the person of its best representatives, advancing Russian art ahead, will again be united and undivided.<sup>57</sup>

It was actually only Stasov who insisted on the somewhat different logic behind the split: if various groups of artists are “thinking dissimilarly” and have contrasting artistic “directions and aims,” they should form separate exhibition societies.<sup>58</sup> This was quite an insightful statement, which Stasov reiterated two decades later with more confidence and reference to the major secessionist outbreaks in Paris and Munich—the quotation with which this chapter began. But in 1876 such insight proved to be an exception among critics.

To be sure, one of the reasons for the prevalent critical indifference to the aesthetic aspect of the Peredvizhniki’s split from the Academy had to do with the largely conventional inclusive character of the Partnership’s shows. As has been argued, the latter was in many ways reminiscent of academic exhibitions, although smaller and more selective. A no less significant factor was the even more conventional reviewing habits of the critics, in other words, mere professional inertia. Before the foundation of the Partnership, critics and the public used to deal with one paradigmatic notion of an art exhibition—the regular annual official academic show. This show was designed to represent (and sell), in a centralized manner, recent artistic achievements in Russia. Like its educational curriculum, the Academy’s exhibition tended to represent accomplishments in all major branches of arts, including painting, engraving, sculpture, and architecture. In turn, the largest painting segment of this show featured a great assortment of genres, themes, representational approaches, styles, and so forth. A priori, the explicitly eclectic manner of every new academic exhibition informed the reviewing patterns of the critics: they sorted out the exhibits by medium, and when it came to painting, they merely followed the conventional academic hierarchy of genres, discussing first, history painting, then genre or portraiture, before addressing landscapes and other minor genres. Since there was an imbedded understanding of the random character of the entire display, there was no conceptual effort on the

part of the critics to make sense of the whole: they observed exhibits individually, largely in isolation from one another. The foundation of a major alternative exhibition platform, the Partnership's show, made a significant difference to these decades-old reviewing habits. Slowly but surely, the critics were now invited to compare, conceptualize, and sometimes exaggerate the differences between the two shows—the Partnership's and the Academy's—which conveniently opened in the same city and around the same time.

Still, it took more than a decade and many exhibitions and scandals around the Peredvizhniki for critics to begin to adjust their reviewing habits *en masse*. Responding to the apparent changes in exhibiting practice, they could not but begin to ask: why some artists break away and what this or that group of artists and its paintings might bring together in one exhibition space; what they have in common and what are distinctive features of this group's exhibition in comparison to the academic show.<sup>59</sup> A remark by the critic Vladimir Chuiko (1839–1899) on the occasion of the Peredvizhniki's twelfth show in 1884 is indicative of that ongoing professional transformation: “it is not the description of paintings that constitutes the task of art criticism, but those general, logical conclusions which can be made on the basis of the whole totality of works produced during a certain period of time.”<sup>60</sup> In short, with time, because of the Peredvizhnik exhibiting venture, Russian critics started to demonstrate a more nuanced and syncretic approach in their reviews, while gradually getting used to the idea that disagreement between artists is a good and somewhat essential thing.

Albeit within somewhat different socio-political contexts, the art worlds of late nineteenth-century Russia and Western Europe witnessed comparable seminal developments: the marginalization of the centralized official contemporary art exhibition and the concurrent rise and privatization of exhibiting practices by artists. While there is still room for debate about whether the secessionist movements in Western Europe had as decisive a role in that tectonic change, this was certainly the case with the Peredvizhniki in Russia. Nevertheless, the major common characteristics of that change—or what can be termed the exhibition turn—were the modern exhibition-based modes of aesthetic self-endorsement, marketing, and reviewing patterns. The exhibition turn facilitated the development of the European avant-garde, which was structured around exhibition-based manifestos. Although this aspect has received substantial scholarly attention, to fully understand the significance of the exhibition turn, one needs to get a better sense of what preceded and anticipated it.<sup>61</sup> As argued in this essay, the exhibition-based approach to studying artistic developments can be a great remedy against the various myths, clichés, and historical detachments that still pervade eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art history.

## Notes

The present essay is a significantly expanded version of the conclusion in my book *Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia: The Peredvizhniki, a Partnership of Artists* (New York, NY; London: Bloomsbury Academics, 2019). I am very grateful to Le Centre franco-russe en sciences humaines et sociales de Moscou and Deutsches Historisches Institut Moskau, whose grants enabled me to carry out this research in the archives and libraries of Paris and Moscow respectively. My sincere appreciation also goes to Galina Mardilovich and Maria Taroutina for their valuable comments and suggestions on early drafts of this text; and to Maria Chukcheeva for her kind help with translations from French.

- 1 Vladimir Stasov, “Khorosha-li rozn’ mezhdu khudozhnikami?” *Severnyi vestnik*, no. 1 (January 1894): 150.
- 2 See for example, Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art: Past and Present* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 82–189, and Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Paris* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1985), 1–44.
- 3 Patricia Mainardi, *The End of the Salon: Art and the State in the Early Third Republic* (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 4 Harrison White and Cynthia White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 111–154; Mainardi, *The End of the Salon*, 135–136.
- 5 Patricia Mainardi, *Art and Politics of the Second Empire: The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1987), 1–120. One of the major points of disagreement among artists was whether the jury should count the awards—and the privileges which came with them—which artists received during Expositions Universelles, or whether the jury should ignore them when considering submitted works for salons. Constance Cain Hungerford, “Meissonier and the Founding of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts,” *Art Journal* 48, no. 1 (Spring, 1989): 71–73.
- 6 Stasov, “Khorosha-li rozn’ mezhdu khudozhnikami?” 123–150.
- 7 Partnership for Touring Art Exhibitions has often been referred to in English as the Association of Travelling Art Exhibitions; in my research, I have corrected the translation to the term I use here.
- 8 The neologism *peredvizhniki* was derived from *peredvizhnaia vystavka* or touring exhibition.
- 9 See for instance, Rosalind P. Blakesley, “There is something there ...”: The Peredvizhniki and West European Art,” *Experiment: Journal of Russian Art and Culture* 14 (2008): 18–57; Elena Nesterova, “Russko-frantsuzskie khudozhestvennye sviazi vtoroi poloviny XIX veka,” in *Rossia-Evropa. Iz istorii russko-evropeiskikh khudozhestvennykh sviazei XVIII—nachala XX vv. Sbornik statei*, ed. Andrei Tolstoi (Moscow: NIITIII RAKh, 1995), 119–156; Vladimir Lapshin, “Iz istorii khudozhestvennykh sviazei Rossii i Germanii v kontse XIX—nachale XX veka,” in *Vzaimosviasi russkogo i sovetskogo iskusstva i nemetskoi khudozhestvennoi kul’tury* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980), 193–235.
- 10 Perhaps the only account of the Peredvizhniki as a long-term institution can be found in Dmitrii Severiukhin, *Staryi khudozhestvennyi Peterburg: rynok i samoorganizatsiia khudozhnikov ot nachala XVIII veka do 1932 goda* (St. Petersburg: Mir, 2008), 311–327. See also Grigorii Sternin,  (Moscow: Nauka, 1997), 18–52.
- 11 The noteworthy exception is Dmitrii Sarabianov’s brief and loose observation that the Partnership was a blend of the Salon and a brotherhood. See Dmitrii Sarabianov, “Peredvizhniki i ikh predshestvenniki,” in *Peredvizhniki. Sbornik statei*, ed. Ida Gofman (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977), 68–74.
- 12 Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 182–187. See also Robert Waissenberger, *Vienna Secession* (London: Academy Editions, 1977).
- 13 See for example, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques (1848–1918). Une histoire transnationale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 175, 181–182.
- 14 See Ilia Doronchenkov, “Between Isolation and *Drang nach Westen*: Russian Criticism and Modern Western Art around 1900,” in *Critical Exchange: Art Criticism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries in Russia and Western Europe*, eds. Adlam, Carol and Juliet Simpson (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 295–308; Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, “Opening up to Europe: The Peredvizhniki and Miriskusniki Respond to the West,” in *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture and Decorative Arts*, eds. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 45–60; and Hanna Chuchvaha, *Art Periodical Culture in Late Imperial Russia (1898–1917): Print Modernism in Transition* (Leiden; Boston: Brill 2016), 85–90.
- 15 Robin Lenman, *Artists and Society in Germany, 1850–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 35.
- 16 Mainardi, *The End of the Salon*, 80–86. On the significance of this event see Pierre Vaisse, “Réflexions sur la fin du Salon officiel,” in “Ce Salon à quoi tout se ramène”: le Salon

- de peinture et de sculpture, 1791–1890*, eds. James Kearns and Pierre Vaisse (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).
- 17 For more on the subject, see Hungerford, “Meissonier,” 71–77; Olivia Tolède, “Une sécession française: la Société nationale des beaux-arts, 1889–1903” (PhD diss., Université de Genève, 2008); Pierre Vaisse, *La Troisième République et les peintres* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 94–116; Olivia Tolède-Leon, “Le Salon de la Société nationale des beaux-arts comme lieu d’épanouissement du mécénat privé dans les années 1890,” in “*Ce Salon à quoi tout se ramène*”: *le Salon de peinture et de sculpture, 1791–1890*, eds. James Kearns and Pierre Vaisse (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).
  - 18 For more on the subject, see Maria Makela, *The Munich Secession: Art and Artists in Turn-of-the-Century Munich* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Lenman, *Artists and Society in Germany*, 110–111; Markus Harzenetter, *Zur Münchner Secession: Genese, Ursachen und Zielsetzungen dieser intentionell neuartigen Münchner Künstlervereinigung* (Munich: Kommissionsverlag UNI-Druck, 1992).
  - 19 See Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques*, 160–182.
  - 20 Waissenberger, *Vienna Secession*, 23–33.
  - 21 Severiukhin, *Staryi khudozhestvennyi Peterburg*, 27–28; Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757–1881* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2016), 29, 82–83.
  - 22 Dmitrii Severiukhin, Oleg Leikind, eds., *Zolotoi vek khudozhestvennykh ob’edinenii v Rossii i SSSR (1820–1932). Spavochnik* (St. Petersburg: Chernyshev, 1992), 130–132, 177–183. See also Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, 77–82, 230.
  - 23 See for example White, *Canvases and Careers*; Nicholas Green, “Dealing in Temperaments: Economic Transformation of the Artistic Field in France during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” *Art History* 10, no. 1 (March 1987): 59–78.
  - 24 Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art. The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1977). See also David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).
  - 25 Shabanov, *Art and Commerce*. See published archival materials of the first twenty-five years of the Partnership, Sof’ia Goldshtein, ed., *Tovarishchestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok: Pis’ma, dokumenty*, 2 vols (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987). Some important archival sources related to the Partnership have been translated into English in *Experiment: Journal of Russian Art and Culture* 14 (2008).
  - 26 *Ustav Tovarishchestva peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok* (St. Petersburg, 1870), 2.
  - 27 See the history of the negotiation process in Goldshtein, *Tovarishchestvo*, 95–99, 106–107, 111, 127, 135–136, 546–549.
  - 28 “Khronika”, *Golos*, no. 74 (14 March 1876): 2.
  - 29 See, for instance, response to the split from two prominent critics of the time, Adrian Plakhov and Andrei Somov: Profan [Adrian Prakhov], “Khudozhestvennye vystavki v Peterburge,” *Pchela*, no. 10 (22 April 1876): 6; A. S. [Andrei Somov], “Khudozhestvennaia vystavka v Akademii khudozhestv,” *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, no. 71 (12 March 1876): 1.
  - 30 Peter Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism, 1840–1945* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 66–71; Peter Paret, *The Berlin Secession: Modernism and Its Enemies in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 29–36. See also Jensen, *Marketing Modernism*, 167–181.
  - 31 Jensen, *Marketing Modernism*, 167.
  - 32 *Ustav Tovarishchestva*, 1.
  - 33 Hungerford, “Meissonier,” 71.
  - 34 Makela, *The Munich Secession*, 151–153.
  - 35 *Ibid.*, 143.
  - 36 Goldshtein, *Tovarishchestvo*, 142.
  - 37 Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism*, 66.
  - 38 Jensen, *Marketing Modernism*, 167.
  - 39 Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism*, 69–70.

- 40 Paret, *The Berlin Secession*, 36.
- 41 Starting with the sixteenth touring exhibition in 1888, the balloting began to take up an entire day. In order to be accepted, an external exhibitor's painting/s had to secure 50% plus one of all the votes of all the members present in the Partnership's annual General Meeting. From the minutes of those meetings, we can gauge which works were accepted unanimously and which barely passed balloting. See Goldshtein, *Tovarishchestvo*, 334, 351–352, 363, 387–388, 410–411, 427–428, 443–444, 459–460, 482, 511–512. Further insight into the balloting process can be found in artists' correspondence of the period. See for example, letters by Vasilii Polenov, one of the few members of the Partnership who lobbied for young Moscow artists, in Ekaterina Sakharova, ed., *Vasilii Dmitrievich Polenov. Elena Dmitrievna Polenova: Khronika sem'i khudozhnikov. Pis'ma, dnevniki, vospominaniia* (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1964).
- 42 Goldshtein, *Tovarishchestvo*, 352.
- 43 See for instance, Ian Dunlop, *The Shock of the New: Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972); Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial. Exhibitions that Made Art History, Volume 1: 1863–1959* (London: Phaidon, 2008).
- 44 *Ustav Obshchestva vystavok khudozhestvennykh proizvedenii* (St. Petersburg, 1875); Severiukhin, Leikind, *Zolotoi vek*, 157–159; Severiukhin, *Saryi khudozhestvennyi Peterburg*, 331–336.
- 45 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA), fond 789 “Akademiia khudozhestv MID”, op. 11 1884, d. 224. See also *Otchet Imperatorskoi Akademii khudozhestv s 4 noiabria 1885 po 4 noiabria 1886* (St Petersburg, 1887), 6–8, and Goldshtein, *Tovarishchestvo*, 303–304, 311–318, 589–590.
- 46 *Vremennyi ustav Imperatorskoi Akademii khudozhestv* (St. Petersburg, 1893); Severiukhin, *Saryi khudozhestvennyi Peterburg*, 93–94.
- 47 Severiukhin, *Saryi khudozhestvennyi Peterburg*, 364.
- 48 *Ustav S.-Peterburgskogo obshchestva khudozhnikov* (St. Petersburg, 1890); Severiukhin, Leikind, *Zolotoi vek*, 258–260; Severiukhin, *Saryi khudozhestvennyi Peterburg*, 351–358.
- 49 *Ustav Obshchestva khudozhnikov istoricheskoi zhivopisi* (Moscow, 1896); Severiukhin, Leikind, *Zolotoi vek*, 200–201.
- 50 Paret, *The Berlin Secession*, 30.
- 51 Severiukhin, Leikind, *Zolotoi vek*, 86–87, 308–310.
- 52 The exhibition partnership under this name was officially registered only in 1896. *Ustav Moskovskogo Tovarishchestva khudozhnikov* (Moscow, 1896).
- 53 Margarita Chizmak, “Vystavochnaia deiatel'nost' Moskovskogo Tovarishchestva khudozhnikov 1890-kh godov,” in *Tretiakovskie chteniia. 2013* (Moscow: GTG, 2014), 152.
- 54 See Vladimir Lapshin, “Iz istorii vozniknoveniia i perykh let deiatel'nosti Moskovskogo Tovarishchestva khudozhnikov,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie*, no. 2 (1979): 172–205; Chizmak, “Vystavochnaia deiatel'nost',” 152–168; Severiukhin, Leikind, *Zolotoi vek*, 133–135; Ekaterina Usova, “‘Miunkhensko-parizhsko-russkaia koloniia'. Zametki k deiatel'nosti Moskovskogo Tovarishchestva khudozhnikov v 1900-e gody,” *Iskusstvoznanie*, no. 2 (2018): 162–193.
- 55 See for instance, Janet Kennedy, “Closing the Books on Peredvizhnichestvo: Mir iskusstva's Long Farewell to Russian Realism,” in *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture*, eds. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Margaret Samu (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University, 2014), 141–151; Severiukhin, Leikind, *Zolotoi vek*, 115–116.
- 56 Severiukhin, *Saryi khudozhestvennyi Peterburg*, 367–77; Severiukhin, Leikind, *Zolotoi vek*, 116–119; Vladimir Lapshin, *Soiuz russkikh khudozhnikov* (Leningrad: “Khudozhnik RSFSR”, 1974).
- 57 Profan, “Khudozhestvennye vystavki,” 6. (Italics in the original.) See also A. S., “Khudozhestvennaia vystavka,” 1.
- 58 V. S. [Vladimir Stasov], “Khudozhestvennye vystavki,” *Novoe vremia*, no. 17 (16 March 1876): 1.
- 59 See for instance, Shabanov, *Art and Commerce*, chapters 5–7, which provide an analysis of the Partnership's key exhibitions and the change in their critical reception over time. On the history of Russian art criticism of the period see for example, Carol Adlam and Juliet Simpson, eds., *Critical Exchange: Art Criticism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*

*in Russia and Western Europe* (Bern; Oxford: P. Lang, 2008); Ilia Dorontchenkov, *Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art: 1890s to mid-1930s* (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 2009).

- 60 V. Ch. [Vladimir Chuiko], "Po povodu 12-i peredvizhnoi vystavki kartin," *Rossiiia*, no. 12 (22 March 1884): 12.
- 61 See for instance, Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

## 5 Blurring Boundaries

### Mikhail Vrubel's Decorative Turn and the Rise of Russian Modernism

*Maria Taroutina*

On December 19, 1915, the museum-going public of St. Petersburg was scandalized by the artworks on display at the *0.10 (Zero-Ten): Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting*.<sup>1</sup> Out of the 155 exhibited works, Kazimir Malevich's epoch-making *Black Square* (1915) was especially singled out for critical censure as an "evil hallucination" that represented "a cult of futility."<sup>2</sup> It had intrepidly transgressed both the boundaries of acceptable aesthetic experimentation and polite taste, thus earning itself a place of honor within the annals of modernist art. According to conventional accounts, it was here that Malevich (1879–1935) triumphantly inaugurated the vanguard new abstract movement known as suprematism, which forever altered the course of twentieth-century art history both in Russia and abroad. However, as recent scholarship has persuasively demonstrated, Malevich's earliest suprematist forms did not in fact debut at *0.10*. Instead, they initially appeared as "decorations" on applied art objects at *The First Verbovka Exhibition of Modern Decorative Art* held at the Lemerrier Gallery in Moscow in November 1915. In her analysis of these works, Aleksandra Shatskikh contends that "the fact that Malevich for the first time showed his mature, suprematist works now seen in any textbook at a 'needlework exhibition' attested [...] to the audacious freedom of the artist, who did not hold with the traditional hierarchy of the arts [...] [but instead] created above and beyond barriers."<sup>3</sup> Although the author concedes that the precedent was first set by nineteenth-century "painters such as Mikhail Vrubel," she immediately dismisses the latter artist's achievements by claiming that he "in no way challenged the hierarchical division into 'high,' or principal art, and 'earth-bound,' or secondary, auxiliary art."<sup>4</sup> The present chapter aims to offer a corrective to such pervasive views and to challenge entrenched modernist narratives by demonstrating that it was the daring, experimental artworks of the late nineteenth-century artist Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910)—and especially his decorative pieces—that were integral to the formal and conceptual innovations of twentieth-century avant-gardes. The ceramic medium in particular granted Vrubel the freedom to articulate some of his most revolutionary ideas. It allowed him to develop a distinct and original visual syntax that sowed the seeds for subsequent Russian modernist movements, including the neoprimitivist, constructivist, and productivist avant-gardes—a link that has been rarely examined.

It is hardly an accident that the next generation of artists repeatedly identified Vrubel as the "founder" of Russian modernism and "an artist [who was] ahead of his time."<sup>5</sup> Young talents such as Liubov Popova (1889–1924), Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964), Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891–1956), Naum Gabo (1890–1977), and Sergei Sudeikin (1882–1946), among others, all



proclaimed their admiration for Vrubel's art. As early as 1903, Alexandre Benois (1870–1960) observed that Vrubel was unlike any other artist of his time in his ability to move effortlessly between “easel painting, sculpture and [...] the industrial arts.”<sup>6</sup> Vrubel had thus presciently demonstrated that art produced under the conditions of modernity was no longer medium-bound—a notion that subsequently entirely transformed artistic practices in the twentieth century as evidenced by Vladimir Tatlin's *Corner Counter-Reliefs*, El Lissitzky's *Prouns*, Marcel Duchamp's *Readymades*, and the Surrealist *objets trouvés*. Perhaps this is why Sudeikin provocatively claimed that “all the principles of cubism, constructivism and surrealism were founded and developed by Vrubel. And, despite our respect for Picasso, the founder of modern painting was Vrubel.”<sup>7</sup> Nikolai Ge (1884–1920) similarly maintained that Vrubel ought to be viewed as a “great explorer in the realm of form [...] [who] expanded the possibilities of representation” for the next generation of artists. The leftist art critic and productivist theorist, Nikolai Tarabukin (1889–1956), echoed these sentiments almost thirty years later, writing that Vrubel was a “genuine innovator,” who had “opened new paths in Russian art.”<sup>8</sup> Tarabukin noted that in its essence Vrubel's art was fundamentally “realist”—in the materialist sense of the word—and that the artist resorted to “cheap symbolism” in only a few of his paintings.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, however, Tarabukin contended that Vrubel's art was “concrete,” “simple,” “straightforward,” and “true,” just as the new constructivist object was “honest” and “realist,” in opposition to dissembling illusionistic and figurative painting that was still largely dominant during Vrubel's lifetime.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, Tarabukin asserted that in his applied artworks Vrubel demonstrated an extraordinary sense both of architectonics and of the all-encompassing social role of art, which became a key tenet of the productivist program in the 1920s.

Comparing a constructivist piece such as *Head No. 2* (1916) (Figure 5.1) by Naum Gabo with Vrubel's *Head of a Lion* (1890–91) (Figure 5.2), it is not hard to see how the latter artist anticipated twentieth-century stylistic developments by nearly three decades.<sup>11</sup> The protruding, geometricized planes and shifting volumes in *Head of a Lion* explicitly emphasize the underlying structural armature of the represented animal and reflect Vrubel's deconstructive and analytical approach to form—an approach, which subsequently became one of the central principles of constructivist art. John Bowlt attributes Gabo's, Rodchenko's, and Tatlin's interest in Vrubel's art to this unique “constructive” method. He writes:

There are two very distinctive properties in Vrubel's painting—his ‘broken’ composition divided into geometric patterns [...] and his very conscious use of texture (facture or *faktura*) [...]. Thanks to these two essential properties, Vrubel's painting often produces a peculiarly “constructive” effect as if the artist has built the canvas vertically, horizontally and in relief [...] it seems [his forms are] about to move outwards from the pictorial surface.<sup>12</sup>

This “constructive effect” is especially evident in Vrubel's major masterpiece, the *Seated Demon* (1890) (Figure 5.3), where the artist employed flat, overlapping planes to create volume and space out of coloristic contrasts. In particular, the large geometricized flowers on the right-hand side of the painting accentuate the materiality of the canvas, breaking down the impression of three-dimensional space. The disintegration of their legible forms approaches abstraction so closely that at first glance it is



Figure 5.1 Naum Gabo, *Head No. 2*, 1916, enlarged version, 1964, steel, 175.3 × 134 × 122 cm. Tate Modern, London, Collection Miriam Gabo. Photograph © 2019, Tate London.

difficult to identify these angular shapes as flowers. In his memoirs, Nikolai Prakhov (1873–1957) recounted that the striking composition of the *Seated Demon* was initially conceptualized by Vrubel as a design for a fireplace screen in Savva Mamontov's (1841–1918) Abramtsevo country estate, but which the artist subsequently adapted for his monumental painting. Prakhov describes the inception of this work in the following way:

Mikhail Aleksandrovich [Vrubel] executed the same 'Seated Demon' for a fireplace screen on a piece of sackcloth with heavily diluted oil paint and within a few minutes drew the corner of a large ornament made of tulips on a piece of notation paper that he happened upon. He modified this drawing for the wood-burning technique [to be executed] on a smooth lime frame, which I then fired [for him]. I believe that this screen was the sketch for the large painting, which is now in Moscow in the State Tretyakov Gallery.<sup>13</sup>

If one re-imagines the *Seated Demon* as a flat, decorative screen, it does much to explain the unconventionally shallow, compressed space of the painting and its emphasis on surface values. By the same token, this work is remarkable in its simultaneous creation of solidity and three-dimensional volume, which Vrubel was able to achieve through his experimentation with terracotta and majolica sculpture, as evidenced by



Figure 5.2 Mikhail Vrubel, *Head of a Lion*, 1890–91, glazed majolica, 45.5 × 47.5 × 28 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © 2019, Bridgeman Images.



Figure 5.3 Mikhail Vrubel, *Seated Demon*, 1890, oil on canvas, 116 × 213.8 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, Bridgeman Images.

the surviving *Head of a Demon* from 1894. Vrubel had in fact turned to sculpture in the late 1880s in order to deepen his understanding of the depiction of form. He wrote to his sister Anna that he had

[...] noticed that my passion to embrace form as fully as possible was interfering with my painting—I took up the challenge and decided to model the Demon: in sculptural shape it could only help the painting [...].<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the 1890s Vrubel simultaneously worked on an array of projects in a wide range of media, which included ceramics, sculpture, stage and costume design, metalwork, jewelry, architecture, and easel painting. This period of intense multimedia experimentation coincided with Vrubel's extensive stays at the Abramtsevo estate, where he was first invited by Mamontov in the winter of 1889–90 and where he proceeded to work intermittently for over a decade. Mamontov's estate was located about sixty kilometers north of Moscow in the Sergeievo-Posadskii district and had belonged to the wealthy magnate since 1870. Over the ensuing three decades, prominent Russian artists such as Ilia Repin (1844–1930), Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939), Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926), Vasilii Polenov (1844–1927), and Valentin Serov (1865–1911) resided and worked on the estate. This group of artists eventually came to be known as the “Abramtsevo Artistic Circle,” “Abramtsevo Colony,” or “Mamontov Circle.”<sup>15</sup> It was in this artistically fertile context that Vrubel first took up ceramics.

One of his earliest forays into the medium involved the manufacture of a number of decorative terracotta tiles for the various fireplaces in the Abramtsevo mansion, which included the now well-known *Bluet* (1890) and *Lily* designs, and which led his own father to disparagingly refer to him as “an artist of stove art.”<sup>16</sup> These initial works were followed by a series of majolica busts on Oriental themes such as the *Egyptian Girl* (1891), the already mentioned *Head of a Lion* (1890–91), *The Egyptian* (1892), and *The Assyrian* (1890s). Vrubel's most celebrated ceramic pieces date to the second half of the 1890s and the early 1900s and were inspired by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's operas on the themes of Slavic mythology and medieval folklore. These were *Tsar Berendei* (1899–1900), *Kupava* (1899–1900), *Mizgir* (1899–1900), *Sadko* (1899–1900), and *The Sea Princess* (1897). In addition to these sculptural busts of mythological figures, Vrubel concurrently produced a range of vases, flower pots, platters, plates, bowls, and ashtrays. Rather than viewing them as separate spheres of creativity, Vrubel worked interchangeably between the “high” art of figurative sculpture and the “low” art of utilitarian household appliances throughout the 1890s and early 1900s. His multifaceted and inventive works from this period actively blurred the boundaries between discrete artistic categories, powerfully challenging the assertions of modernist scholars such as Shatskikh that self-conscious intermedial experimentation was the exclusive prerogative of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

During this time, in collaboration with the professional ceramicist and chemist Petr Vaulin (1870–1943), Vrubel developed the unusual technique of coating his majolica sculptures and objects with a metallic glaze in order to produce a variety of different textures, iridescent colors, and elusive, shimmering surface effects. Traditionally, ceramicists value color purity and glaze transparency, as a result of which Vrubel's unconventional kaleidoscopic effects were initially perceived by his contemporaries as being flaws or defects. Vrubel, however, actively harnessed these “defects” towards

new aesthetic possibilities. Indeed, in contrast to the fine art sphere where his innovative ideas were repeatedly stifled, the applied art realm became the principal artistic domain where Vrubel could express and execute his revolutionary designs without any restriction. In a letter again to his sister Anna, Vrubel admitted as much, writing,

I am again in Moscow, or better yet, in Abramtsevo, where I am once more besieged by the search for the pure and stylistically magnificent in art [...]. To put it into more comprehensible language: I am once again in charge of the manufacture of tiles and terracotta decorations [...] I am so taken up with all of this that I have begun to treat painting frivolously [...]. The prism of ornament and architecture—there's our music!<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the sense of freedom and elation that is palpably evident in this and Vrubel's other letters from Abramtsevo, and which characterized his private artistic experimentation with majolica, the artist's public work was often riddled with anxiety and repeated failure.

As various scholars have observed, throughout his career Vrubel was dogged by conservative public taste. He had few public commissions, and oftentimes patrons would either entirely reject or insist on significant alterations to his designs. One of his earliest public rejections involved the high-profile commission to decorate the interior of the newly built revivalist Cathedral of St. Vladimir in Kiev.<sup>18</sup> Having already worked with Vrubel on the restoration of the St. Cyril Church in 1884–1886, archaeologist and art historian Adrian Prakhov (1846–1916) invited the artist to submit designs for the new cathedral in 1887. Vrubel set to work immediately, producing a large number of pencil sketches and watercolor studies. Among them are some of Vrubel's most original and radical images, from both a formal and a conceptual point of view, such as his three *Lamentation* studies (1887) and two *Resurrection* scenes (1887).<sup>19</sup> For example, in one version of the *Lamentation*, Vrubel depicted the seated Virgin against a low horizon, towering above the flat, prostrate body of Christ, which the artist essentially reduced to a single white line. The solid, upward thrust of the Virgin's body is striking in its reticent minimalism, while the entire scene is executed with just a few, virtually monochromatic strokes of dark pigment within a flattened, shallow space. In place of emphatic gesturing and outward signs of emotion, typical of traditional lamentation scenes, Vrubel portrayed the Virgin with a stoic facial expression in a moment of quiet contemplation, exemplifying a particularly modern sensibility of interiority and controlled grief. Instead of using conventional Orthodox iconography to emphasize the sacred nature of the scene, Vrubel relied exclusively on compositional devices. For instance, the Virgin's emphatic verticality in relation to Christ's accentuated horizontality creates a cruciform structure that indirectly references the crucifixion and communicates to the viewer the underlying spiritual significance of the image. In its compositional simplicity and modernist succinctness, this and Vrubel's other designs for the Cathedral of St. Vladimir stood apart from the mainstream of Russian nineteenth-century church decoration, as exemplified by the works of Viktor Vasnetsov and Mikhail Nesterov (1862–1942). Prakhov himself recognized the originality of Vrubel's proposed fresco cycle, observing that his "superb sketches" required a cathedral in an entirely different and "exceptional style."<sup>20</sup>

It is therefore hardly surprising that the conservative academic jury promptly rejected Vrubel's submission on the grounds that his works were too stylistically

unconventional and iconographically unorthodox to be included in the project. Instead, the commission was given to Vasnetsov, Nesterov, the brothers Pavel and Alexander Svedomsky, and the now largely forgotten Polish artist Wilhelm Kotarbinsky, while Vrubel was invited to execute only a few small decorative ornaments on the interior columns of the cathedral. According to Benois, these “humble, but extraordinarily beautiful” designs were by far superior in their “pure, bright and inspired musicality” to the “cold, official, rational and dry” monumental figures executed by Vasnetsov.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in this case, as in the Nizhnii Novgorod scandal nearly a decade later, Vrubel’s small-scale decorative works seemed to have been much more readily accepted and appreciated by his contemporaries than his large-scale panels and easel paintings, which featured similar stylistic innovations. Ironically, in instances where Vrubel tried to appeal to the tastes and expectations of his more conservative patrons, more often than not the resulting works were deeply disappointing both to the artist himself and his clients, and, were ultimately rejected or destroyed.

An example of a failed large-scale project was the monumental panel mural *Judgment of Paris* (1893) (Figure 5.4a–c), which was commissioned by Elizabeth Dunker in 1893 on the recommendation of Vrubel’s principal patron, Mamontov. The mural was meant to form a triptych along the staircase of Dunker’s Moscow mansion. In theory, Vrubel



Figure 5.4 Mikhail Vrubel, *Judgment of Paris*, 1893, oil on canvas, left panel: 317 × 312 cm, central panel: 317 × 133.8 cm, right panel: 317 × 132.5 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, Bridgeman Images.

was given the freedom to choose the subject matter, although the patron insisted that the theme relate to the Italian Renaissance. In practice, however, Vrubel was daunted by the official and exacting nature of the commission and wrote that he felt “compelled to respond to the current fashion” rather than pursuing his own interests.<sup>22</sup> Measuring in total 133 × 317 cm, the triptych consisted of three equal-sized panels, all set in an idyllic Mediterranean landscape. These depicted in the left panel the goddess Juno enthroned in a cloudy sky with two tritons frolicking in the sea below (Figure 5.4a), in the central panel a reclining Venus with Cupid holding the golden apple in the foreground and Paris seated in the background with a flock of sheep (Figure 5.4b), and lastly, the goddess Minerva in the right panel (Figure 5.4c). Halfway through the work’s execution, the triptych was unceremoniously rejected by Dunker. Eager to appease her, Vrubel attempted to paint a replacement triptych, but was dissatisfied with the result and destroyed all the panels except one, now known as *Venice*. Compared to some of Vrubel’s other paintings from the 1890s, the *Judgment of Paris* panels were conceptually conventional and formally lackluster. The deep, saturated colors that were typical of Vrubel’s palette, were replaced by pale pastel tones; while his fragmented, signature crystalline brushstrokes were tempered by an art nouveau linearity, marking a striking departure from the pulsating, activated surfaces of his earlier paintings such as *Portrait of a Girl against a Persian Carpet* (1886) and *Seated Demon*.

One of the most publicized and dramatic episodes in Vrubel’s career was the 1896 Nizhnii Novgorod scandal, where the artist once again found himself at the center of a major public fallout. As the respected and wealthy owner of the Moscow-Iaroslavl’-Arkhangel’sk railroad, Mamontov used his influence with the organizers of the *Nizhnii Novgorod All-Russia Industrial and Art Exhibition*, and especially with the Minister of Finance, Count Sergei Vitte (1849–1915), to have Vrubel’s monumental artworks included in the official art pavilion.<sup>23</sup> For this occasion Vrubel painted two enormous panels, each measuring 1066 × 1422 cm, on the themes of Western European and Slavic medieval mythology. The first panel took up the subject of *The Dream Princess* (1896), which was based on an 1895 play by the French poet and dramatist Edmond Rostand (1868–1918) and showed a twelfth-century troubadour story of a courtly romance, where the errant knight, Jaufré Rudel, sought the love of Hodierna of Jerusalem, a beautiful but distant princess. In Vrubel’s panel, the dying knight is pictured aboard a sailing ship, singing and playing a harp, while a vision of the princess appears like a mirage above the deck to bid him farewell. The second panel depicted *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga* (1896) (Plate 7), two heroes or *bogatyr*s from the Kievan period—one a knight, the other a peasant—symbolizing “the strength of the Russian soil.”<sup>24</sup> As Aline Isdebsky-Pritchard notes, the two panels were executed in Vrubel’s typical crystalline or mosaic style and were much “more uncompromising” in their modernist syntax than his previous large-scale commissions.<sup>25</sup> When the young Fedor Shaliapin (1873–1938) saw them for the first time, he remarked that they were painted “very strangely—made up of many-colored little cubes—very brightly and somehow disconnectedly [...] a chaos of colors.”<sup>26</sup>

Once again, officials from the St. Petersburg Imperial Academy of Arts predictably demanded that Vrubel’s panels be removed from the exhibition on account of their “pretentious” and “monstrous” execution.<sup>27</sup> Outraged, Mamontov erected a separate pavilion at the fair’s entrance, which housed both these and other works by Vrubel, and which bore a prominent, provocative sign above the entryway: “Exhibition of Decorative Panels by the artist M. A. Vrubel, rejected by the jury of the Imperial

Academy of Arts.” Although this incendiary phrasing attracted large crowds, in this case as in previous instances, the public generally sided with the Academy and the panels were met with intense mockery, hostility, and incomprehension with multiple press reviews accusing the artist of incompetence, “decadence,” and “Impressionism.”<sup>28</sup> As a result, despite Mamontov’s bold, supportive gesture and continued encouragement, Vrubel was unable to finish *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga* as he was too overwhelmed by the negative critical response and public scrutiny. Consequently, at the time of its initial display, this work was only partially painted and had to be completed by Vrubel’s artist friends, Konstantin Korovin and Vasilii Polenov. Alla Gusarova argues that the original striking stylistic effects of the *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga* panel were unequivocally tempered and “softened” by these two artists, who had reduced its overall painterly “strangeness” and formal nonconformity to appease public expectations.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, less than two years later, Vrubel successfully produced a majolica fireplace (1898–1900) (Figure 5.5) on the exact same theme of *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga*. This work repeated virtually verbatim the composition of the Nizhnii Novgorod



Figure 5.5 Mikhail Vrubel, *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga*, 1898–1900, glazed earthenware, polychrome painting, 225 × 275 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, Bridgeman Images.



panel and was awarded a gold medal at the 1900 World Fair in Paris. Just like the monumental Nizhnii Novgorod version, the fireplace depicted two robust *bogatyr*s together with their horses, their large forms almost entirely filling up the available ceramic surface and pushing out beyond the boundaries of the depicted scene. Mikula Selyaninovich is portrayed frontally on the right side of the furnace. He wears heavy chain-mail armor with a pointed metal helmet and is seated astride his valiant steed, whose flowing white mane flutters in the wind. Volga occupies the left half of the fireplace and is shown standing on the ground with his back towards the viewer. He holds a large, wooden plough in his powerful, strong arms and is rendered in a traditional, boldly patterned peasant tunic and woven bast shoes. Although Vrubel's fireplace was inspired by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Russian ornamental furnaces, the final design significantly departed from these earlier prototypes both structurally and conceptually. Instead of the systematized alternating rows of identical ceramic tiles, cornices, and columns that were typical in the construction of older furnaces, Vrubel combined irregular masses, protruding textures, and bold patterns with contrasting colors and fluid, sinuous lines to produce a striking and visually imposing final piece. As Natalia Adrashnikova observes, in *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga*:

[Vrubel] creates a ceramic panel much like a large mosaic of colored stone, molding it from figural pieces, the joints of which, when combined, create the basis of the pictured image. A line formed by the joint is much more expressive than a line produced with paint and in order to avoid a gap between them, the artist renders the rest of the image with false joints on raw clay, varying their depth in order to create fuller expressiveness. Thus, in the faces [of the bogatyr]s, rendition with joints is transformed into low carving and turns into a bas relief [...].<sup>30</sup>

The overall effect of this technique is one of self-conscious crudeness or “primitivism,” for want of a better word.<sup>31</sup> Vrubel actively cultivated this earthy, rudimentary aesthetic throughout the 1890s, deploying it in a number of other objects such as his *Forest Vase* (1890s), *Vase with Pointed Leaf Reliefs* (1890s), *Vase with Krylov's Fables* (1890s), *Craquelé Vase* (1890s), *Sadko Platter* (1899) and the large untitled bowl with black, red, and bright green floral designs (Plate 8). The latter piece is especially striking in its uncompromising embrace of intentionally naïve shapes and motifs, jarring, vivid colors, thick, unrefined lines and deep, uneven grooves. Radically departing from the commercial refinement of the art nouveau objects manufactured in the Imperial factories of St. Petersburg, as well as the more structured patterning and stylization of his fellow Abramtsevo colleagues, such as Viktor Vasnetsov and Elena Polenova (1850–1898), many of Vrubel's applied artworks—including the *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga* fireplace—were characterized by a heavy formlessness, asymmetry and reductionism, which foreshadowed the later aesthetics of the Russian neoprimitivists, such as Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), Mikhail Larionov, David Burliuk (1882–1967) and Alexander Shevchenko (1883–1948). Like Vrubel, these artists drew on folkloric themes and incorporated into their paintings traditional peasant art forms, such as the *lubok* or broadsheet, folk embroideries, wooden household appliances and toys, and carved and painted statuettes, all with the explicit and transgressive purpose of “neutralizing” the lauded fine art hierarchies of beauty, “value and originality.”<sup>32</sup>

It was only when Vrubel withdrew to the safe haven of the Abramtsevo artistic colony in the countryside, away from the official cultural institutions of Moscow and

St. Petersburg, that he was able to produce some of his most inventive and forward-looking artwork. As outlined above, the humble medium of ceramics seemed to facilitate especially effectively his formulation of a distinctly modernist visual vocabulary. Liberated from the ideological baggage of fine art conventions and high-profile commissions, Vrubel explored the expressive possibilities of majolica and the new horizons that it opened up for formal and conceptual experimentation in the realm of “high” art. As Eleonora Paston astutely observes, rather than a work of applied art, the *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga* fireplace registers as an intermedial, “multifunctional” and dynamic piece, a “ceramic painting” that activates and galvanizes the surrounding space.<sup>33</sup> Evgenii Arenzon similarly contends that this work “lays claims [...] to a new monumental significance, ready to move beyond the limits of the frame, the wall, the interior, and to become part of [real] space.”<sup>34</sup> Such language echoes the rhetoric that was deployed by constructivist artists and theorists in the 1910s and 1920s to describe their novel approaches to artistic production. For example, Nikolai Punin (1888–1953) wrote that Vladimir Tatlin’s *Corner Counter-Reliefs* “construct forms with the materials and volumes of lived experience [...] [and] endow new works of art with real spatial relationships.”<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, as I will proceed to argue in the remaining part of this chapter, Vrubel’s pioneering vision paved the way both directly and indirectly for subsequent Soviet developments in ceramics and industrial design. Thus, for example, the vanguard elevation of “purely functional objects to the level of a genuine work of [high] art” that Arenzon attributes to Vrubel’s majolica pieces likewise became a hallmark of constructivist and productivist works in the early Soviet period.<sup>36</sup> Artists like Malevich, Nikolai Suetin (1897–1954) and Iliia Chashnik (1902–29) created a series of porcelain suprematist tableware, which they considered to be on a continuum with their easel paintings and part of a single non-objective aesthetic system.<sup>37</sup> In fact, to a certain extent, Vrubel’s majolica fireplace could be said to prefigure Tatlin’s iconic stove (1923–25), which was primarily conceived as a functional everyday object, but now occupies an honored place in the modernist canon as an avant-garde artwork. In her seminal publication on Tatlin’s art and life, Larisa Zhadova maintains that

[...] Tatlin’s stoves were not only technically better and more useful than the iron stoves in widespread use in the difficult years [...] [but they] already contained a tendency of design which later became universal: that in modern apartments technical appliances had to be designed as part of the furnishings. The thick-set forms of Tatlin’s stoves evoke the Russian village hut but at the same time they resemble a [modernist] cube [...]<sup>38</sup>

Much like Vrubel, who ultimately translated traditional prototypes into a modernist idiom in the *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga* fireplace, with his stove Tatlin “wanted to create modern forms from the popular originals.”<sup>39</sup> In *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, Christina Kiaer observes that “in his attention to the ‘low’ of everyday life, Tatlin invented a form of artistic primitivism” that was arguably far more radical “than other modern art movements that have come under the primitivist label.”<sup>40</sup> Punin echoed an analogous idea as early as 1924, contending that:

Tatlin created a stove and insists that he is an artist and deals exclusively with art—this means that the stove is a work of art [...] when I listen to Tatlin and look

at his stove with him, I also experience an ‘inexplicable pleasure’ [akin to looking at Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*] in front of this reality, through which the simple, creative, ingenious thought of a human being had passed and took on material shape in space, that is precisely in those same elements, which constitute the deepest essence of the entire pictorial-plastic world [zhivopisno-plasticheskogo mira].<sup>41</sup>

Just like Vrubel then, Tatlin was equally “an artist of stove art,” only in his case the term had acquired positive, rather than negative, connotations within the modern art canon.

It is thus hardly a coincidence that in his 1928 monograph on Vrubel, Nikolai Tarabukin described the artist’s vision and creative output in proto-productivist terms, writing that:

[Vrubel] had always aspired to go beyond the limitations of easel painting. Vrubel had always dreamed of an art that would be monumental, socially important, that would enter daily life, that would be connected to its environment; an art of active social impact and [capable of] transforming life.<sup>42</sup>

Although at first glance such productivist rhetoric may appear incongruous in relation to Vrubel’s decorative projects, it is worth remembering that some of Vrubel’s art literally “entered the street”—to use a favorite avant-garde slogan—in the form of monumental architectural murals. For example, *The Dream Princess* (Plate 9) was translated into ceramic tiles and used to decorate the northern façade of the Metropol Hotel in central Moscow in 1901. One of the artists who was directly involved in the manufacturing and assembling of the tiles for *The Dream Princess* was Sergei Chekhonin (1878–1936), who was also a member of the Abramtsevo circle and who was eventually appointed artistic director of the State Porcelain Factory in St. Petersburg (later known as the Leningrad Lomonosov Porcelain Factory), serving in that position from 1918 to 1923 and then again from 1925 to 1927.<sup>43</sup> In that role he oversaw the design and production of multiple iconic series of agitational Soviet porcelain, including the following signature plates: *What Has Been Produced By Working Hands Cannot Be Swallowed By a Lazy Belly* (1918), *Cubist Design with Hammer and Sickle* (1919), *Famine* (1921), and *Lenin is the Banner of the Communist Revolution in the Entire World* (1924).<sup>44</sup> Chekhonin’s friend and colleague at the State Porcelain Factory was none other than Petr Vaulin, who was appointed Head Commissar of the factory in 1918, and who had previously worked with Vrubel at Abramtsevo as discussed earlier.<sup>45</sup> Vrubel’s artistic legacy was thus very much alive in the 1920s and implicitly informed both the theory and praxis of one of the largest porcelain producers in the Soviet Union—a fact that is rarely alluded to in scholarship on post-revolutionary ceramic art.

Last but not least, between 1898 and 1901 Vrubel had taught an applied arts course at the Stroganov School of Industrial Design, which was the pre-revolutionary precursor to the subsequent Bolshevik institutions of VKhUTEMAS and later VKhUTEIN in Moscow.<sup>46</sup> One of Vrubel’s most enthusiastic students at the Stroganov School was Aleksei Filipov (1882–1956), who graduated from the institution in 1903 as an expert ceramicist and who proceeded to found and direct the Murava Artistic Artel in Moscow. He amassed one of the largest collections of Vrubel’s ceramic works,

which he later bequeathed to the Museum of Decorative, Applied and Industrial Arts at the Moscow State Stroganov Academy of Design and Applied Arts following his death, and which to this day forms an integral part of the museum's collection.<sup>47</sup> After the Bolshevik Revolution, Filipov became a professor at the VKhUTEMAS and was appointed Dean of the Ceramic Faculty in 1921, where his techniques and ideas came to influence a number of prominent students and fellow faculty, including Tatlin, Malevich, David Shterenberg (1881–1948), Vera Mukhina (1889–1953), Joseph Chaikov (1888–1979), Aleksei Sotnikov (1904–1989), Ivan Efimov (1878–1959), and Nina Niss-Goldman (1892–1990), to name but a few.

Tatlin was a particularly active member of the ceramic faculty at VKhUTEIN from 1927 to 1930, where he taught his celebrated course on the “Culture of Materials” and where his studio produced an array of iconic ceramic pieces, including the *Nursing Vessel* (1930), *Teapot with Lid* (1930) and *Shaving Kit* (1930). According to Zhadova, these porcelain objects were created “in the spirit of material culture under Tatlin's direction [...] [who] had extended the range of the properties of porcelain as the traditional material of chinaware and proved that it was possible to model it as sculpture.”<sup>48</sup> The pieces were “durable, suitable to [their] purpose and also pleasing to the eye,” combining functionality with aesthetics, much like Vrubel's own series of platters, vases, flowerpots, and ashtrays from the 1890s.<sup>49</sup> In addition to Tatlin, other major avant-garde artists who made designs for porcelain tableware included Popova, Rodchenko, Alexander Vesnin (1883–1959), Nathan Altman (1889–1970), and Vasilii Kandinsky (1866–1944). Indeed, as Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky observes, “most of the avant-garde artists in the RSFSR in the early 1920s created one or more designs for either the State Porcelain Factory in St. Petersburg or the Ceramics Faculty at VKhUTEMAS in Moscow” and both of these institutions had direct links to Abramtsevo and Vrubel.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, Tarabukin was not misguided in his claim that Vrubel's oeuvre had prefigured and informed many of the theories, practices, and canonical artworks of the later Soviet period.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the historical links between Vrubel's applied artworks and subsequent post-revolutionary avant-garde developments are much more tangible and substantial than first meets the eye. Much like Tatlin's stove, Malevich's suprematist teapot, and Rodchenko's book and poster designs, Vrubel's artistic output often blurred the boundaries between functional and purely decorative art objects into a single synthetic vision. The result was one that transgressively negated the distinctions between the “low” art form of majolica and the “high” art of easel painting. Vrubel thus anticipated by several decades the Soviet avant-garde's revolutionary dissolution between art and life.

## Notes

- 1 *0.10 (Zero-Ten): The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting* was opened on 19 December, 1915, and ran until 19 January, 1916. It was held in the private art gallery of Nadezhda Dobychnina (1884–1950), which was located on the Field of Mars in the nineteenth-century Adamini House in St. Petersburg. For a detailed analysis of the *0.10* exhibition see Linda S. Boersma, *0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1994); Anatolii Strigalev, “O Poslednei futuristicheskoi vystavke kartin ‘0,10 (Nol’-Desiat’),” *Nauchno-analiticheskii informatsionnyi Biulleten’ Fonda K. S. Malevicha* (Moscow, 2001): 12–38; Aleksandra Shatskikh, “0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition,” *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University

- Press, 2012), 101–123; and *In Search of 0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting*, ed. Matthew Drutt (Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2015).
- 2 Alexandre Benois, “Posledniaia futuristskaia vystavka,” *Rech'*, no. 8 (9 January 1916), quoted in *Kazimir Malevich: Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism*, ed. Irina Vakar, Tatiana Mikhienko, and Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 2: 517.
  - 3 Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 85–98; Charlotte Douglas, “The Art of Pure Design: The Move to Abstraction in Russian and English Art and Textiles. A Meditation,” *Russian Art and The West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts*, ed. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan Reid (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 99–101.
  - 4 Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 95–96.
  - 5 Nikolai Kulbin, “Cubism,” *Strelets* 1 (1915): 204; Vsevolod Dmitriev, “Zavety Vrubelia,” *Apollon* 5 (1913): 18.
  - 6 Alexandre Benois, “Vrubel’,” *Mir iskusstva*, Nos. 10–11 (1903): 177.
  - 7 Sergei Sudeikin, “Dve vstrechi s Vrubelem. Vospominanie o khudozhnike,” *Novosel’ie*, No. 19 (1945): 29–38. Reprinted in *Vrubel’: Perepiska, vospominaniia o khudozhnike*, ed. E. P. Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, Iu. N. Podkopaeva, and Iu. N. Novikov, 2nd ed. (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1976), 295.
  - 8 Nikolai Tarabukin, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel’* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974), 31.
  - 9 Nikolai Ge, “Vrubel’,” *Mir iskusstva*, Nos. 10–11 (1903): 187.
  - 10 Tarabukin, *Vrubel’*, 37.
  - 11 I discuss these two works at length in *The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 131.
  - 12 John Bowlt, “Rodchenko and Chaikov,” *Art and Artists* (1976): 28.
  - 13 Nikolai Prakhov, *Stranitsy proshlogo: ocherki-vospominaniia o khudozhnikakh*, ed. V. M. Lobanova (Kiev, 1958). Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, Podkopaeva, and Novikov, *Vrubel’: Perepiska*, 195–196.
  - 14 Mikhail Vrubel, “Letter to Anna Vrubel,” January 1888. Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, Podkopaeva, and Novikov, *Vrubel’: Perepiska*, 51.
  - 15 For more information on this topic, see: Eleonora Paston, *Abramtsevo: iskusstvo i zhizn’* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 2003) and “The Abramtsevo Circle: Founding Principles and Aesthetic Direction,” *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier*, ed. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Margaret Samu (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 59–78; Evgenii Arenzon, *Abramtsevo khudozhestvennyi krugok, zhivopis’, grafika, skul’ptura, teatr, masterskie* (Leningrad: “Khudozhnik RSFSR”, 1988); Rosalind P. Gray, “Questions of Identity at Abramtsevo,” *Artistic Brotherhoods in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Laura Morowitz and William Vaughan (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2000), 105–121; and *Experiment: A Journal of Russian Culture* 25 (2019): *Abramtsevo and Its Legacies: Neo-National Art, Craft and Design*.
  - 16 Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vrubel, “Letter to Anna Vrubel,” 20 November, 1890. Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, Podkopaeva, and Novikov, *Vrubel’: Perepiska*, 122.
  - 17 Mikhail Vrubel, “Letter to Anna Vrubel,” July, 1892. Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, Podkopaeva, and Novikov, *Vrubel’: Perepiska*, 57–58.
  - 18 For information on the decoration of the St. Vladimir Cathedral, see Viktor Kyrkevych, *Volodymyrskiy sobor u Kyievi* (Kiev: Tekhnika, 2004), 26–177, and Viktoriia Gusakova, *Viktor Vasnetsov i religiozno-natsional’noe napravlenie v russkoi zhivopisi kontsa XIX–nachala XX veka* (St. Petersburg: Avrora, 2008), 36–47, 92–107, 134–143.
  - 19 For a detailed discussion of these works, see Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square*, 114–118; Maria Taroutina, “From Angels to Demons: Mikhail Vrubel and the Search for a Modernist Idiom,” *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, ed. Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharow (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017), 50–55; Gusakova, *Viktor Vasnetsov i religiozno-natsional’noe napravlenie*, 134–143; Nina Dmitrieva, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel’* (Leningrad: “Khudozhnik RSFSR,” 1984), 40–49; Mikhail Alpatov and Grigorii Anisimov, *Zhivopisnoe masterstvo Vrubelia* (Moscow: Lira, 2000), 101–104.

- 20 Adrian Prakhov quoted in Nikolai Prakhov, "Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel'." Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, Podkopaeva, and Novikov, *Vrubel': Perepiska*, 187.
- 21 Benois, "Vrubel'," 178.
- 22 Mikhail Vrubel, "Letter to Anna Vrubel," summer 1893. Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, Podkopaeva, and Novikov, *Vrubel': Perepiska*, 58.
- 23 For a detailed account see Nikolai Prakhov, "Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel'." Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, Podkopaeva, and Novikov, *Vrubel': Perepiska*, 209–213.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 209.
- 25 Aline Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910)* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), 25–26.
- 26 Fedor Shaliapin, *Stranitsy iz moei zhizni: Avtobiografiia* (Leningrad: Rabochee Izd. Priboi, 1926), 194.
- 27 Mikhail Vrubel, "Letter to Anna Vrubel," May, 1896. Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, Podkopaeva, and Novikov, *Vrubel': Perepiska*, 62; Mikhail German, *Mikhail Vrubel: The Artist of the Eves* (St. Petersburg: Aurora; Bournemouth: Parkstone Press, 1996), 84.
- 28 The term "impressionism" was used loosely both by period journalists and the general public to describe painterly imprecision and faulty execution. See Maxim Gorky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Khudozhestvennye proizvedeniia v 25 tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), 23: 222.
- 29 Alla Gusarova, "Vrubel' v Tret'iakovskoi galere," *Mikhail Vrubel' v Tret'iakovskoi galeree, muzeiakh i chastnykh sobraniakh Moskvy*, ed. Lidiia Iovleva (Moscow: Pinakoteka, 1997), 14.
- 30 Natalia Adrashnikova, "V Abramtseve. Novye formy keramiki," *Mikhail Vrubel' v Tret'iakovskoi galeree*, 47.
- 31 Maria Taroutina, "Between East and West: Reconsidering Mikhail Vrubel's; 'Nativist' Aesthetics," *Experiment: A Journal of Russian Culture* 23 (2017): 76.
- 32 Jane A. Sharp, *Russian Modernism Between East and West: Natalia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 242.
- 33 Paston, *Abramtsevo*, 375.
- 34 Evgenii Arenzon, "'Abramtsevo' v Moskve. K istorii khudozhesvenno-keramicheskogo predpriiata S. I. Mamontova," *Muzei 10. Khudozhestvennye sobraniia SSSR. Iskusstvo russkogo moderna*, ed. Irina Antonova (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1989), 98.
- 35 Nikolai Punin, *Tatlin (Protiv Kubizma)* (St. Petersburg: Gos. izd-vo, 1921). Reprinted in *O Tatline*, ed. Irina Punina and Vasilii Rakitin (Moscow: Literaturno-khudozhestvennoe agenstvo "RA," 1994), 33. For an abridged version in English see *Tatlin*, ed. Larisa Zhadova (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 347–393.
- 36 Arenzon, *Abramtsevo*, 185.
- 37 For example, see Kazimir Malevich's famous text *Mir kak bezpredmetnost'*, which was originally written between 1924 and 1925, but was first published in 1927 under the German title, *Die gegenstandslose Welt* as the eleventh book in the Bauhaus Book series under the editorship of Walter Gropius and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. For an English edition, see *The World as Non-Objectivity: Unpublished Writings 1922–25*, ed. Troels Andersen (Copenhagen: Borgen Verlag, 1976).
- 38 Larisa Zhadova, "Tatlin, the Organizer of Material into Objects," *Tatlin*, 140.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 53.
- 41 Nikolai Punin, "Tatlin i rutina," 1924. Reprinted in Irina Punina and Vasilii Rakitin, eds. *O Tatline*, 69–70.
- 42 Tarabukin, *Vrubel*, 131.
- 43 Paston, *Abramtsevo*, 280.
- 44 Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky, "Soviet Porcelain of the 1920s: Propaganda Tool," *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932* (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 626–627.
- 45 Paston, *Abramtsevo*, 377–378.
- 46 VKhUTEMAS was the Soviet acronym for the Higher Art and Technical Studios (Vysshie khudozhestvenno-tekhicheskie Masterskie) in Moscow, which was subsequently renamed

the Higher State Artistic and Technical Institute (Vysshii gosudarstvennyi khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskii institut) in 1927. For more information on Vrubel's course at the Stroganov School, see Aleksandra Troshchinskaia, *Proizvedeniia M.A. Vrubelia iz sobraniia muzeia dekorativno-prikladnogo i promysblennogo iskusstva MGKhPA im. S.G. Stroganova* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii muzei, 2013), 12.

47 Ibid., 30.

48 Zhadova, "Tatlin, the Organizer of Material into Objects," 146.

49 Vladimir Tatlin, "Lecture on Material Culture," 1923. Cited in Konstantin Miklashevskii, *Gipertrofiia iskusstva* (Petrograd: Akademiia, 1924), 60.

50 Lobanov-Rostovsky, "Soviet Porcelain," 631.

## 6 Idiosyncrasy as an Alternative Modernist Narrative

*Steven A. Mansbach*

Jože Plečnik (1872–1952) has occupied a peculiar place in the scholarly (and popular) historiography of progressive twentieth-century art and cultural expression, mostly because he failed to conform to conventional expectations for a modern(ist) architect. His particular modernism departed essentially from the paradigmatic model of rationalism, internationalism, and anti-historicism that remains the legacy of the idealistic pioneers of modern design and landscape architecture. In recent years, however, scholars of modern art and architectural history—in particular, those who focus on Eastern Europe—have begun to challenge as too restrictive and too partial the reliance on Western modernism as a useful paradigm for comprehending twentieth-century art universally. Instead of relying predominantly on transnational styles as the most telling index of progressive art, scholars are attending increasingly to the decisive role played by local traditions, expectations, and audiences in the development and expression of a modern art.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, we might begin to recognize that Plečnik was inspired both by modern industrial aesthetics and by the appeal of antiquity, by the possibilities of new building techniques and by age-old methods of construction, by international standards of democratic progress and by chauvinist Slavacist aspirations. Although the material results of these perspectives and practices may be comparable in terms of imaginative stylistic solutions pursued by others in Central and Eastern Europe, as Piotr Piotrowski and I, among others, have shown in numerous studies since the late 1990s, it is through delving into Plečnik's motivations and strategies that the originality of his methods and attitudes might be most suggestively disclosed.

In the early 1900s in Vienna while working in Otto Wagner's (1841–1918) cosmopolitan studio, Plečnik, as a young architect from Ljubljana (then officially known as Laibach), had the chance to develop a heightened Slavic, and distinctively Slovene, consciousness.<sup>2</sup> From his student days, he had committed himself to a lifelong task of consolidating and developing both a generalized Slavic and a particularized Slovenian culture, and one that was singularly enriched by the classical strain in his formation, promoted in no small measure by his experiences in Italy in 1899 as a winner of the Prix de Rome (1898) for his diploma work at the Vienna Academy.<sup>3</sup> So when early in 1900 Wagner organized a competition for the important commission for the Zacherlhaus, the city mansion of offices and dwellings for the wealthy insecticide manufacturer Johann Evangelist Zacherl,<sup>4</sup> the twenty-eight-year-old Slovene, who had proposed a business partnership with Otto Wagner, Jr, won the job.<sup>5</sup> Over the next few years, Plečnik refined his plans and capitalized on the opportunity to mull over how he might invigorate antique sources for contemporary usage, primarily by eschewing the tenets of classicism in favor of a generalized and mostly imagined Mediterranean



variation of ancient references.<sup>6</sup> But for the architect, such an engagement would need to steer clear of contemporary fashions, such as the Jugendstil that was enormously popular throughout Central and Eastern Europe and well beyond.<sup>7</sup>

It is in the upper stories of the Zacherlhaus that one may experience some of Plečnik's most extraordinary innovations.<sup>8</sup> Here, one encounters a decorative cornice of elongated, overlapping granite wedges. These cuneate elements have only the most distant relationship to classical forms, vaguely recalling, for instance, the imbricated patterning found on a classical column torus. Beneath this impressive cornice decoration, and "bending" under the weight from supporting two superposed flat rectangular capitals, is a staggered parade of cast stoneware Atlantids executed by Franz Metzner (1870–1919) (Figure 6.1).<sup>9</sup> Each of these semi-nude musclemen is rendered with an anatomical abstraction that shares little with contemporary Viennese fashion for the elongated and lean. Nor do the figures summon up classical standards of masculine potency. Rather, the rippling rib cages, the brawny hip sinews, and the ropey arms and strapping thighs describe beings equally alien from Max Klinger's monumental semi-nude *Beethoven* (1902) as they are from Richard Luksch's 1904 lithesome glazed sculptural panels for the Purkersdorf Sanitarium.<sup>10</sup> The only evident "regularity" is Plečnik's rhythmic placement of them around the building in the interstices between the convex windows.



Figure 6.1 Jože Plečnik, Upper stories of Zacherlhaus (executed by Franz Metzner), 1903–1905, Vienna, Austria. Photograph courtesy of Damjan Prelovšek.

Although granite panels were stipulated by Zacherl himself,<sup>11</sup> their ingenious fastening to a brick supporting wall attests to Plečnik's engineering acumen and technological inventiveness.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the attachment of the vertical ribbing to the exterior is as intelligently resolved structurally as it is creatively asserted visually, referring to but not emulating pilasters. The twinning of imaginative engineering and aesthetic solutions is a foundation of Plečnik's practice. It is one that at once roots him in the modern respect for technology while freeing him to depart from tradition's stylistic limitations. Through this cogent conjunction, he was able to remake building and design conventions to fit the needs of contemporary commercial intercourse while maintaining his commitment to his own aesthetic preferences. This is as evident on the Zacherlhaus's complicated exterior as it is compelling on the interior.

The awkward site,<sup>13</sup> just meters from Vienna's St. Stephen's Cathedral, affected the disposition of internal spaces and, indirectly, the decorative program. The ovoid staircase, rectilinear vestibule, and sequence of floor plans of the various stories were an imaginative response to the demands of the irregular urban plot as well as the commercial requirements of the client. For the ground floor vestibule and the ascending staircase, Plečnik played with the contrast between light and dark, which shaped not only his orchestration of sunlight and its fall on paneled surfaces, but also his stark use of stone columns without bases or capitals, as well as his creation of a coffered ceiling that echoed the decorated grids embedded in the floor (Figure 6.2). Perhaps the most captivating design features are the extraordinary and extravagant candelabras that adorn the landings, the carved and cast figural ornamentation that is contained in the railings, and the fanciful door handles, among the array of ingenious solutions to quotidian necessities (Figure 6.3). From the exterior cornice to interior window hinges, Plečnik created a totalizing work that addressed one visually and haptically.<sup>14</sup> And he did so in this, his first independent architectural project, in a complete manner. Moreover, Plečnik's Zacherlhaus adumbrates the architect's future, deeper integration of inventive and conservative design elements.

Plečnik's combination of ideological reactionism and progressive aesthetics has been productively appraised in various studies. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more striking than in the scholarship regarding his Prague projects, especially his work on the Prague Castle for President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (and his daughter Alice) and in his design for the Church of the Most Sacred Heart of Our Lord (1929–1932).<sup>15</sup> In addition, his numerous buildings for his native city of Ljubljana have also been assessed from this perspective. Less well-studied have been Plečnik's ideologically inspired programs for the preservation (and adaptation) of Laibach's Roman wall and for Ljubljana's extensive riverine works.<sup>16</sup> In these projects, more emphatically than others perhaps, the architect sought to manifest both a Slovene aboriginal spirit and a singular Slavic identity. Accordingly, whereas most scholars have sought to locate Plečnik within the history of landscape architecture or to situate him within a broad European movement of progressive culture, the present chapter endeavors to look more closely at the *nature* of Plečnik's singular combination of advanced techniques and "reactionary" ideology.

Plečnik had initiated his ventures into the landscape with his redesign of the extensive gardens surrounding the historic Prague Castle (Pražský hrad), beginning in 1920. The half-kilometer of southern gardens, the first focus for the Slovene, was a show-place for his creativity as both a progressive landscape designer and an architect of decisively "retrospective" vision. It was a laboratory in which to experiment with new



*Figure 6.2* Jože Plečnik, Zacherlhaus, Vestibule, 1903–1905, Vienna, Austria. Photograph courtesy of Damjan Prelovšek.



*Figure 6.3* Jože Plečnik, Zacherlhaus, Candelabrum and Balustrade, 1903–1905, Vienna, Austria. Photograph courtesy of Damjan Prelovšek.

forms and innovative conceptions through which to educate the Czechs to the nobility of their heritage while proselytizing for a modern morality. Thus the sequence of gardens on the south side of the Castle—the “Paradise” (Rajská zahrada) and “On Rampart Gardens” (Na valech zahrada), as well as the original array of staircases, ramps, bastions, stone bowls, vases, pyramids, tables, mosaic floors, and columns that ornament and complete them—was as much an idealized as a literal landscape. It was a cultivated space in which Central European history was encompassed and modern political philosophy grounded. The ideas he realized in these extensive gardens constitute the architect’s first sustained foray into park planning and landscape philosophy. Plečnik’s imaginative melding of morality and garden design, history and landscape aesthetics, provided him with the philosophical grounds and aesthetic strategies that he would refine and implement in his native land.<sup>17</sup>

By the mid-1930s, the generalized (Western) Slavist suprapatriotism to which Plečnik and his patrons in Prague had subscribed was eclipsed by a much more particularist and virulent Czechoslovak (and anti-German) nationalism. This chauvinism was manifested in the policies that privileged Czechs over other ethnic groups, while it also promoted Czech history as distinct from those of others in the region, especially from those nations that were once integrated into the Habsburg empire. The atmosphere this exclusionary nationalism established throughout Bohemia and Moravia, and in Prague specifically, discouraged Plečnik from continuing his work there. Yielding to the stridency of Czech chauvinism, Plečnik resigned as Castle Architect in 1935 and shifted his principal focus onto his native soil.

What he learned from his work for Prague’s principal castle garden, he endeavored to elaborate in Slovenia, though with one profound difference. Whereas Plečnik had been charged by President Masaryk to create a symbolic seat of government worthy of a new state proud of its freedom from centuries of imperial domination, his task in Slovenia was to affirm continuities with past regimes—both actual and imagined. While the commission in Prague was to adapt the past to fit the present; the challenge in Ljubljana was to fit the present into an imagined past. In both instances, Plečnik would become an inventive mediator of history.

Despite the different ideologies informing his projects in the two Slavic centers, Plečnik drew upon his Czech experience to effect in Ljubljana a triumphal program through which the “traces of the past stand out sharply, using monuments in their capacity as urban marks of orientation and turning them into points of support for collective memory.”<sup>18</sup> In so doing, Plečnik sought to transform his native city into a worthy capital for a modern Slovene nation. In short, the generalized Slavic consciousness that he evinced in Prague blossomed into a particularized Slovenian self-awareness. It was this ethnic identity that would determine his original engagement with both an ideated past and a projected future; it would serve, moreover, as the basis for his ingenious designs for a modern Ljubljana.

From his student days, Plečnik believed firmly in the Slavs’ civilizing mission for Europe. Holding that we Slavic “artists [...] are God’s elect,” he went on to claim “that we are not artists [only] in order to make works of art—but that [...] we bring ourselves in the search for the beautiful and good—possibly close to God—to the understanding of justice, and make good people—good righteous men as perfect as possible [...]”<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on the moral dimension of Slavic creativity was easily transfigured by the artist into a religious one, as Plečnik conjoined his abiding adherence to the Catholic faith with a commitment to elevating the spiritual life of his

countrymen—primarily through the agency of architecture and landscape design.<sup>20</sup> Plečnik's faith in the timeless relevance of the Church and its teachings went hand in hand with his belief in the authority of architecture to make visible and consequent for a contemporary audience the experience of spirituality. At the most profound level, Plečnik believed in the power of modern architecture to effect salvation—for the individual, for the Slavic race, and for Slovenia.

Like others of his time in Central and Eastern Europe, Plečnik looked to history in order to identify an ethnic lineage upon which a modern national state might be constructed. Despite his recognition of affinity with and admiration for his fellow Slavs, most notably the Czechs, the architect posited a unique derivation for the Slovenes. Postulating on little concrete evidence that the original inhabitants of central Italy were likely Slavic tribes, he traced to Etruria the origin of the Slovene people. Believing uncritically in a Tuscan pedigree for his compatriots, Plečnik found it fitting to revive and adapt elemental Italian forms—Tuscan columns, door jambs, and *tumuli*, for example—as a legitimate expression of the “national” architectural idiom. Although various modern artists and architects equally invoked antique models or ancient references, especially those active in Mussolini's Italy or in a different manner in Hitler's Germany, Plečnik was almost alone in seizing on Etruscan forerunners for both stylistic inspiration and ideological justification. Rejecting the readily accessible Slovenian decorative arts and the surviving folk art as sources for a native idiom—and therefore departing from the normative practices of his contemporaries in Slavic Poland, Russia, and elsewhere in the region—the architect turned instead to ancient Etruria as a manifestation “of unspoiled ancient Slovene national art, from which contemporary architecture should draw its inspiration.”<sup>21</sup> An Etruscan vocabulary of forms—as well as references to Etrurian spirituality and reliance on ritual—would confer a classical monumentality commensurate to the ethnic derivation Plečnik hypothesized for his people.

Plečnik's world view was more eclectic than systematic. He borrowed freely from a wide range (and all too frequent misreading) of religious thinkers, historians, and architectural theoreticians, ranging from Jansenist theologians and the Slavacist theories of his cherished colleague Jan Kotěra, to the designs of his confederate Max Fabiani. The figure who exercised the dominant influence over his architectural perspective was Gottfried Semper (1803–1879), whose arguments in favor of “variety,” especially of antique forms, the Slovene would embrace as the foundation of his own aesthetic vocabulary. This was evident in the Zacherlhaus, which he designed while still affiliated with the master of Habsburg architecture, namely the consummate Semperian Otto Wagner.<sup>22</sup> What motivated Plečnik was likely the desire to root historically his conservative devotionism and to justify it with an emotionally charged iconographic program. By means of such a roughly conceived ideology, he desired to counter the ever-growing reliance on the transnational “utilitarianism, typology and standardization [that] are the death of any art,”<sup>23</sup> not with a single style but rather with an overall architectural expression, one that might advance his vision for his Slavic brethren. By drawing upon architectural history, national mythologies, and innovative technological processes, he intended to return architectural design to its authentic basis and to provide his native land with a vocabulary of form proportional to his aspirations for it. To effect such an ambitious transformation, Plečnik was favored by a singular conjunction of fortuitous circumstances and natural talent.

Material and political conditions in Ljubljana were ripe for Plečnik just when he was most prepared to take fullest advantage of them. The end of World War I witnessed the

creation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes with Ljubljana designated as the capital city of the Slovenian component of the newly created modern nation of the south Slavs. The local elite, with the encouragement of the royal government in Belgrade, was thus finally in a position to realize the national ambition of making Ljubljana worthy of its status as a capital city. The Yugoslav kingdom passed a building law in 1931 through which the director of Ljubljana's Municipal Building Department was granted unusual free reign to award contracts and implement projects. Hence Matko Prelovšek (1876–1955), the director of the department between 1914 and 1937, was able to vest Plečnik with public commissions of an unprecedented number and scale.<sup>24</sup> These included plans for the capital's green spaces—and the landscape structures designed for them—through which the architect would realize his unconventional modern vision. By considering Plečnik's approach to Ljubljana's Roman Wall and his treatment of the banks of the city's Ljubljanica River, we can best perceive his ideologically charged aestheticization of the landscape.

Plečnik believed nature (φύσις) provided an ideal model, philosophically and historically, for modern man to emulate. His faith in the contemporary value of nature was a conscious attempt to align himself with the philosophy of classical antiquity and, thereby, to make the past an essential part of the present. Although Plečnik's inventive variants on and innovative contextualization of the column, pyramid, and obelisk would ultimately serve as his principal architectural instruments to bring antique forms into current usage, nature—in terms of landscaping—constituted his philosophical strategy: green spaces possess an inherent therapeutic and social value. To revive the citizen's spirit, restore his energies, and remind him of democratic values, Plečnik had planted a variety of trees and bushes throughout the central districts of Ljubljana. Along the capital's streets, he diverted sidewalks and pedestrian pathways to allow for the “natural” growth of the countless trees and shrubs he had put into the soil,<sup>25</sup> and hoped to prompt an inspiring encounter with nature's greenery. In Plečnik's theory, greenery would remind urban man of his connection to nature and would soften the harshness and relentless tempo of contemporary city life. But most importantly, a “greened” landscape would be an effective means for the architect to orchestrate one's passage through space and time. And nowhere was this more ingeniously realized than in his strategy for the surviving fragment of the city's Roman Wall (Figure 6.4). Here, one encounters most dramatically the twinned pillars of Plečnik's world view: nature and history combining to shape the modern citizen.

Ljubljana had been founded by the emperor Augustus in 34 BCE as a Roman colony under the ancient name of Emona (or Aemona). An extensive remnant of the south wall fortification (14–15 CE) had been preserved into the twentieth century as a reminder of the city's classical past.<sup>26</sup> Behind the wall, on the opposite side of Mirje Street, Plečnik gathered many of the stone fragments from tumbled columns, fallen archivaults, and broken ornaments into a lapidarium, which he treated as if it were one of the many burial chambers that had impressed the architect on his study trip to Rome and its Appian Way in 1899. But Plečnik was interested in more than the architectural record. As was the case with his work for Prague, so too in Ljubljana did he desire to reinforce the spiritual and hereditary bonds between the present Slavic inhabitants and the distant past. In the case of Slovenian capital, these ancestors were the original Roman settlers. To effect this linkage, he needed to do more than merely safeguard the archaeological fragments; he had to transform them into a modern demonstration of historical consequence. Between 1934 and 1937, Plečnik rebuilt the wall



Figure 6.4 Jože Plečnik, Roman Wall, 1934–1937, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Photograph courtesy of Julia E. Frane.

and studded its top with a series of pyramids. These pyramids, both surmounting the wall and sometimes implanting themselves firmly on the ground, emulate his use of this form for the southern gardens of the Prague Castle, just as they were intended to recall the Pyramid of Cestius (Augustan, c. 18–12 BCE), and thereby reinforce the connection to ancient greatness, one of Plečnik's objectives. However, the triangular forms, occasionally with portals cut through their bases, and with interior chambers, were also intended to evoke the tumuli of Etruria. This evocation at the Roman Wall of ancient Etrusco-Italic burial structures was of signal significance to Plečnik.<sup>27</sup>

To give contemporary life to these exalted antique forms, the architect staggered the pyramids rhythmically both atop and alongside the wall. This created an impressive visual syncopation along the longitudinal axis that revealed itself almost cinematographically as the pedestrian proceeded along the street. Moreover, Plečnik intended the pyramidal surfaces to be covered with greenery, allowing natural grasses—which he preferred to brightly colored flowers or exotic plants—to vitalize the geometry. Likewise, the verges to each side of the ancient stone wall were landscaped in long bands of grass, establishing a lively contrast to the gray masonry. Further animation was given to the Emonan fortification ensemble through the planting of a row of poplar trees (no longer extant) by which a play of shadows was to enliven the wall surface and with which the rhythmic arrangement of pyramids would have been vertically reinforced. Thus the citizen of modern Ljubljana, walking or driving along the street on the way home from the city center, would encounter Plečnik's historical narrative, unfolding cinematically from Etruscan, through Roman, to contemporary time.



The carefully constructed consciousness of motion through time and space, one of the defining characteristics of classical modernism, was a prominent feature of Plečnik's landscape designs. Indeed, the architect shared a pan-European interest in updating historical references through transmuting them into new forms or introducing them into novel contexts. For example, Plečnik was able to creatively blend classical columns and balusters with advanced engineering, as well as with folkloric references, in a number of churches he either completed or recreated during the last decade of his life, such as the Church of St. Benedict in Zgornje Stranje. In this artful union of diverse references, both temporal and ethnographic, his work might be compared with similar "blendings" that took place both slightly earlier and contemporaneously in southern Poland, in the Netherlands, and in Hungary, as well as in the Baltic.<sup>28</sup> Yet, when Plečnik creatively combined historical reference and contemporaneous movement with nature's greenery, he achieved a synthesis that had few parallels in twentieth-century art. Perhaps Plečnik's most perfect realization of this fusion of the old and the new, the manmade and the natural, can be found along the Ljubljanica River, which winds its way through the heart and history of the capital city.

The shallow Ljubljanica had often overrun its banks until, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the riverbed had been deepened and its course channeled through concrete embankments. The work on regularizing the river, long supported from the Habsburg coffers, was halted during World War I, and not until 1930 were the municipal authorities, benefitting from a special appropriation from the royal Yugoslav treasury, in a financial position to continue the project. Matko Prelovšek, in his capacity as director of the city building department, engaged the keen interest and active participation of Plečnik in a host of (realized) riparian design commissions: bridges, storehouses, markets, sluices, and embankment parks, among them. It is the last two mentioned that merit attention here.

Plečnik concentrated his efforts on remaking the embankments, beginning as early as 1931 and not ending until 1945. The park for the upper reaches of the river, in the city districts of Trnovo and Prule, dates toward the beginning of the project, most likely to the years 1932–1933, a full decade after the architect's first efforts at landscape garden design for Prague. As one first approaches this portion of the embankment, for example from Plečnik's Cobbler's Bridge (1931–1932), one is first struck by the absence of the very monumentality that the architect had championed as both appropriate to the city's genealogy and essential to his fellow citizens' spiritual health. In lieu of an impressive cascade of steps, a panoply of pyramids (as employed at the Emona wall), a complex "fan" of river spans (as instanced by the Three Bridges, 1929–1932), a sequence of "paraphrased Ionic" lampposts (such as his candelabrum outside the Philharmonic Hall, 1932–1933), or an impressive colonnade (as lines the multi-sectioned market, 1940–1944), here one encounters a soothing succession of low, shallow terraces, which follow the gentle curve of the river. Whereas elsewhere along the river bank it is Plečnik's architectural elements that thrust imposingly upward, within this park-like setting verticality is communicated solely by the stand of weeping willows, which crowns the horizontal rise of the terracing (Figure 6.5). That Plečnik assigned to nature the highest position is noteworthy. On the one hand, it is fully congruent with his garden practice, as we have seen with his stipulation that greenery cap the Roman Wall pyramids. But on the other hand, and in a deeper sense, Plečnik wished to bring Ljubljana's citizens into more direct contact with nature and history; and the riverside park commission afforded him an ideal opportunity.



Figure 6.5 Jože Plečnik, Terraces along the Ljubljanica River, 1931–1945, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Photograph © 2019, Steven A. Mansbach.

With gently sloping hedge-lined paths leading down from the high embankments and easily accessible from the surrounding streets, the terraces were particularly inviting for citizens to relax, play, or—as Plečnik presumed—launder clothes. Combining utilitarian functions with relaxation and entertainment would lend the terraces wide appeal. But Plečnik wanted to make them instructional as well. To this end, he banked up the slope as to accommodate a progression of low, elongated stone benches in alignment. In such manner, the landscape architecture calls to mind classical parallels congruent with Ljubljana’s past, such as a shallow amphitheater or the flutes of a column laid on its side.<sup>29</sup> The park, then, was to be a place where one literally relaxed, played, bathed (or laundered) in an archaeological reprise of the city’s Augustan history. As the citizen sat on or walked along the stone benches of Plečnik’s “romanized” terraces, she or he presumably might glance across the regulated river to an opposite wall of soothing herbage and pathways, both camouflaging the concrete embankment, that Plečnik designed to evoke the green banks and slow windings described by Virgil in the *Georgics*.<sup>30</sup>

If the architect intended his riverbank park to call to mind Latin pastoral poetry, Plečnik wanted to invoke the masculine authority of Roman engineering in his design for the sluice (1931–1935), which lay at the opposite end of Ljubljana’s *flumen*. Of course, the lock was of necessity engineered to perform utilitarian functions, namely to maintain a constant water level and to regulate the flow in the urban sections of the Ljubljanica.<sup>31</sup> However, Plečnik aspired to monumentalize the ideological significance

of the structure and to employ it to promote a stream of historical associations among his fellow Slovenes.

Rejecting the functionalist denigration of decoration, as well as the hierarchical typology of buildings, Plečnik designed his utilitarian sluice as a major public monument, one that would function on multiple metaphoric and literal levels. At a slight distance from the walkways along the river, one can appreciate the greenery cloaking the inclined banks that the architect had planted with native shrubbery and unshaped trees. This park-like framework, which hid from view the reinforced concrete that supported the embankments, is dramatically intensified when seen from the level of the river itself. The woodland-like greensward is complemented at the street level by a procession of paving and gravel that lead directly to the dressed masonry pylon gate. From here the pedestrian initiates the passage through history and across the water. Progressing through an Egypto-Mesopotamian-style portal, the modern citizen of Ljubljana mounts a shallow flight of stairs and then crosses a bridge supported by the three towering pylons of the sluice itself (Plate 10). Traversing the bridge entails more than motion through space. Plečnik wanted it to be a procession through time, too. Therefore, he supported the slender bridge on monumental hybrid Aeolic capitals adorned with carved heads between flaring volutes. This ingenious architectural “composite” was inspired by the archaeological record at Etruscan Cerveteri, where Plečnik may have been impressed by the Aeolic pilasters from the “Tomb of the Reliefs.” Plečnik’s “Etruscan” shafts were balanced on the other side of the lock gate by equally monumental fluted “Doric” columns, cut off a few meters above the base so that they might serve as stands for enormous antique caldrons, whose imposing gryphon protomes Plečnik knew from his study of Etruscan tomb art, more likely from the books he consulted than from visits to archaeological sites or museum collections. In his invention of original “classicizing” forms, he harkened back to the ornamental Atlantids he first employed in the Zacherlhaus. With such historical elaboration, the sluice bridge was to function as much more than a utilitarian span over the river; rather, it was to engineer a metaphoric transition through Slovenia’s genealogy. By an ingenious application of historical reference to the practical task of water regulation, Plečnik unified along the Ljubljanica his nation’s history and nature, its ideology and architecture.

With its ideologically charged bridge supported on imaginative architectural combinations, the lock gate marked the final phase in the architect’s long engagement with redesigning Ljubljana’s watercourse and its urbane mainstream. By 1945, the year of sluice’s completion, the favorable conditions under which Plečnik had worked so creatively for his native city changed decisively. Soon after the conclusion of World War II came the end of the Yugoslav monarchy with its relative social conservatism, which Plečnik had genuinely embraced. Moreover, with the imposition of a Soviet system and the introduction of various forms of socialist realism,<sup>32</sup> Plečnik found himself increasingly out of official favor, though never entirely dismissed. Nonetheless, the imaginative combination of conservative Catholicism, idealized historicism, progressive engineering, and inventive aesthetics that Plečnik embodied never garnered the favor of the communist party. The now aged architect was mostly passed over in the awarding of major commissions to build a new classless society. Instead of encouraging the idiosyncratic blend of modernism and ethnic identity formation that Plečnik personified, Soviet policies proved by and large unsympathetic to forms of inventive design that departed from party principles.<sup>33</sup> For Plečnik and his patrons, who celebrated the

past as a valued support of the present and who promoted a modern expression that affirmed singularity instead of standardization, an era of liberal creativity and optimism had functionally come to an end.

Plečnik's idiosyncratic modern architecture combined a commitment to modern technologies with a reworking of tradition. Such a concurrence informed his work from his first independent project in Vienna, through his noble endeavors in Prague, to his prolonged engagement with remaking the urban landscape of his native Ljubljana. What united the rich array of his projects was an abiding belief in the power of a modern architectural expression to articulate the national or ethnic character of Slavs generally, and of the Slovenes specifically. To realize his nationalist ideology, Plečnik resisted the ideological precepts of High Modernism, which were being forcefully projected in word and concrete by J. J. P. Oud's and Theo van Doesburg's *De Stijl*, by Walter Gropius's Bauhaus, and most vigorously by Russian and East European constructivists with their designs for a "great utopia." In the very years when the fundamental faith in rationalism, anti-traditionalism, and transnationalism was being stridently advanced by an ascendant functionalism, Plečnik was demonstrating the potency of a different kind of modernism. His progressivism embraced new technology and innovative engineering processes; but it also affirmed the essential value of historical forms and antique references—and the critical importance of an extensive use of imaginative ornamentation—as the best means to conserve, consolidate, and ultimately to celebrate that which is local, distinctive, and satisfying. His forms of modern architecture necessarily resisted the postulates of High Modernism's socialism: economic, political, and aesthetic. Thus, we can understand Plečnik's singular ethnocentrism as indicative of the ideological potential and aesthetic originality to which a modernizing architecture can sometimes lend itself. As a result, it befits us to keep this engaging case in mind as we historians and critics continue the worthy effort of recognizing in modernism less a single or uniform "movement" than a complex creative endeavor characterized by diversity, individuality, and idiosyncrasy.

## Notes

- 1 Just such a contextual perspective, as for example provided by Damjan Prelovšek (see below, notes 2, 3, and 5), would disclose what he calls, rightly, "asymptomatic" aspects of Plečnik's modernism. Further, the last decade of published scholarship on the history of modern architecture reveals a searching reassessment of the meanings and purposes of "modernist" paradigms as originally established by Walter Gropius, J. J. P. Oud, Le Corbusier, and other fathers of functionalism. Many of these contemporary studies have appeared under the rubric of Docomomo (International Working Party for the Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement). Most are premised on the concept of a pluralistic modernism; that is, a methodological strategy that holds that progressive architectural forms and uses defy any unitary categorical imperative. In contrast to the dominant interpretive uniformity that characterized the plurality of architectural studies from the 1930s through the 1980s, they attribute to modernism a heterogeneity of meanings and intentions. Representative of the current historiography is Hilde Heynen's *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique and Universality and Heterogeneity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).
- 2 The scholarly bibliography on Plečnik is substantial. Most recent studies remain indebted to the pioneering research and extensive publications by Damjan Prelovšek. His *Jože Plečnik, 1872–1957 Architectura Perennis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997) remains a touchstone. Equally important is Peter Krečič, *Plečnik: The Complete Works* (New York, NY: Whitney Library of Design, 1993), and François Burkhardt, Claude

- Eveno, and Boris Podrecca, eds., *Jože Plečnik, Architect: 1872–1957* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989). Studies devoted to specific sites and projects of Plečnik's activities are manifold and extend from the multi-authored volume on the architect's works for the Prague Castle (Zdeněk Lukeš, Damjan Prelovšek, Miroslav Řepa, and Tomáš Valena, eds., *Josip Plečnik, An Architect of Prague Castle* [Prague: Prague Castle Administration, 1996] and *Die Prager Burg* [Salzburg: Mury Salzmann Verlag, 2016]) to the landscape architecture for Ljubljana. See also Steven A. Mansbach, *A Different Modernism* [New York, NY, and London: Routledge, 2018], and in the discussion below.
- 3 See Damjan Prelovšek, *Josef Plečnik: Wiener Arbeiten von 1896 bis 1914* (Vienna: Edition Tusch, 1979), especially 13, n6 for a quotation by the architect on his desire to become ever more a “Carniolan—a Slovene—in the same way as my parents [...]” (Ms. 31, undated). See also, Damjan Prelovšek, “Architecte Joze Plečnik (1872–1957),” in *Architecte Joze Plečnik (1872–1957)* (Brussels: Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 2008), exhibition catalogue, esp. 17–29.
  - 4 J. E. Zacherl was the son of the founder of the company, Johann Zacherl (1814–1888), whose fortune was first established through importing via Tiflis (Georgia) the powdered blossoms of the Pyrethrum plant. By 1870 the company was able to manufacture its insecticide powder from locally sourced products in its magnificent “Persian-style” factory designed by Hugo von Wiedenfeld in Wien-Döbling. In keeping with the origins of the plant from whose blossoms the family fortune flowered, the city-center sales facility (Bauenmarkt 7) was ornamented by a large Secessionist mural depicting above the entrance way a Circassian warrior holding aloft the distinctive bottle of Zacherlin Insect Repellent (artist: Josef Maria Auchentaller).
  - 5 For an analysis and assessment of the competition for the commission, see Damjan Prelovšek, “Der Wettbewerb für das Zacherlhaus,” in *Josef Plečnik Zacherlhaus: Geschichte und Architektur eines wiener Stadhauses*, eds. Nikolaus Zacherl, Peter Zacherl, and Ulrich Zacherl (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2016), 16–53. For the names of those invited to compete, see Prelovšek, “Der Wettbewerb,” 19–20.
  - 6 Plečnik would revise his attitudes toward Mediterranean antiquity throughout his career. He rejected an explicit classicism, such as Roman art, in favor of a “variant” of the Etruscan, as will be discussed below. Another non-classical antique reference might be recognized in his Vzajemna Mutual Insurance building in Ljubljana (1928–1930), where the columns have been described by Boris Podrecca as “Minoan.” See Boris Podrecca, “Bekleidung Kontra Konstruktion—in Gespräch mit Peter Zacherl” in *Josef Plečnik Zacherlhaus*, 211.
  - 7 According to Ákos Moravánszky, the building “reflects little of the great architectural currents of its time [...] [It] can be linked to neither the *Jugendstil* nor the Vienna Secession movements [...]” Ákos Moravánszky, “Granitgewerke,” in *Josef Plečnik Zacherlhaus*, 56.
  - 8 Significantly, the extensive use of polished granite on the building's exterior was the choice of the client and not that of the architect. See Moravánszky, “Granitgewerke,” 72, and Damjan Prelovšek, “Der Architekt und seine Bauherr,” in *Josef Plečnik Zacherlhaus*, 115.
  - 9 Metzner is perhaps best known for his sculpture adorning the Palais Stoclet in Brussels, designed by Josef Hoffmann. The sculptor had consolidated his international reputation by being awarded the gold medal at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, and was thus an appropriate artist to whom the wealthy manufacturer could let a commission. For his work for the Zacherlhaus, see Prelovšek, “Der Architekt und sein Bauherr,” 118–119. See also, Anthony Alofsin, *Frank Lloyd Wright, The Lost Years, 1910–1922* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 127–132, and Maria Pörtl-Malikova, “Franz Metzner und die Wiener Secession,” *Alte und Moderne Kunst* 21, nos. 148/149, 1976, 30–39.
  - 10 One might also note the girdle with its emphatic vertical scabbard and fall of drapery from just below the navel to well beneath the knees. The pattern, approved by Plečnik, is once again counter-classical. Of equal sculptural significance is the large bronze figure of the Archangel Michael, for which Plečnik composed figure drawings before giving his program to Ferdinand Andri (1871–1956) for execution. The sculpture was complete by 1905; it was exhibited in the XXX Exhibition of the Vienna Secession in 1908. The style of the work, as well as its eccentric placement on the Wildpretmarkt facade, are indicative of Plečnik's creative individuality.

- 11 It is not certain whether Zacherl's keen interest in granite as a building material was purely aesthetic, as Prelovšek and others assert, or whether there may have come into play an ideological commitment. Julius Langbehn had written in his extremely well known and oft-quoted (and recently published) nationalist tract, *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld, 1890, 221) that "[D]ie Griechen hatten eine Kultur von Marmor, die Deutschen sollten eine solche von Granit haben. Der Granit is ein nordischer und germanischer Stein...." [The Greeks had a culture of marble, the Germans should have one of granite. Granite is a Nordic and Germanic stone.]. It is likely that both patron and architect were aware of the claim, especially as it was echoed by similar assertions elsewhere in Europe. In Baltic Estonia, for instance, grey limestone was proclaimed the "national stone." See Steven A. Mansbach, "Modernist Architecture and Nationalist Aspiration in the Baltic: Two Case Studies" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* [JSAH] 65, no. 1, March 2006, 100 and n.32.
- 12 See Podrecca, "Bekleidung", 207–208.
- 13 For a discussion of the site, made all the more challenging by the passage of new urban planning policies by the Vienna city government, see Prelovšek, "Der Wettbewerb," 28–29.
- 14 The immediate reception in Vienna to the Zacherlhaus was as controversial as it was extensive. See Prelovšek, "Der Architekt und sein Bauherr", 122–127. Perhaps the most enthusiastic supporter of the building was Peter Altenberg, an associate of Adolf Loos: "[The Zacherlhaus] is indescribable, the impression of this noble, simple, and yet mysterious palace of the gods, a modern, habitable Valhalla in the midst of a thousand cardboard blocks! As if it has grown out of the soil and its own noble power! Structured like basalt rocks, its sharp walls. It moved me like tragic, epic poetry. Breaking conventions, prevailing, and devastating with the tremendous power, and heralding a new world order...!", as quoted in Prelovšek, "Der Architekt und sein Bauherr", 124–125.
- 15 See above note 2. Several of the cited sources contain extensive analyses and manifold bibliographical references to the work Plečnik completed in Prague between his arrival in 1911 and his final departure twenty years later.
- 16 Much of the following discussion is taken from Steven A. Mansbach, "Making the Past Modern: Jože Plečnik's Central European Landscapes in Prague and Ljubljana", in *Modernism and Landscape Architecture, 1890–1940*, eds. Therese O'Malley and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, distributed by Yale University Press, 2015), and from Steven A. Mansbach, "Jože Plečnik and the Landscaping of Modern Ljubljana," in *Centropa: A Journal of Central European Architecture and Related Arts* 4, eds. Steven A. Mansbach and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, no. 2, May 2004, 110–120. A more extensive treatment and a broader geographical and ideological contextualization is available in Mansbach, *A Different Modernism*, as in note 2.
- 17 For a detailed analysis of the political valences of these southern gardens, see Mansbach, "Making the Past Modern." 99–103.
- 18 See Jörg Stabow and Jindřich Vybíral, "Projects for Prague", in *An Architect of Prague Castle*, 432.
- 19 From an undated letter from Plečnik to Jan Kotěra as cited in Prelovšek, *Jože Plečnik, Architectura Perennis*, 13.
- 20 Plečnik's Catholicism must be understood as part of his nationalism; for by fulfilling his numerous commissions for the Church in his homeland, he understood himself as promoting the ethnic identity of the overwhelmingly Catholic Slovenes. In Plečnik's mind, there was a coincidence of the universalist claims of the Church and the totalizing aspirations of architecture: each was perceived as transcendent, monumental, and transformative and thereby revelatory of the highest spirit of mankind and nation. As a result, he was as committed to Catholic Slovenia (within the framework of the multi-confessional Habsburg Empire and the succeeding two Yugoslavian states) as he had once been to the mostly non-Catholic nation of Masaryk's Czechoslovakia.
- 21 See Damjan Prelovšek, "Ideological Substratum", in *An Architect of Prague Castle*, 99, n7.
- 22 For an analysis of the importance of Semper (in particular his *Die vier Elemente der Baukunst* [1851] and *Der Stil in den technischen and tektonischen Künste oder Praktische Asthetik* [1860–1863]) for Plečnik's aesthetic development, see Prelovšek, *Jože Plečnik, Architectura Perennis* and Prelovšek, *Josef Plečnik: Wiener Arbeiten*, passim.

- 23 Cited in the unpublished manuscript by Vinko Lenarčič, *Spomini na Plečnika* [Recollections of Plečnik] (Ljubljana: AccordiA, 1998), quoted in Prelovšek, *Jože Plečnik, Architectura Perennis*, 260.
- 24 With Director Prelovšek's encouragement, Plečnik prepared the first of several master plans for his native city between 1926 and 1928, setting out his ambitious program for a Slavic metropolis. Although the full scope was never implemented, cardinal civic and religious projects were substantially realized: public squares during the latter half of the 1920s (including the St. James'/Levstikov, Congress, and French Revolution Squares); the University and the National Library from 1936–1941; churches and monasteries from the 1920s through the 1950s; bridges, markets, and monuments during the 1930s and 1940s; cultural, commercial, and governmental buildings; villas and private houses; and parks, promenades and public passageways and staircases. In contrast to most modern architects of large vision, Plečnik rarely worked on apartment buildings and was never interested in public housing projects, neither in Ljubljana nor in Prague. He preferred instead to focus his energies on representative projects, from the most modest to the grandest scale. It is likely that his reluctance to undertake multi-dwelling housing, especially that intended to accommodate workers, was due to his politically conservative belief in the social importance of privilege. He often proclaimed that people of noble mind should serve as an example to those less fortunate. With such a conservative outlook, it is not surprising that he viewed unsympathetically functionalism's belief in modern architecture's "social engineering." See Jörg Stabenow, *Jože Plečnik: Städtebau im Schatten der Moderne* (Braunschweig/Wiesbaden 1996) 40; and Prelovšek, *Jože Plečnik, Architectura Perennis*, 262–273.
- 25 Plečnik preferred not to sculpt trees or contour bushes; rather, he advocated leaving them in the natural state and using them as "natural shapes" (both in his Bohemian and Slovenian commissions). As a result, for Ljubljana he favored trees with distinctive "profiles": birch, poplar, plane, and weeping willows, among other species. Significantly, the architect chose few species that carried classical references from Latin poetry. Hence, there are comparatively few oaks or cypress trees, for instance, in his landscape programs.
- 26 Although the south wall was the most visible surviving portion of the Roman surrounding stonework, standing to a height of about three meters after its renovation by Walter Schmidt in the nineteenth century, Plečnik treated at least one additional wall fragment, where the medieval city wall intersects a segment of the original Roman wall, just in front of the National and University Library (Plečnik, 1936–1941). The architect had the Roman portion resurfaced in local cut stone and then allowed it to be covered in greenery. This combination of herbage, local masonry, and remnants of antiquity was, as claimed in the present study, an ideological strategy Plečnik favored.
- 27 Perhaps nowhere is this more forcefully realized than in the architect's program for the city's principal cemetery of Žale (an old Slavic word for cemetery) (1938–1940). Here, Plečnik advocated funerary monuments based on Etruscan rounded tumuli or pyramidal forms, and often concealing internal chambers under a layer of earth and grass.
- 28 Numerous studies on this potent mix of retrospection and contemporaneity can be found in a number of articles published in *Centropa: A Journal of Central European Architecture and Related Arts*. See also, S. A. Mansbach, "Modernist Architecture and Nationalist Aspiration in the Baltic: Two Case Studies" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* [JSAH], vol. 65, no. 1, March 2006, pp. 92–111.
- 29 Prelovšek was the first to associate Plečnik's stone terraces with the flutes of a column. See Prelovšek, *Jože Plečnik, Architectura Perennis*, 292.
- 30 Of the numerous classical descriptions for an ideal landscape in Virgil's extended poem (29 BCE), perhaps the most poignant and apt for the present discussion are the lines from Book III in which the poet sketches a "green plain where great Mincius [Mincio] wanders in slow curves and clothes the banks with tender reeds."
- 31 According to Prelovšek, Plečnik also had the idea to use the sluice to make the river navigable, and consequently planned a landing dock nearby. He also envisioned a small hydroelectric power station to be connected to the sluice. See also K. Dobida, "K načrtu zatvornic na Ljubljanici," [On the plan for the lock on the River Ljubljanica], *Mladika* 1, 1935.
- 32 For a recent appraisal of modern Yugoslav architecture, including the decisive role of socialist realism, see Martino Stierli and Vladimir Kulic, eds., *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2018).

- 33 In the decade from the end of World War II, Plečnik received no major commissions in his native land nor in Czechoslovakia, although he was able to complete several commissions for religious structures and their ceremonial artifacts. (See Mansbach, *Advancing a Different Modernism*, 67n37.) Notably, in 1952, he was allowed to be awarded an honorary doctorate from Ljubljana University. Moreover, in the year preceding his death in 1957, rather unexpectedly the architect received a commission from the Yugoslav party and national leader, Marshall Tito (1892–1980). Paradoxically, this commission permitted Plečnik to complete his career among Slavs in the same way he began it, namely by designing a private retreat for the president of the respective republics: the Palace of Lány (and the private apartment in the Castle) for Czechoslovakia's T. G. Masaryk, and a villa on the island of Brioni for Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito (prime minister from 1945–1953; president from 1953–1980).





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Part II

## Visualizing Ideology

New Systems, Cold War Aesthetics,  
and Post-Socialist Memory



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## 7 Art in the Age of Binary Inversion

### Russian Constructivist Graphic Design and the Interwar Grid

*Kristin Romberg*

One of the most interesting aspects of design history is sometimes also what makes it seem mundane: the extent to which design is a job. Although we may recognize that most artworks are influenced in one way or another by patronage or market forces, with design work we often forego entirely the avant-garde conceit that the objects express an individual maker's experience or point of view. Designers format and frame content that is given. They construct a perspective and voice for calculated effect. When designers are great, their genius lies in their capacity to creatively conceptualize solutions that satisfy external demands.

This problem finds a particularly productive crux in the example of Russian constructivism. Artists like Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891–1956) and Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958) emerged from the avant-garde paradigm of the teens and found their own way into design, producing numerous covers for books and magazines from 1922 until the end of their careers. Because they arrived at the productivist design project through a series of theoretically sophisticated discussions at the Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury, INKhUK) and expressed strong political convictions themselves, their work has been treated as something with more artistic and political integrity than most day-job scenarios.<sup>1</sup>

An identity between maker and message makes some sense in cases like their designs for the journals *Kino-Fot*, *Lef*, and *Novyi Lef*, where they also contributed content and editorial direction on topics related to aesthetics and politics. In other instances, however, the assumption that they subscribed to the content and point of view of the publications whose forms they crafted has led to sticky political cul-de-sacs that have been difficult to exit. The defining example has been the photo essay that Rodchenko produced in 1933 about the construction of the White Sea Canal for the magazine *USSR in Construction*, which presented forced labor as a positive project of rehabilitation.<sup>2</sup> In a statement published later, in 1936, in *Soviet Photo (Sovetskoe Foto)*, Rodchenko described his experience at the construction site as personally transformative.<sup>3</sup> This has been taken as evidence that he believed in what he was doing, and it seems possible that he did on some level, but we should also consider that the statement itself was carefully designed to function for particular effect in a particular context (the height of the purges).<sup>4</sup> There are other examples produced at somewhat less fraught moments that allow us to ask similar questions with lower stakes. For example, do we assume that Rodchenko supported purging “wreckers” when he designed the cover of the report on the Shakhty trial in 1928?<sup>5</sup> Or going back further, to 1925, what can we infer about his position on Soviet labor policy from his design of the cover of the Russian translation of the writing of Frederick Winslow Taylor, the American founder of scientific management?

This chapter focuses on the last, and seemingly most benign, of these examples—the translation of Taylor (Figure 7.1)—as a means of revisiting a set of questions about what it meant aesthetically and politically to be a designer for content in this context. The cover is one of several that Rodchenko produced in 1925 for Transpechat', the publishing wing of the People's Commissariat for Transportation, Railways, and Electrification (NKPS). Others included covers for volumes on aircraft engines, radio



*Figure 7.1* Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover of the Russian translation of *The Scientific Organization of Labor*, by Frederick Winslow Taylor, 1925. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven. Photograph © 2018 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / RAO, Moscow / VAGA at ARS, NY.

technology, automobile ignitions, railroad assessment, and electric lighting.<sup>6</sup> While these subjects may have been of some personal interest for Rodchenko within the technophilic imagination of the era, this design work falls fairly clearly into the category of hired jobs. At least relative to the graphic work that he did for publications like *Kino-Fot* and *Lef*, his designs for the Transpechat' covers frame content that he played no part in producing or selecting. What makes an object like this constructivist then? How should we think about the relationship of form to content? What, if anything, can we surmise by closely reading such an object, by attending to the specificities of the formal choices that Rodchenko made? How would that reading affect how we understand constructivism's politics?

Although this kind of for-hire work might appear to be the least relevant set of objects in Rodchenko's oeuvre, the questions that it poses are some of the most important for understanding constructivism.<sup>7</sup> I have argued elsewhere that constructivist aesthetics revolved around an understanding of form as a response to the various pressures that bear upon both artist and object in a given historical moment (in contrast to the assumption that artistic form results from the autonomous expression of the artist's individuality or of an internal formal law).<sup>8</sup> This means that the constructivists' work was to organize form within contextual givens, rather than to express themselves freely within the bounds of a frame (or gallery, theater, etc.). The political and aesthetic conviction at the core of constructivism, for better or worse, was that one should work within the limitations of the economic, social, and political situation in which one was embedded, just as one worked within the limitations of the material medium.<sup>9</sup> From that point of view, whether Rodchenko believed in the content whose covers he designed is less important than the question of how he worked within the givens. How did his formal choices reinforce, redirect, or resist current mediological and ideological possibilities as they evolved into the next moment? Stretched further, this set of questions is also about the agency of the artist-designer. Working in this embedded mode is by definition to be complicit in the production or reproduction of the languages, tropes, and norms that define what is communicable, actionable, or possible. Restated with more specificity, the question might become, how did Rodchenko's design for Taylor's book participate in or attempt to forestall the production of the world in which he was issued the task of the White Sea Canal essay?

### **Taylor's Texts in the Land of the Bolsheviks**

The Russian translation of Taylor provides an especially interesting example for asking the questions outlined above for a number of reasons. First, its content is related to labor and its exploitation, an issue of utmost importance in validating or undermining the legitimacy of Soviet power. Second, the importance of the book's topic to the foundations of Soviet ideology meant that it engaged with a discursive sphere already highly developed through years of debate among the most prominent Russian communists, including Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) and Aleksandr Bogdanov (1873–1928). Finally, it entered that discursive sphere from the outside—indeed, from the capitalist West, the Soviet Union's greatest “other.” Rodchenko's design gave this foreign and ideologically charged object a face and orientation as it entered that field.

The cover that Rodchenko designed is fully black and white, using the hand-drawn block letters and geometric graphic forms that are characteristic of his work

of the mid-twenties. The volume itself combined full translations of two of Taylor's books—*Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) and *Shop Management* (1912)—under the title *The Scientific Organization of Labor* (*Nauchnaia organizatsiia truda*).<sup>10</sup> This was the Russian term for the science of labor organization, commonly abbreviated as “NOT.” The title is rendered as negative space in the central black rectangle, along with text reading “with a foreword by P. M. Kerzhentsev.” This central rectangle is the only singular element in a design otherwise marked by repetition and difference. The two square grids provide the most striking case in point: both are six by six and rendered on the same scale, but the use of positive and negative space (or black and white) is inverted. The inversion is reinforced by positioning them catty-corner relative to each other so that the form is reflected around both horizontal and vertical axes. The arrows are similarly doubly reflected: the upper arrow, which presents the author's name, last name first (Taylor, Frederick Winslow), points down toward the title block; the lower arrow points upward, also toward the title, and contains the publication information, “NKPS Transpechat' Moscow.” The reversal of the arrows' direction reinforces the logic of mirroring or inversion. They seem to signify equal and opposite contributions to the neutrally positioned science of NOT.

This preliminary reading is consistent with that moment's thinking about Taylor. Early Soviet debates on NOT have been well-narrated elsewhere, but in short, the crux of the problem was this: prior to the revolution, most communists considered Taylor's science to be a capitalist technology for exploiting workers, eking out ever more product and profit from their labor under the guise of objective science. When the economy began to collapse in 1918, however, Lenin and others began to wonder whether aspects of Taylor's research might be rechanneled for socialist ends.<sup>11</sup> Taylor himself claimed that his organizational techniques were in the workers' interest, since, if organized properly, greater profits could be shared in the form of higher wages. He talked about the technique as a means for bringing the interests of workers into harmonious alignment with those of owners, obviating the cumbersome inefficiencies wrought by labor unions and their antagonistic attitude toward management.<sup>12</sup> Still, Taylor never questioned the fundamental premises of capitalism: the right of the owners to claim the greater part of the profit and to direct both production and profit-sharing processes. Thus, when Lenin and others suggested assimilating aspects of Taylor's research, a crucial condition was that the usable parts be separated from bourgeois capitalist elements in order to develop a form of labor organization that prioritized the interests of workers.

The Russian translation of Taylor was prefaced by a foreword that encouraged this selective reading. Just as much as Rodchenko's graphics, the foreword was a framing device for the text, organizing the reader's perception of it. It was written by Platon Kerzhentsev (1881–1940), a veteran of political and cultural enlightenment work and an advocate for grass-roots efforts to improve labor efficiency. He had been engaged in trying to cultivate a worker-centered version of labor organization for several years before the Transpechat' publication. In 1923, he founded the Time League, an organization dedicated to cultivating cells of workers interested in developing more efficient ways of working. They published a journal, *Time* (*Vremia*) in which workers could share strategies for more efficient production practices they had developed themselves. The cover of *Vremia* was also a constructivist design—produced by the “Second Working Group of Constructivists,” led by Rodchenko's colleague Aleksei Gan (1887–1942)—but it did not feature the complex set of inversions

that Rodchenko's cover for Taylor does. It is not clear how actual the grassroots character of the Time League was, nor how successful. In the foreword, Kerzhentsev rhetorically signalled his awareness of the contradictions of studying "the arch-bourgeois Taylor," but also defended the publication by pointing to Taylor's unavoidable centrality to the field: "there is no work about the scientific organization of labor that does not mention him, or argue through him or with him."<sup>13</sup> Even authors who refuted him founded their theories on polemics against him. That is, Taylor was a given in the field. Unless they wanted to start from scratch, they would have to work through him too.

This sort of strategy of importing foreign expertise with the understanding that it could be repurposed for socialist ends was characteristic of the New Economic Policy (NEP). From 1921 to 1928, NEP allowed for foreign trade and a partial market economy as a means of building a stronger base for the Soviet economy. Part of this was importing goods and technologies that were not available domestically.<sup>14</sup> The policy was pragmatic, but it generated an ideological conundrum: the material survival of Soviet power was understood as relying on the import of technology from the same economies in opposition to which its legitimacy was defined. As Victoria Bonnell notes in her study of Soviet propaganda posters, the peculiarity of this dynamic was expressed in a dramatic change in the rhetorical strategies that structured propaganda images. During the Civil War (1918–1921), and again after the start of the First Five-Year Plan (1928), an *us/them* structure was frequently employed to encourage solidarity by defining common enemies, who were embodied in grotesque caricatures of capitalists, tsars, clerics, and internal wreckers.<sup>15</sup> Propaganda that figured enemies in such black and white terms dramatically decreased during the years governed by NEP, when the relationship to "them" became more complicated and multivalent, characterized by dependence as much as difference.<sup>16</sup> Envy and enmity, desire and disgust had to be carefully negotiated.

Kerzhentsev's foreword is an excellent example of the rhetoric that was repeatedly employed during NEP to soothe this ideological sore spot. Boiled down to a formula, it was something like, if *x*-technology was a force for exploitation under capitalism, under socialism, that same *x* would be a tool for emancipation. That is, the science was neutral, and its potential could be fully inverted, turned from exploitative to emancipatory, if reconditioned by Soviet power.<sup>17</sup> A poster designed by Rodchenko in 1924 offers a particularly straightforward demonstration of this proposition's structure (Figure 7.2). It depicts factory machinery that, under capitalism, "maims" the worker, but that is "tamed" under socialist conditions, represented by a protective grating erected by the union. The underlying assumption is that technology could be transformed from harmful to helpful when resituated in conditions where workers' lives were valued over profit. One might understandably question whether or not this was true in general, let alone in the specific conditions existing in the Soviet Union in the mid-twenties. In his foreword, Kerzhentsev invokes the authority of Lenin, who apparently had "said more than once" that "only by assimilating and reworking bourgeois culture will we build communism."<sup>18</sup> Kerzhentsev saw "the Taylor system" as bringing together two separable components: "the exquisite cruelty of bourgeois exploitation," on the one hand, and, on the other, "the richest scientific achievements." The realization of socialism lay in assimilating bourgeois culture in order to reorganize, redirect, and refunction it, "combining Soviet power and Soviet organization...with the newest [technological] progress."<sup>19</sup>





Figure 7.2 Aleksandr Rodchenko, Trade Union Poster (“Machinery that Maims? Behind a Union-Erected Grate, It’s Tamed”), 1924. A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow. Photograph © 2018 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / RAO, Moscow / VAGA at ARS, NY.

To fulfill this charge of stripping the rich technology of NOT of the exquisite cruelty of its application under capitalism, Kerzhenstev advocates another sort of “technology,” a critical reading against the grain. It is worth reproducing an extended excerpt in order to attend to the specificity of his language:

Studying Taylor’s book must be accompanied by careful critical analysis of his assertions and conclusions. Even untutored readers very quickly notice the typical property-oriented (*sobstvennicheskuiu*) point of view (*tochku zreniia*) that Taylor defends. He approaches the problem of NOT with the eye (*so vzgliadom*) of a factory owner wanting to make the greatest profit. For him, NOT is a method with a scientific feel that can be used to exploit workers and servants. At the same time, he tries to convince us that the interests of the workers and owners are one and the same, that they must and can be in friendly union. Taylor doesn’t acknowledge the contradictions of labor and capital and constructs his entire argument on the assumption that the capitalist system is entirely unchangeable and absolutely good [...] Bourgeois psychology makes him absolutely blind to the contradictions.<sup>20</sup>

Kerzhentsev urges readers of Taylor’s text to take care to identify those premises and conclusions that stemmed from Taylor’s subject position, or his “point of view.”

Looking at the problem “with the eye of a factory owner” created certain contradictions to which, according to Kerzhentsev, Taylor was “blind.” Preserving this blindness required Taylor to mount a vigilant “defense” in the form of what we might term myths, or constructions made to seem natural in order to mask contradictions. The most important of those myths was that capitalism was the natural and unquestionable order of things. This assumption forced Taylor into the contradictory conclusion that a harmonious union of the interests of workers and owners was possible within that set of conditions.

It is true that Taylor’s framing of his own project was clearly jury-rigged ideologically, whether through blindness or deliberate sleight of hand. He begins the introduction to *Principles of Scientific Management* by conflating the meaning of the word *efficiency* as it was used in the conservation discourse of Roosevelt-era Progressives (who in turn took their meaning from engineering), with the way that it was used in commerce. For engineers, efficiency was defined as the input-output ratio of matter to energy; in commerce, it was the ratio of price to cost. As Samuel Haber has noted in his study of Taylor, the word *efficiency* carried very positive connotations in these years; in Haber’s words, “efficiency and good came closer to meaning the same thing [...] than in any other period in history.”<sup>21</sup> This affirmative aura likely clouded the technical distinctions between the two types of efficiency, which were not only not the same, but quite often at odds, pitting profit against stewardship of resources. Taylor participated directly in that debate, always coming out of the side of profit. In the introduction to *Principles*, however, he rhetorically elides the difference to suggest that his science was an overlooked branch of conservation, a conservation of labor.<sup>22</sup> As Haber also points out, Taylor’s efforts to present his methods in the mold of an exact science—to discover “laws of management” that would be perceived like laws of nature and therefore remain “impartial and above class prejudice”—only obscured the bias that very clearly shaped his project.<sup>23</sup>

In returning to Rodchenko’s graphics, Kerzhentsev’s word choices are as interesting as Taylor’s. Kerzhentsev’s plan for refunctioning Taylorism seems to lie exclusively in looking at the research from another “point of view,” with another “eye,” without being “blinded” by defenses. Participants in Soviet NOT would reconfigure Taylor’s findings by seeing through the contradictions resulting from the “property-oriented” point of view of a factory owner. They would look at it from the opposite direction, from the labor-oriented view of workers. Here, I will follow McKenzie Wark’s suggestion in his recent discussion of the early Soviet proletarian culture movement and term this view “a labor perspective.”<sup>24</sup> Wark explains that from the perspective of proletarian culture, bourgeois science and philosophy represented a specific way of organizing knowledge, one that prioritized values such as individual freedom and autonomy. Proletarian culture would similarly remold knowledge around proletarian values such as collaboration and interdependence. Whether the resulting labor perspective was more objective, or simply one with different blind spots, is a question to keep in mind in moving on to the next section. Before moving on, however, I would like to revise slightly my preliminary reading of Rodchenko’s design. The arrows may still signify equal and opposite contributions to NOT, or opposing forces acting on NOT, but they might also refer to opposing vectors of vision, points of view, or positions in relation to a shared object. One looks down on NOT from above; the other sees NOT from below. Their points of view on the topic are not aligned, as Taylor imagined, but rather directly opposed.

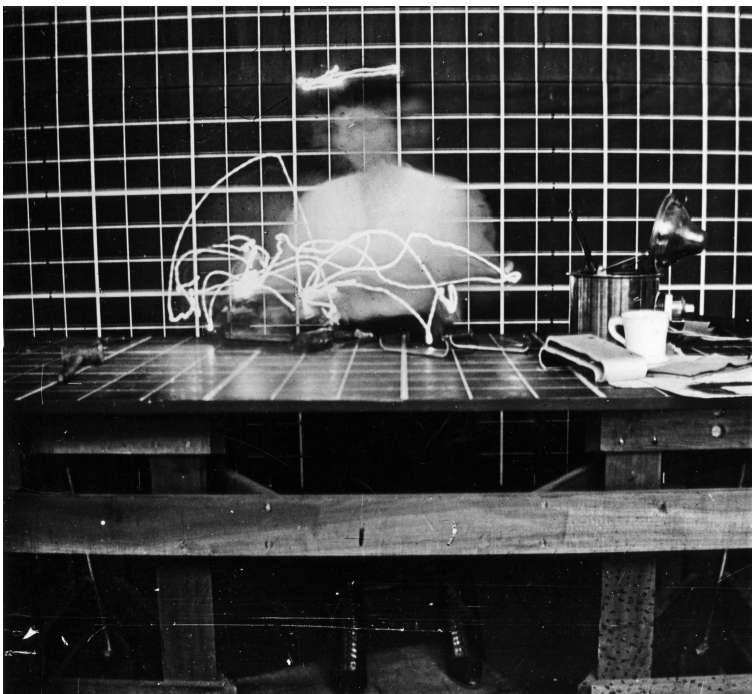
## A Tale of Two Grids

The emphasis on viewpoint discussed above creates a rich juncture for an art historian, insofar as it provides an intersection between Kerzhentsev's strategy for refunctioning bourgeois science and the Russian avant-garde's most celebrated formal device: *ostranenie*, or estrangement.<sup>25</sup> Theorized by Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984) in the essay "Art as Device" in 1919, the term refers to the capacity of art to defamiliarize the world, enabling deeper understanding by frustrating easy recognition. It allows one to experience an object's qualities anew and without prejudice, or, in the words of Shklovsky's contemporaries, "as such."<sup>26</sup> Although usually discussed in relation to painterly abstraction and formalist poetry, Shklovsky's primary examples in the essay are much more literal and embodied. He cites Tolstoy's device in the short story "Kholstomer" (Strider), where Tolstoy narrates from the perspective of a horse in order to make the human world strange.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Shklovsky's concept involves occupying and seeing from an embodied position embedded in the real, rather than the withdrawal from reality sometimes associated with abstraction. Indeed, he specifically notes the difference between *ostranenie*, a neologism that entered Russian in 1916, and *otstranenie*, an older word that implies distance or withdrawal from the world (and better translated simply as "estrangement").<sup>28</sup> Shklovsky's notion has not been understood as particularly relevant to Rodchenko's graphic design work, but it has been one prevalent way to read the artist's oblique-angle photographs of the same period.<sup>29</sup> For example, design historian Victor Margolin argues that the "distinct viewing position" manifest in many of Rodchenko's shots carried signification in itself: it was the "representation of a revolutionary stance." It made "an argument that individuals who participated in a revolution had to alter their perceptual habits and see the world anew as part of their involvement in a changing political practice and social structure."<sup>30</sup> Katerina Clark has also written about this faith in new vision as a revolution in itself, a "perceptual millenarianism" in which revolution stemmed from revelation, scales falling from eyes.<sup>31</sup>

My suggestion above is that Rodchenko's graphic arrows signify something like this "revolutionary stance," or that at least the lower one does. It represents a point of view on the scientific organization of labor positioned counter to Taylor's property-oriented eye. In thinking further about this revolutionary perspective or labor perspective, there are other minor variations between the two arrows that are significant. Both contain text referring to entities that have contributed to NOT, but there is a marked difference in the way that those contributors are named. The upper arrow features an individual author's name (Taylor, Frederick Winslow), while the lower label refers to something more corporate and institutional. Indeed, it is a mash-up of multiple corporate entities: the portmanteau Transpechat' (combining "transportation" and "printing") sits below the acronym for the associated government entity (NKPS). This is the kind of bureaucratic mouthful often portrayed as a quirk of Soviet culture. The arrows thus differ not only in direction but also paradigmatically. The model of an individual author fits well with the figures of speech that Kerzhentsev applies to Taylor. "Point of view" and "with an eye" are underwritten by the model of one-point perspective that was the norm in modern Western conventions of representation stretching back to the Renaissance. Yet, on Rodchenko's cover, Taylor is the one that fits awkwardly into the schema. The broken last-name-first configuration works against the motion of the arrow. This comma-split format is native to modern techniques of administration such

as bureaucratic filing or alphabetical lists. It is a means of fitting a conceptual relic of another era, the proper name, into the organizational structures of mass society that are better served by the corporate language of acronyms.

The fact that Kerzhentsev proposes no alternative figures of speech to characterize the perspective of the arrow “from below” attests to the complexity of reconceptualizing perspective in collective terms. He does not seem to have a language with which to describe the counter-perspective of a labor point of view. In this regard, the other major motif in Rodchenko’s design, the grid, conjures multiple associations. The grids might be grates on a window, a camera’s viewfinder, or the gridded “veil” advocated by Alberti and Albrecht Dürer as a device for achieving proper perspective. More specific to the context of the book, they also resemble the gridded backdrops sometimes used to measure movement in the photographic studies produced by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth on the basis of Taylor’s work (Figure 7.3).<sup>32</sup> Note that all of these devices belong to the same paradigm that underwrites the expressions that pepper Kerzhentsev’s description. That is, they revolve around one-point perspective, or framing and producing a two-dimensional record of reality that mimics human optical experience. In fact, the Gilbreths pushed this paradigm a step further, experimenting with what they called a “stereochronocyclegraph,” which employed two slightly off-set cameras to produce simultaneous footage of the same subject that could be combined for a three-dimensional effect.<sup>33</sup> This binocular set-up simulated the structure



*Figure 7.3* Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, untitled cyclegraph, c. 1910. Photograph © National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

of human vision even more closely than traditional one-point linear perspective. Still, like Taylor's name in Rodchenko's arrow, it was an awkward fit for the task at hand, insofar as human optical experience is not a particularly effective approach to measuring the position of the object being filmed in relation to the grid behind. The data gleaned from the resulting images would need to be manipulated to take account of the optical distortion. Something like the isometric perspective used in technical drawing would have been better (although admittedly would require developing some device for measurement other than the camera as we know it). Indeed, the Gilbreths are generally thought to have been more successful in producing images promoting the aesthetic of scientific efficiency than they were in actually developing an effective diagnostic tool.<sup>34</sup> Their images make it seem as if data gathered on the model of human vision was objective rather than situated. In that regard, the images also obscure, or manage, a contradiction between individual human experience and objective reality.

Rosalind Krauss famously discusses the prevalence of the grid in modernist painting as a structure that functions to manage contradictions. She analyzes it in terms of the structure of myth, making connections between the form (the grid) and the structure (myth) that are multiple and multivalent. First, she points to the way that structuralists use grids, or charts, to map out and spatialize cultural myths. By presenting contradictory episodes simultaneously, the grid allows them to highlight contradictions that narrative structures are usually able to hold together through their unfolding in time. In that application, the grid is a tool for achieving transparency, for getting to the bottom of things. Yet, she also proposes that the grid functions *as* a myth itself in the context of modernist painting. On the one hand, it maps the flatness of the pictorial surface; on the other, it refers to optical devices for producing perspectival illusion such as those discussed above. For her, this allows modernists to hold onto contradictory investments in both the materialist and the spiritual aspects of their work.

As Krauss digs down into the origins of modernism, she suggests that the contradiction is at least partially resolved by foregrounding the model of a lens. By drawing attention to the flatness of the picture plane, the grid reminds us that one's access to reality is never transparent—that it is always filtered through some lens, even if it is only the biological organs of our eyes in conjunction with consciousness. In this sense, she writes, the grid is “an emblem of the infrastructure of vision.”<sup>35</sup> While she does not explicitly say it, resolving the contradiction in this way actually transforms the structuralist usage (the grid as an ordering device that lays bare contradictions) into a myth in itself. If there is always a lens, one can never get to the bottom of things. All one can do is cut through it from another point of view. Krauss almost makes this point when she proposes that two formal and conceptual readings of the grid coexist, duck/rabbit-like. The first (the “centrifugal”) assumes that the grid extends forever, mapping a continuous space in reality. The second (the “centripetal”) reads the grid as bounding a complete and internally consistent system. For her, the first reading is allied with science and materialism; the second, with spirit.<sup>36</sup> By “spirit” Krauss seems to mean something like spirituality, but the schema works equally well if thought in terms of Hegelian spirit, which, in the interwar years, was reconceived as the object of social science. Thought in those terms, there is really nothing less scientific about the spiritual reading, which simply acknowledges that any individual's perspective incorporates filters informed by social interactions and expectations and by the languages available to name what is seen.

This is perhaps the meaning of Rodchenko's grids, which work in tandem, rebus-like, with the arrows to signify the social constructedness of vision. The upper grid, articulated with black lines on a white ground, is more "normal" from the point of view of Western art. Like most drawing and writing, it prioritizes the individual agency of the mark-making process. The lower grid's "lines" are instead defined relationally, as the negative space between black squares. The two grids represent filters that organize data in opposite ways. Both read "centripetally" because of their boundedness, their symmetry, and their multiplicity. They thus signify both the self-consistency and relativity of any point of view, the way that "objectivity" is normatively defined and dependent on the embedded position of the viewer. By displaying both grids, positive and negative (or negative and positive), in two of the cover's quadrants, also a gridded format, the page becomes like the structuralist grid as well: it undercuts the myth of objectivity itself by making the two perspectives simultaneously available.

There is perhaps a smidge of chauvinism, albeit one that inverts the usual hierarchies, in the way that the lower grid (the one associated with a labor perspective) seems more self-conscious about its limitations, or its boundedness. The thin border-line required to demarcate the form from the surrounding ground is conspicuous and therefore denaturalizing. It is literally the "marked" perspective. This too reinforces the position of Kerzhentsev's foreword, which asks readers to apply their critical eyes to Taylor in reading the text at an angle. It marks the labor perspective as the more estranged and more revolutionary perspective, the perspective more aware of the situatedness of its own knowledge and also most able to see Taylor's blind spots. In a wonderful reversal of hierarchy, yet another myth is deflated, as the marked perspective, or the perspective of the marginalized, is presented as the more objective.<sup>37</sup>

### **Art in the Age of Binary Inversion**

The final motif that should be discussed is less of a form per se than a formal logic. Rodchenko uses a logic of inversion in motivating his formal choices to an extent that it should be considered a theme in itself. He exploits the black and white of the printing process in ways that emphasize positive-negative relationships, and then reinforces the logic through operations such as the reversed directionality of the arrows and multiple reflections. This set of graphic techniques signifies not just difference, but binary inversion: up and down, right and left, black and white. I have argued above that this graphic logic works with the rhetorical logic of Kerzhentsev's introduction to position the readers to be critical of Taylor's claims. In this final section, I would like to consider why Kerzhentsev and Rodchenko use this specific structure to frame this content, and why it matters that they do. This line of investigation will also return to the questions with which I started. How much agency did Rodchenko have, as a constructivist working within the mediological and ideological limitations of his moment, to choose the formal languages in which he worked?

Here, it is important that the translation of Taylor is only one example within a larger group of Rodchenko's designs of the mid-twenties that also employ inversion as a motif. Arguably, they all frame content imported from Western bourgeois culture as refunctionable under socialist conditions. The poster mentioned above—in which factory machinery transforms from maiming to tamed—is one example (Figure 7.2). Rodchenko uses the positive/negative inversion in the lettering as it passes through the area protected by the grate to express the inversion of technology's potential under

Soviet conditions. This example is especially straightforward, but the list of dubious imports rehabilitated through these graphic and rhetorical strategies can be stretched to include social and artistic “technologies” as well. For example, Rodchenko used similar techniques in his designs for the covers of Marietta Shaginyan’s serial *Miss Mend: Yankees in Petrograd*, which was conceived as a Soviet version of the detective genre associated with American popular culture (Figure 7.4).<sup>38</sup> The arguments used to validate avant-garde formal strategies, such as montage and new-vision photography, follow a similar formula. In the journals *Kino-Fot*, *Lef*, and *Novyi Lef* (e.g., Figures 7.5 and 7.6), these techniques were defended as taking on social significance in the Soviet Union even though they had been developed for purely aesthetic purposes in the West. We could also include Vladimir Mayakovsky’s deliberations in *About That (Pro Eto, 1924, Figure 7.7)*, in which he agonizes about how to refunction romantic love outside the purview of the “property-oriented eye.” Each of Rodchenko’s designs for these publications not only employs binary inversion, as all print objects of that era did, but also arguably foregrounds it as a motif conveying meaning in itself.

We should pause here to recognize that the inversion of technology’s potential through recontextualization is not the only imaginable way to make an argument for importing foreign technology. One might even argue that it was a particularly convoluted and counterintuitive way. It could have been presented in an equally socialist spirit in terms of international cooperation. Indeed, recent scholarship has sought to think beyond the politics of an East-West divide by reconceptualizing the interwar avant-garde in terms of international vectors and networks.<sup>39</sup> Such paradigms seem apropos given the role played by networked mass-media and communications technologies such as the telephone and radio in animating the imagination of artists and laypeople alike. Rodchenko (and Kerzhentsev) could have used that language of connection and cooperation. Why instead is this content presented through structures that emphasize separation, inversion, and contradiction, even a Manichean divide between black and white? My final suggestion is that some part of this choice was not a choice at all, but stemmed from the pressures imposed by the ideological, linguistic, and mediological means at their disposal. That is, it stemmed from the “grid,” the lens, or the socially informed perspective that Rodchenko and Kerzhentsev (and others) worked with and within. This was a historically specific “infrastructure of vision” that made some things legible and communicable and other things difficult to represent and conceptualize.

In this respect, it is interesting to revisit the device of enstrangement, associated above with the development of the revolutionary perspective or labor perspective. Although seldom noted, *ostranenie* was conceptualized in terms of inversion or reversal too. Shklovsky’s notion is rooted in the futurist avant-garde’s experiments in the teens with abstraction in language (*zaum* or transrational poetry’s work with “the word as such”) and painting.<sup>40</sup> As Nancy Perloff has recently shown, the poet Aleksei Kruchenykh talked about a similar concept as a “worldbackwards principle.” Kruchenykh wrote in 1913, “we learned how to look at the world backward, we enjoy this reverse motion.” He continued by connecting reversal to deepened perception: when text is “read backward [...] it acquires a more profound meaning.”<sup>41</sup> He also related the worldbackwards principle to Kazimir Malevich’s claims about his non-objective paintings, that they “bring everything to zero,” the zero of form, and then “pass beyond zero.”<sup>42</sup> Passing beyond zero means to move backwards, but also to enter the negative or inverse (...2, 1, 0, -1, -2...). The logic is transformed from one of



Figure 7.4 Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover of *Miss Mend, a Yankee in Petrograd* (number 9), by Jim Dollar (Marietta Shaginyan), 1924. A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow. Photograph © 2018 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / RAO, Moscow / VAGA at ARS, NY.



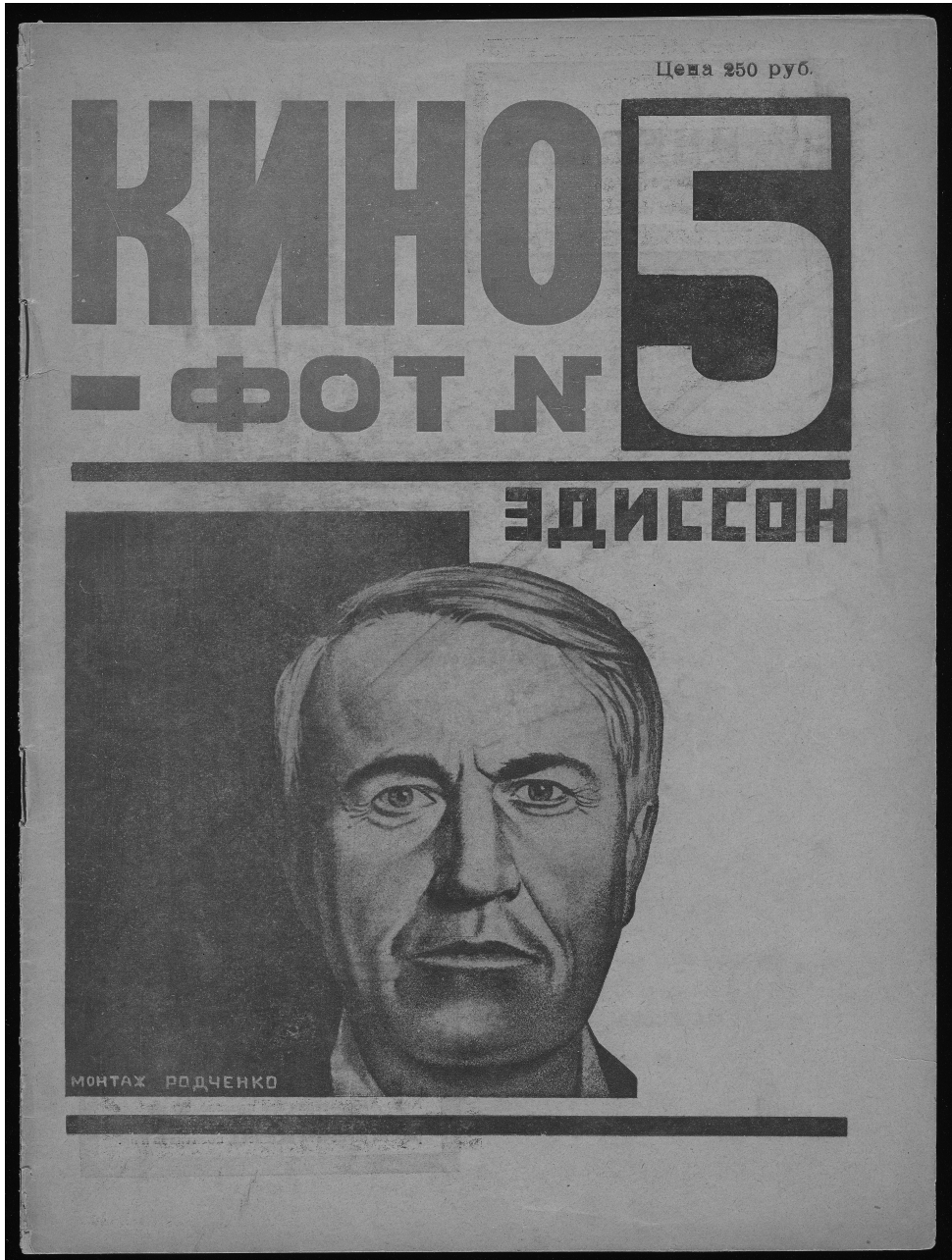


Figure 7.5 Aleksandr Rodchenko and Aleksei Gan, cover for *Kino-Fot 5*, 1922. Photograph © Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.

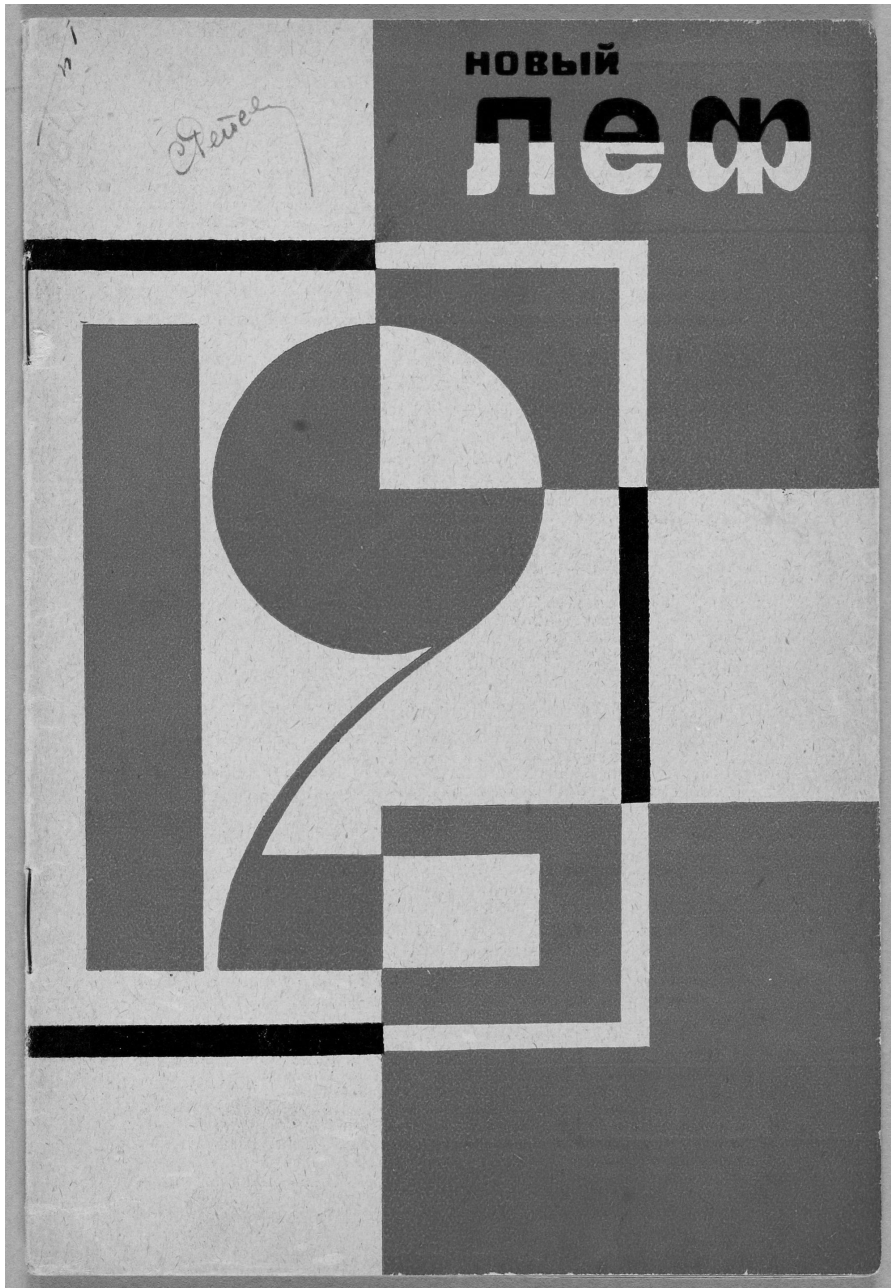


Figure 7.6 Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover for *Novyi Lef* 12, 1928. A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow. Photograph © 2018 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / RAO, Moscow / VAGA at ARS, NY.



Figure 7.7 Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover for *Pro Eto*, by Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1923. A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive, Moscow. Photograph © 2018 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / RAO, Moscow / VAGA at ARS, NY.

progress and regression to a positive-negative symmetry. While this point is admittedly abstract, it is relevant insofar as enstrangement and non-objectivity were two of the most foundational concepts for the Russian avant-garde and for Rodchenko personally. That they were conceptualized in these terms—indeed, somewhat gratuitously so—is symptomatic of a structure of thinking deeply woven into Rodchenko's grid.

Given the power of that paradigm, efforts to understand the interwar avant-garde in terms of networks must be qualified as tentatively contesting rather than fully supplanting more entrenched modes of thinking. While abundant designs for radio stands and agit-kiosks testify to interest in newer networked technologies, the clunky and over-the-top utopian avant-gardism of these objects also suggests that such paradigms still posed a challenge to the imagination.<sup>43</sup> Our tendency to see those structures now may stem from our own lens as much as the interwar eye. By far the dominant medium of mass communication in the 1920s was still print. Even photography and film—media considered new at the time—were fundamentally based on print processes. If it requires somewhat more effort to identify this logic, it is perhaps because it was so assimilated and naturalized, so intimately woven into the infrastructure of vision, that it did not stand out.

Discussions of the interwar avant-garde's turn toward print media, including photography and film, have tended to adopt Walter Benjamin's focus on mass reproducibility and circulation.<sup>44</sup> The move away from handcrafting unique objects and toward work in print-based media is understood as part of a historical zeitgeist shaped by mass production and mass politics, and animated by concepts like the international and the mass subject.<sup>45</sup> Less remarked upon is the other common denominator: these media all required articulating meaning in terms of black and white, or binary difference. Indeed, the 1920s were the very last period in history when the fundamental conditions of photography were black and white; cinema was still silent (and black and white); and color printing on a mass scale was limited, usually to one color. Thus, as a mediological paradigm, interwar print held together two related, yet also seemingly contradictory structural logics: one based on universality and mass circulation, the other on binary inversion. Anything communicated in a mass reproducible medium required translation into a positive and negative, light and shadow, or black figure on white ground. When Rodchenko began designing objects for mass reproduction in print, those technological conditions were part and parcel of the medium, an implicit condition of his design task. It was the formal language at his disposal, and one with an already storied past.

While the language of universality and mass circulation might parlay well with communist ideologies of equality and cooperation, the language of inversion borrowed more from the structural logic of nationalism. Benedict Anderson partially acknowledges this in his seminal study, *Imagined Communities*, when he links the rise of mass-produced print forms (the book and newspaper) and the advent of the nation. He also notes that many communist countries in the twentieth century took on nationalist forms.<sup>46</sup> Anderson emphasizes mass reproducibility, rather than graphic limitation, but historically these went hand in hand. The construction of the imagined community of the nation often had a flipside: an "us" produced through opposition to a "them." The use of this structure during the Russian Civil War—identified by Bonnell, as explained above—was strikingly continuous structurally with imperial propaganda from World War I. German, Austrian, and Turkish leaders and soldiers were replaced by tsarist officials, capitalist businessmen, and priests as enemies to rally against.<sup>47</sup> El Lissitzky's



Иллюстрированное  
ПИСЬМО в РЕДАКЦИЮ.

**НАШИ  
и ЗА-ГРАНИЦА.**

Материал: 6 фото.

Вверху налево: фото Д. Мар-  
тэн (САСШ) 1925 г.

Вверху направо: фото А. Род-  
ченко (Москва) 1926 г.

Посредине налево: фото  
А. Ренгер-Шатч (Германия) 1924 г.

Посредине направо: фото  
А. Родченко (Москва) 1927 г.

Внизу налево: фото проф. Мо-  
голи-Наги (Германия).

Внизу направо: фото А. Род-  
ченко (Москва) 1926 г.

**Примечание:** А. М. Родченко —  
отнодь не простой фотограф. Он —  
художник-профессор Вхутемаса в Мос-  
кве, является искателем новых путей  
в фотографии, известен способно-  
стью видеть вещи по-своему, по-но-  
вому, с собственной новой точки  
зрения. Способность эта столь обще-  
признана, что если какой-либо фо-  
тограф снимает сверху вниз или  
снизу вверх — то про него говорят,  
что он „снимает под Родченку, под-  
ражает Родченке“.

**Предварительный вывод:** Как  
не стыдно иностранным фотографам  
использовать достижения совет-  
ской фотографии для своих импери-  
алистических целей, да еще выдавать  
их за свои собственные!

**Окончательные выводы** из  
всего вышеназванного — пусть сде-  
лают сами читатели.

Фотограф

**Примечание редакции:** К сожа-  
лению, все вышеприведенное не являет-  
ся первоапрельской шуткой: все 6  
приводимых фото действительно до-  
ставлены автором письма в редакцию  
в виде вырезок из иностранных и со-  
ветских журналов из вырезок вид-  
но, что фото действительно принад-  
лежат тем авторам, на коих ссылает-  
ся письмо; года также проверены.

Figure 7.8 “Illustrated Letter to the Publisher: Ours and Theirs,” in *Sovetskoe Foto*, 1928. Photograph courtesy of Russian State Library, Moscow.

well-known poster design *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1920) demonstrates how easily this language and logic could be distilled, abstracted, and transferred.

Rodchenko's cover for the Taylor translation can be considered symptomatic of the final climax of black-and-white print as a dominant paradigm, as well as the moment when the "grid" that supported it became visible "as such." Like his futurist colleagues' play with "the word as such" or "theater as such," Rodchenko's manipulation of the grid represents an effort to push beyond that structure and that language while remaining embedded within it. As Rodchenko became self-conscious about the socially constructed aspects of vision, these designs functioned as a kind of graphic *zaum*, an attempt to go beyond existing sense through creative manipulation of a linguistic or symbolic legacy. It produced a "transrationality," a wormhole that allowed for certain things (factory machinery, montage, love, etc.) to cross the ideological divide between rationalities informed by incongruous perspectives.<sup>48</sup>

I wish that I could add that this was also the moment when that grid, having become visible as a construction, began to break down. The glimmer of that possibility was there. Certainly, Rodchenko used the graphic language of binary inversion less after 1928, but this stemmed less from moving beyond the structure than from its renaturalization in a new form. At that point, Rodchenko began contributing to publications as a photojournalist more frequently than as a graphic designer, although one might argue that photojournalism also came to be understood within a design paradigm, as a way of framing or formatting reality itself. In spring of 1928, Rodchenko was famously criticized in *Soviet Photo* for his use of enstranging oblique-angle perspectives. The spread was entitled "Illustrated Letter to the Publisher: Ours and Theirs" and reproduced three of Rodchenko's photographs side-by-side with strikingly similar shots by Western artists Ira W. Martin, Albert Renger-Patsch, and László Moholy-Nagy (Figure 7.8). Minus the graphic framing of grids, inversion, and arrows, the images look a lot like the same thing, and Rodchenko was accused of being no different than the bourgeois aesthetic formalists of the West.<sup>49</sup> Formatted like a structuralist grid with two columns facilitating comparison, the spread presents itself as rhetorically naïve, less an argument than a transparent laying bare of the contradictions. In one more operation of inversion, the transrational construction that had allowed such aesthetic technologies to flourish under NEP became the myth of unsituated objectivity, the appearance of truth.

## Notes

- 1 On discussions in the Institute of Artistic Culture, see Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 21–119.
- 2 On Rodchenko's work for *USSR in Construction*, see Leah Dickerman, "The Propagandizing of Things," in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, ed. Magdalena Dobrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 62–96; Aglaya K. Glebova, "Elements of Photography: Avant-Garde Aesthetics and the Reforging of Nature," *Representations* (May 2018): 56–90; and Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 163–213.
- 3 Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Perestroike khudozhnika," *Sovetskoe foto* 5-6 (1936): 19–20; translated as "Reconstructing the Artist," in Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. Aleksandr Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 297–304.
- 4 On the pressures of that moment, see especially Glebova, "Elements of Photography."

- 5 The Shakty trial was the first show trial after the trial of the Right Socialist Revolutionaries in 1922. A group of engineers was accused of sabotaging the Soviet economy.
- 6 Illustrated in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, ed. Magdalena Dobrowski, 229.
- 7 A notable exception is Christina Kiaer's treatment of Rodchenko and Mayakovsky's collaboration in designing advertisements for Mossel'prom. Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2005), 143–196.
- 8 Kristin Romberg, *Gan's Constructivism: Aesthetic Theory for an Embedded Modernism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Although *Shop Management* was originally published in 1903, the version included in the Russian volume was published in 1912.
- 11 See Kendall E. Bailes, "Aleksei Gastev and the Controversy over Taylorism, 1918–1924," *Soviet Studies* 29: 3 (1977): 373–394; and my summary in Kristin Romberg, "Labor Demonstrations: Aleksei Gan's *Island of the Young Pioneers*, Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Eye*, and the Rationalization of Artistic Labor," *October* 145 (Summer 2013): 38–66.
- 12 Frederick Winslow Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1911).
- 13 Platon Kerzhetshev, "Foreword" to Frederick Winslow Taylor, *Nauchnaia organizatsiia truda*, trans. A. I. Zak and B. Ia. (Moscow: Transpechat', 1925), iii.
- 14 See Kiaer's discussion of the transitional nature of constructivist graphic design under NEP in *Imagine No Possessions*, 17–28, 143–196.
- 15 Victoria Bonnell, *Iconographies of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1997), 187–224.
- 16 Bonnell's research shows it dropping to half in the years 1921–1929, with most in 1928–1929. Bonnell, *Iconographies of Power*, 207–208.
- 17 "Soviet power" was then understood as worker-centered grassroots power. The Russian word *soviet* means "council" or "committee."
- 18 Kerzhetshev, "Foreword" to *Nauchnaia organizatsiia truda*, iii.
- 19 Cited in *ibid.*, iv.
- 20 *Ibid.*, iv–v.
- 21 Samuel Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift: Scientific Management in the Progressive Era, 1890–1920* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1964), ix. See also Sharon Corwin, "Picturing Efficiency: Precisionism, Scientific Management, and the Effacement of Labor," *Representations* 84, no. 1 (November 2003): 139–165.
- 22 Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management*, 5.
- 23 Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift*, x–xi.
- 24 McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (London: Verso, 2015).
- 25 *Ostranenie* is sometimes also translated more simply as "estrangement," which loses the neologistic character of Shklovsky's concept. On the issues with translation, see Alexandra Berlina, introduction to Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," trans. Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today* 36, no. 3 (2015): 157–173.
- 26 The phrase "as such" was used in the teens to talk about a formalist attention to medium—most famously, in Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh's manifestos "The Word as Such" and "The Letter as Such" (1913) and in Nikolai Evereinov's "Theater as Such" (1912). See Masha Chlenova, "Early Russian Abstraction, as Such," in *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–25* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 200.
- 27 Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," 157–173.
- 28 Viktor Shklovsky, *Izbrannoe v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1983), 188. I am indebted to Svetlana Boym for this reference, which appears in Svetlana Boym, "Poetics and Politics of Estrangement: Victor Shklovsky and Hannah Arendt," *Poetics Today* 26, no. 4 (2005): 581–611.
- 29 For example, Peter Galassi, "Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution," in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, ed. Magdalena Dobrowski, 118–120.
- 30 Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 131.

- 31 Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 29–53.
- 32 Brian Price, “Frank and Lillian Gilbreth and the Manufacture and Marketing of Motion Studies, 1908–1924,” *Business and Economic History* 18 (1989): 88–98.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 91.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 88–98.
- 35 Rosalind E. Krauss, “Grids,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 15–16.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 37 For a discussion of the situated objectivity and this reversal of hierarchy, see Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 575–599.
- 38 Shaginyan published it under the pseudonym Jim Dollar.
- 39 For one prominent recent example, see *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York, NY: MoMA, 2012).
- 40 *Zaum* or transrational poetry was developed by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh in the teens. It involved breaking down language and reorganizing it with respect to sound or systematic structure rather than sense. See Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 121–160.
- 41 A. Kruchenykh, “New Ways of the Word (the language of the future, death to Symbolism)” (1913), in *Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, trans. and ed. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2006), 76. Perloff points to the passage in Nancy Perloff, *Exploidity: Sound, Image, and Word in Russian Futurist Book Art* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2016), 60–61.
- 42 A. Kruchenykh, “On Malevich” (unpublished notes written c. 1913), in *Kazimir Malevich: Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism*, ed. Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 2:109. See also Perloff, *Exploidity*, 60–61.
- 43 The best-known examples are those by Gustav Klutssis, but hundreds of examples by numerous artists, including Rodchenko, exist.
- 44 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–251.
- 45 For example, Leah Dickerman, “Building the Collective,” in *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design, 1917–1937, Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection*, ed. Leah Dickerman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996); and Benjamin Buchloh, “From *Faktura* to *Factography*,” *October* 30 (fall 1984): 82–119.
- 46 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 2–3, 33–36. On the nationalist character of communist countries, he cites Eric Hobsbawm.
- 47 Bonnell cites Iurii Lottman and Boris Uspenskii’s “Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture,” in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, ed. Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 30–66. They look to medieval Russian religious sources to explain a tendency toward revolution, or full rejection of the past, as a binary structure. This structure is distinct from the one that I am describing here, which sets up a divide not between past and future, but between inside and outside.
- 48 On *zaum*, see note 37.
- 49 For a description of this exchange, see Galassi, “Rodchenko and Photography’s Revolution,” 125.



## 8 The Creative Mistakes of Socialist Realism

*Maria Mileeva*

Of all the “isms” of the twentieth century, socialist realism remains arguably the most problematic for the art history university curriculum, the museum, the art critic, and the public. It resists standard classification and has escaped rigorous critical enquiry due to its common definition as kitsch, totalitarian, and anti-aesthetic.<sup>1</sup> When discussed in conjunction with Stalinism—the repressive apparatus that gave birth to it—the criticisms are justified on accounts of authoritarian policies of censorship, propaganda, and terror. Named in 1934 at the All-Union Congress of Writers as the official method and style of Soviet arts across all disciplines, socialist realism was first and foremost discussed as an ideology and a literary text.<sup>2</sup> In the eyes of the state, socialist realism was a new form of “revolutionary romanticism,” which had to be readily understandable and legible to the growing mass audience. It drew on the nineteenth-century tradition of realism, whilst declaring a commitment to Soviet life and its transformation by depicting “reality in its revolutionary development.”<sup>3</sup> What this would mean in the context of painting was not straightforward. The First All-Union Congress of Soviet Artists was not held until 1957, a delay that contributed to the instability and resistance of socialist realism as a label in relation to visual works of art. The vast body of these works—produced over several decades and across all corners of the former Soviet Republics—are still in fact awaiting a rigorous examination of the historical context of their production, circulation, and reception.<sup>4</sup>

The most significant event in the development of socialist realism in the field of visual art was the resolution passed on April 23, 1932, entitled “On restructuring literary and arts organizations.”<sup>5</sup> This decree signaled the foundation of the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists (*Moskovskii oblostnoi soiuz Sovetskikh khudozhnikov*, or MOSKh), which is the focus of this essay.<sup>6</sup> Replacing the competitive struggle between the various artistic groups which defined the 1920s and early 1930s, MOSKh united all stylistic tendencies under one roof and for this reason was the very place where socialist realism came into effect. The operations of MOSKh reveal an atmosphere which was underwritten by complicated bureaucracy, state censorship, and artistic rivalry. In addition to official directives issued by the Party, it was the artists themselves who drove the debates and formulated the concept of socialist realism. Key to the experience of cultural life in the 1930s and 1940s were the campaigns against formalism and naturalism. The criticisms and direct accusations against selected artists and their artistic methods were published in the main newspapers and artistic journals. By focusing on a number of Soviet artists, who were singled out for their “creative mistakes” in the press, this chapter examines how socialist realism was articulated and discussed within the walls of MOSKh. The case studies point to the intersections

between political and artistic concerns, whilst exposing the shifting role of the artist as both a citizen and creator, critic and censor, in the construction and articulation of socialist realism.<sup>7</sup>

Socialist realism was far from the homogenous official style of painting, with which we are often presented in existing scholarship and exhibitions. This is perhaps an obvious observation, when one is forced to fit all Soviet artistic production from the start of the 1930s until the fall of the Soviet Union, under the umbrella of one term. Scholarship on socialist realism varies vastly depending on the place and time of publication, with contemporary politics still making a profound effect on the writing and rewriting of its history. In present-day Russia, a worrying trend has emerged in a series of exhibitions which celebrated and inadvertently glorified the Soviet regime in the eyes of the public. These highly attended exhibitions lifted works of art out of the historical and political context and endowed them with an air of nationalism and patriotism. Two such shows, for example, provoked serious debate amongst critics: *Romantic Realism. Soviet Art 1925–1945* (2015) and *Aleksandr Gerasimov* (2016), both held in Moscow.<sup>8</sup> Exhibiting the well-known repertoire of canonical paintings, the cultural heritage of the Stalinist era has again been used as an instrument of power, which paints the Soviet past as a positive and heroic moment in the collective memory of Russian viewers. This official and state-sponsored trend has raised the question about how to deal with the legacy of the Soviet past.<sup>9</sup> The rise of Stalin's popularity as a positive leader in recent public polls, the proliferation of new Stalin statues across Russian cities, and the renaming of streets in his name are all concerning signs of instances of historical amnesia by both the state and the public.<sup>10</sup>

In particular, the retrospective exhibition of Aleksandr Gerasimov's (1881–1963) work at the State Historical Museum on the Red Square set to recreate and preserve the Soviet myths. Gerasimov is a perfect example of a painter, who rose through the ranks of artistic nomenclature to become the head of the Soviet Academy of Art—the pinnacle of the Soviet art establishment—which reopened in Moscow in 1947. Gerasimov was a prominent member of the 1920s group, Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (*Assotsiatsiia khudozhnikov revoliutsionnoi Rossii*, or AKhRR), held a prominent position within MOSKh from its inception, and was famed as Stalin's favorite painter. His personal trajectory speaks of active participation in the denunciation, and in some cases arrests, of his colleagues during his leading role in the Union. Gerasimov's close relationship to power can be seen in his painting of a visit by a group of artists to Stalin's summer dacha on July 6, 1933 (Plate 11). The scene was painted retrospectively in 1951 and places the artist in an informal and intimate setting of conversation over tea in a garden, with Stalin presiding in the company of the artistic establishment, which included Gerasimov, Isaak Brodskii (1884–1939), and Evgenii Katsman (1890–1955). The real visit was organized by Kliment Voroshilov (1881–1969), the People's Commissar of the Red Army and an important patron of the arts, who sits at the center of the table. The clearly staged encounter emphasizes the artists' close relationship to power and the personal involvement of Stalin and Voroshilov in matters of the visual arts. The exhibition at the State Historical Museum, which featured this painting, promulgated this myth of Gerasimov as a "People's Artist," a prestigious rank, which he received in 1943. He also won four Stalin Prizes during his lifetime (1941, 1943, 1946, and 1949). The 2016 display avoided posing difficult political and aesthetic questions, instead presenting art produced under Stalin as revolutionary and nationalistic, divorced from the political context of its production.<sup>11</sup>



The artists and critics are depicted as parading inside a circus ring or an auditorium. Each is endowed with character and individuality—all of whom are guided by the art critic Abram Efros (1888–1954). The most important voices of early Soviet criticism are elevated on the balcony to observe the artistic parade: these include Iakov Tugenkol'd (1882–1928), Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875–1933), and Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov (1900–1969).<sup>14</sup> The artists, with their attributes of paintbrushes, palettes, varnishes, and canvases, are lampooned. Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969), for example, is seen topless, in skimpy pants wearing boxing gloves and carrying an extra glove on a stick, while Aleksandr Labas (1900–1983) is flying a plane. Commenting on the artists' hobbies, known works, and personalities, the drawing is a contemporary portrait of the main figures and their relationships. It visualizes the many complex and social experiences of the Soviet everyday.<sup>15</sup>

MOSKh became a bureaucratic beast that subsumed all groups into a single organization, and it is important to acknowledge that although many of the artists of different tendencies were now united under the aegis of one organization, they no longer spoke from the position of affiliations of diverse artistic groups. “We” was replaced with “I,” where individual artists were forced to adopt the official policy and produce a personal interpretation of the definition of socialist realism.<sup>16</sup> As a member of the Union, everyone participated and collaborated in defining the discourse—even if many were coerced by circumstance (rather than the high-ranking officials who did the coercing)—of the repressive state apparatus.

Thus, when MOSKh was founded in 1932, it had 590 members, 40 percent of whom were previously members of AKhRR. Aleksei Volter (1889–1973), previously head of AKhRR Party section, was appointed chairman. His deputies were Viktor Perelman (1892–1967) and David Shterenberg (1881–1948). The idea behind the leadership of MOSKh was to provide an equal measure of various group affiliations and tendencies in the higher decision-making body, and these artists became active agents in determining the direction of Soviet art. The Union was divided according to principal artistic departments: painting, theater, monumental art, graphic art, photography, foreign relations bureau, and a section for criticism, which was not set up until 1938. The Union maintained an annual budget, which was split amongst the various sections to organize exhibitions, hold conferences and debates, and controlled the distribution of artist studios. Much of the Union's remit came into direct conflict with the Art Commission of the All-Russian Cooperative Association of Artists (*Vserossiiskoe kooperativnoe ob'edinenie* “*Khudozhnik*”, or *Vsekokhudozhnik*), which performed many of the same tasks. Numerous documents in the MOSKh archive deal precisely with this strife between the two institutions.

Following the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, MOSKh's principal aim was to unlock the formula of socialist realism in the visual arts, which on the ground meant responding to the broader campaign against formalism and naturalism that was fought in the ranks of the Union.<sup>17</sup> Formalism as an accusation became the antithesis that artists used to position themselves against—a practice of distancing not only from formal experiments, but also from the theory of “art for arts' sake.” Naturalism, on the other hand, could mean fetishization of realism itself, and this mere copy of nature stood on the other end of formalism if one was to place realism in the middle. Both terms, often interchangeable, presented a criticism of professional art as a dishonest phenomenon that needed redemption and corrective guidance to lead artists on the path to socialist construction.

The MOSKh archive suggests that there were two events, the intersection of which were critical to the acceleration of the campaign against formalism as it is commonly known. One was the assassination of the head of the Leningrad Party organization Sergei Kirov (1886–1934), and the second—a conference on Soviet portraiture that took place in 1935. Attempting to regenerate the genre of portraiture, the conference was held at the Tretyakov Gallery to coincide with an exhibition of work by Valentin Serov (1865–1911). Whereas the death of Kirov created a legitimate cause for eliminating class enemies amongst all spheres of Soviet society, the conference provided an arena and platform for the artist and audience to voice their worries, confusion, and anxiety about their comrades and the overall direction of Soviet art. The accidental conjunction of the two events, which vastly differ in scale and significance, indicates that it was largely arbitrary circumstances that first fueled the campaign against formalism. The assassination and the conference exemplify the unconnected occurrences that shaped the development of socialist realism: one that is directed from “above,” and the other, which is voiced from “below.”

The “Problems of Soviet Portraiture” conference extended over a month with discussions from November until December 1935.<sup>18</sup> The hundreds of pages contained in the transcripts of these debates reveal a surprising level of disorganization within the Union. The paradoxical freedom of expression provided by the conference seemed to actually create a platform for aggressive and vehement attacks on each other by the artists and the organization that united them. Very little was said in the debates about portraiture or socialist realism, instead, fellow members were criticized on accounts of their recent works displayed at the biannual exhibition of Moscow artists and the portraiture show. In the format of a public debate, many artists were picked on, denounced for “formalistic tendencies,” and were forced to recant. It should be noted that after being publicly condemned for formalism, an artist could be excluded from the Union with the additional denial of all resources needed for survival.

These episodes were part of a larger orchestrated campaign. This began on January 28, 1936, in the newspaper *Pravda*, which stood for the official Party line, with an attack on Dmitrii Shostakovich’s (1906–1975) opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*, written in 1932 and first performed in Leningrad in 1934, a full two years before its public denunciation. That article, entitled “Muddle Instead of Music,” was first in a series, directed primarily against the disciplines of music, theatre, literature, and architecture.<sup>19</sup> The defining offensive against the fine arts came in the form of “About Artists Stain Makers” which appeared on March 1, 1936, also in *Pravda*.<sup>20</sup> The attack was directed at the illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev (1891–1967) in a children’s book by Samuil Marshak (1887–1964) that had been published in 1935. The article declaimed that Lebedev painted “terrible rickets on matchstick legs with bloated stomachs, children without eyes and nose, monkey children, wild and overgrown girls [...] but he did not do it to scare the children but to educate and therefore infect them with aesthetic feelings.”<sup>21</sup> The criticism against the mistakes of Lebedev and the Leningrad branch of the State Children’s Publisher (*Detskaia literatura*, or *Detgiz*) was scathing and effective. The publication of the children’s book was quickly suppressed, and Lebedev was publicly vilified for his individualistic creative approach, which was interpreted as an expression of trickery.

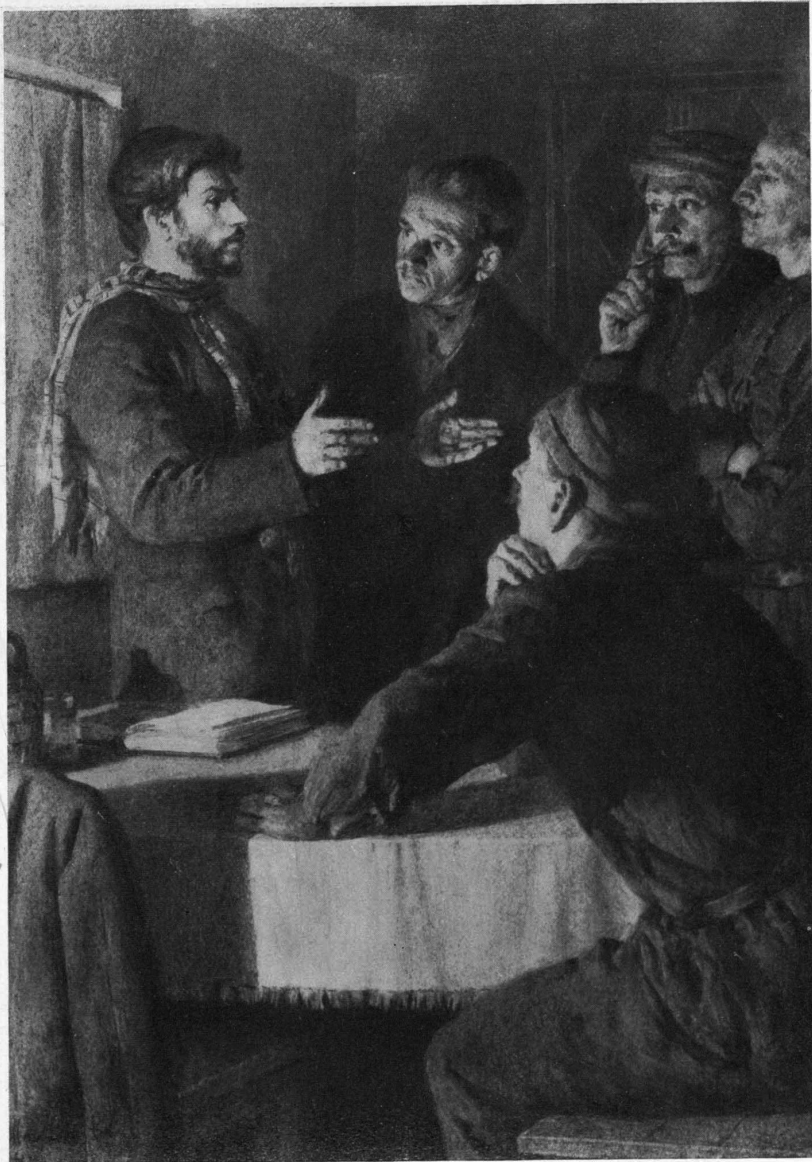
It should be noted that two months before these articles were published, in December 1935, the Committee for Art Affairs (*Komitet po delam iskusstv*) was formed to centralize control of all the arts, replacing the People’s Commissariat for

Education (Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia, or Narkompros). The Committee for Art Affairs' Visual Arts Section was run by a group of politicians headed by Platon Kerzhentsev (1881–1940), and was responsible for the supervision of museums, art schools, art journals, and exhibitions.<sup>22</sup> Its chief task became the battle with formalism. This campaign against formalism was coordinated and publicized at the highest level of Soviet power, which speaks of a forceful indoctrination of the Party line following the pronouncement of socialist realism as the official creative method. This corroborates the reading of cultural life of this period as “totalitarian,” shaped purely by Party directives.

The campaign continued for over a year on the pages of art journals, books, and meetings in local branches of creative unions, museums, and art schools.<sup>23</sup> In his study of socialist realism, Jeffrey Brooks exposes the difficulties of reading the overbearing official rhetoric on the pages of *Pravda*, where “writers and artists had to accept the metamorphosis of public discourse itself, as editors and journalists plunged into a kind of hyperreality in the face of the disjunction between the promises and results of Stalinist policies.”<sup>24</sup> This hyperreality of the text that accompanied the discourse of artistic production tends to favor the word over the works of art. It also corroborates the degree of censorship and involvement of politics in art affairs. Yet, at the same time, the proliferation of artist debates provides an alternative and more nuanced reading of the events, where the construction of new Soviet art was a joint project, and one where MOSKh and its membership played an active role.

One such example of a response to the campaign was the disciplinary hearing on July 16, 1937, which was organized by MOSKh and dedicated to the work of Pavel Mal'kov (1900–1953).<sup>25</sup> Although not a very well-known artist, Mal'kov received the Stalin prize of the third rank for his drawings to mark the celebration of Stalin's 70th birthday in 1949: *Stalin—Leader of the Workers' Club in Tiflis, Batumi Demonstration* (Figure 8.2), and *The Meeting of Lenin and Stalin at the Tammersforskaya Conference*. The reason behind the MOSKh meeting was to discuss Mal'kov's “creative mistakes” made in a painting, which was rejected by the *Industry of Socialism* exhibition jury. The *Industry of Socialism* was the first All-Union art exhibition, the organization for which began in 1935, was intended to open in autumn 1937, but was delayed until March 1939. Mal'kov had been contracted to paint a public celebration in Moscow. On viewing the painting, the group of artists, who made up the directorate of MOSKh stated, “What the painting represents right now, in no way matches the theme, which was contracted to the artist [...]. We see this as a grave political and creative mistake.”<sup>26</sup> The meeting concluded that “objectively, we all came to the decision that the painting is harmful.”<sup>27</sup> The directorate agreed that the painting, on view at the meeting, was an incorrect thematic interpretation of Soviet reality. Mal'kov himself explained that he wanted to represent the state's parsimony by depicting Soviet officials buying flowers, which cost 50 rubles—and the painting depicts a group of tight-fisted men, counting their change. He admitted that he should not have depicted a moment of celebration in a negative anecdotal light, instead he should have turned everyday life into poetry. In his defense, he said that he was isolated, that he fell into a bad circle, which had not helped him grow either artistically or ideologically, and that he had too many teaching responsibilities.

The culprit of the attack then was a painting that did not answer to the definition of socialist realism as delivered at the 1934 Congress of Writers. Rather than transforming the Soviet everyday into a work of “revolutionary romanticism,” Mal'kov's



И. В. Сталин — руководитель рабочего кружка в Тифлисе. Из серии «И. В. Сталин». 1949 г.

Figure 8.2 Pavel Mal'kov, *Stalin—Leader of the Workers' Club in Tiflis*, 1949. Reproduced from P. V. Mal'kov (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1954).

“naturalistic” depiction of reality brought him to the point of artistic misguidance. In an act of reallocating and portioning blame, MOSKh’s directorate agreed that there was not enough political direction from the exhibition’s jury, where an artist could work for a year on the production of a painting only to be told that he made a grave mistake. The case of Mal’kov was identified as a problem of incorrect political education and was ultimately the responsibility of the Union, which needed to establish regular studio visits. Remarkably, despite this meeting taking place at the height of the Great Purges, it was decided that the artist did not make these mistakes intentionally, and it was called “a moment of creative blunder,” an episode of unfortunate bad luck. The committee decided that it would be very difficult to rework the painting and that Mal’kov should start it again. He was given a very short deadline of one month and a list of specific demands for the work. Through discussion and disciplinary action, the artist was given another chance.

The transcript of a discussion about a single work raises a number of important issues. It reveals that five years after its foundation, MOSKh was still lacking a clear and rigorous organizational infrastructure that took care of production, dissemination, and consumption of Soviet art. Far from being programmatic, Mal’kov’s case demonstrates that the operations of the Union were complex, and its actions were often reactionary. It was tasked with clearing the path for socialist realism, where criticism and self-criticism were byproducts of a hygiene strategy for the ailing artistic community. In the case of Mal’kov, the disciplinary action taken by MOSKh could be interpreted as a measure of success, as the painter went on to produce eleven painted panels for the *All-Union Agricultural Exhibition* planned for 1937, and like the *Industry of Socialism* exhibition, delayed until 1939.<sup>28</sup> His panel *The Honorable People of the Moscow District* (1937–1938) is a narrow diagonal composition, which ascends vertically to the top right-hand corner of the arch and frames the pavilion chandelier (Figure 8.3). The young citizens of Moscow descend the stairs to join Vladimir Lenin (whose sculpture stands in front) from the bridge that runs parallel to the Kremlin. The realism of the final installation is a layered mixture of painted and sculptural representations of the historical past (Lenin) and tomorrow’s future (the people of Moscow). The mimetic function of painting and sculpture is further embellished and brought to life with an arrangement of flowers and pyramidal fruit in a fantastic act of forging the new Soviet subject, who would witness and participate in the transformation of “reality in its revolutionary development” as he stepped into the exhibition pavilion.<sup>29</sup>

When it came to the formation of the Soviet viewer, the work of art in the context of the exhibition took precedence over the word. Every form of representation was enlisted to speak *for* the artist, the Union, and the Party, with the aim of education. For this reason, visitors and visitor books became an important object of study. They generated articles and were the focus of MOSKh debates. One such case was the meeting organized by the Committee for Art Affairs alongside MOSKh on March 11, 1937, to discuss the exhibition of the work of Artur Fonvizin (1883–1973).<sup>30</sup> With a career spanning almost a century and best known for his watercolors and book illustrations, Fonvizin’s first one-man exhibition took place at the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in 1936. It was his work at that exhibition that got caught in the expanding attack on formalism, which gained force in 1936 in the hands of Vladimir Kemenov (1908–1988). After the 1936 exhibition, Kemenov wrote a scathing review in the *Literary Gazette* (*Literaturnaia gazeta*) entitled “About Formalists and Retrograde Viewers.”<sup>31</sup>



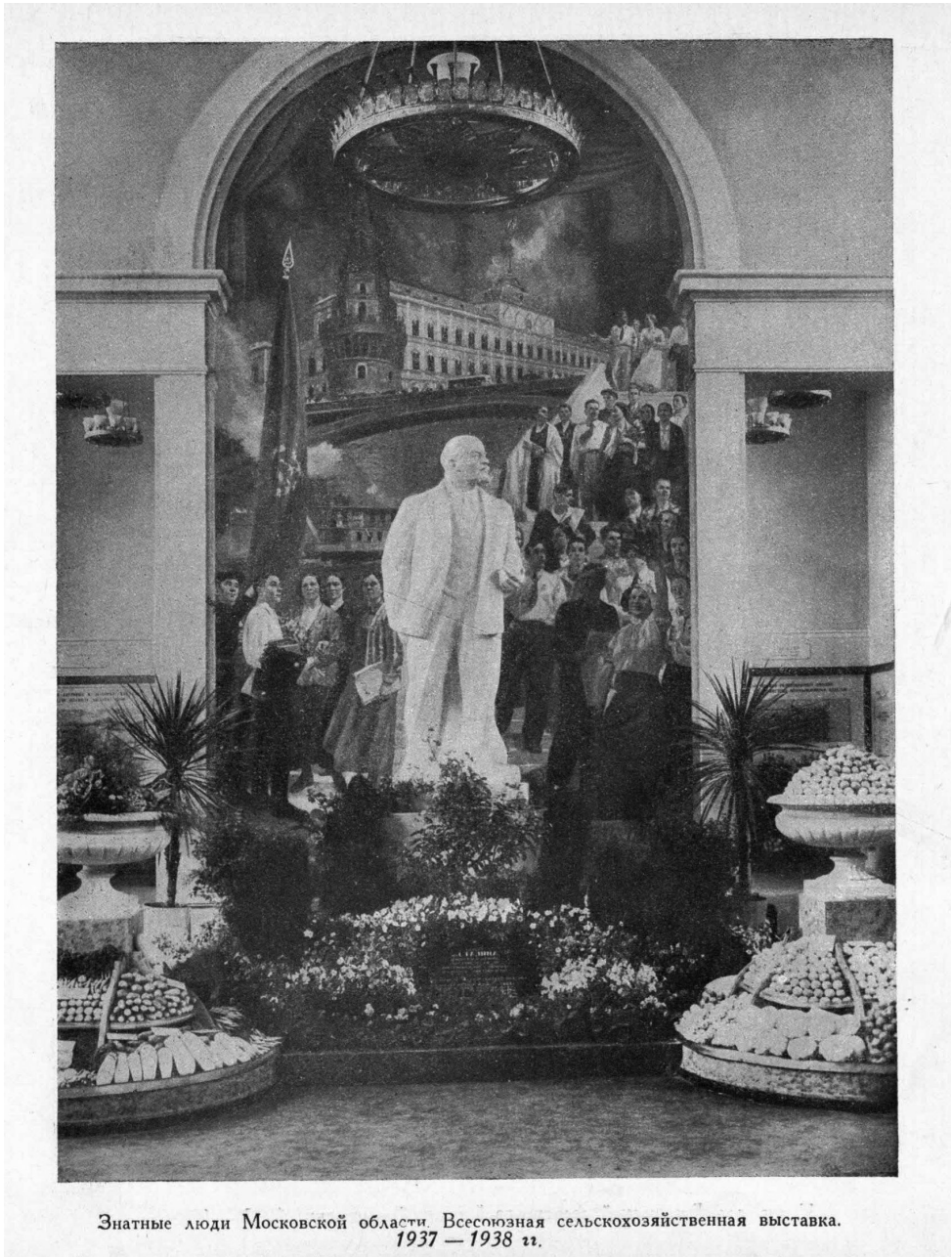


Figure 8.3 Pavel Mal'kov, *The Honorable People of the Moscow District*, 1937–1938.  
Reproduced from P. V. Mal'kov (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1954).

A prominent art historian, Kemenov held the post of director of the State Tretyakov Gallery between 1938 and 1940, was regarded as Stalin's number one art critic, and has been ascribed the authorship of the articles in *Pravda*, including "Against Artists Stain Makers" and "Formalistic Affectations in Painting." In his review of Fonvizin, the artist was rounded up under the nickname of a formalist gang of "three F" along with Robert Fal'k (1886–1958) and Vladimir Favorskii (1886–1964).<sup>32</sup>

Kemenov invoked the visitor comments book to capture the reception of the artist's work by the viewing public.<sup>33</sup> He asserted that the comments were more interesting than the work on display, and even claimed that whilst visiting the exhibition, everyone was reading the visitor book from beginning to end, with rising interest. One visitor stated: "If the artist himself understands what he is painting, then it is for his sake alone. Most of the viewers do not understand anything." The comments went on: "Not everyone has sufficient understanding of a work of such subtlety. But the artist must also show that he can respond to the tastes of the people."<sup>34</sup> The opinions diverged, some believed that the artist could not catch up with the masses and others, that the masses have not yet grown to understand Fonvizin's works. Kemenov contended that Fonvizin's critics and supporters agreed that his art was inaccessible to the masses. Fonvizin's case highlights the critical role of the viewer as the third agent, alongside the Party and MOSKh members, whose assumed backwardness, was also ascribed responsibility for setting the course in the construction of socialist realism.<sup>35</sup>

At the heart of the attack were Fonvizin's watercolors, produced between 1930 and 1935, which were described as detached from Soviet reality and shimmering with color. One of those works, *Portrait of Marina Semenova in Front of the Mirror* of 1935, portrays the famous Soviet ballerina in an intimate setting of her changing room. The watercolor is applied in loose washes of color, with the outlines of the female body splintering and disintegrating into the background. This effect gives an emotional complexity to the work, as Fonvizin captures the temperament of his sitters—he used a similar technique in his portrait of friend and avant-garde artist Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), who plays the bandura (Plate 12). In this portrait, the technique of watercolor allows for a different interpretation of socialist realism, where reality transforms and meaning is suspended through the properties of the medium itself, its translucency, and distortion. Although Fonvizin attempted to come to terms with new Soviet themes, such as his few oil paintings of the Kerchensk factory and October rail network, these did not produce good results and were deemed a series of "paintings indifferent to naturalism and lacking in originality."<sup>36</sup> Instead, his most successful works were on the subject of the theatre and the circus. But even these fell under the arm of the critic with Fonvizin's portraits described as "impressions of unfinished, or hardly started sketches, unclear foggy hints."<sup>37</sup> It is here that Fonvizin's work comes close to Mal'kov's. The discussion of their work as formalist or naturalistic—as incorrect representations of Soviet reality with the ability to reform—places a large proportion of Soviet art of this period firmly in the category of the formative-sketch (*uchebno-etiudnyi siuzhet*). This incompleteness of socialist realist works placed the critic and the viewer in a position of the judge with the power to approve, condemn, complete, or change art.<sup>38</sup>

The public denunciation by Kemenov directly led to the complete isolation of Fonvizin and suspension of his contracts from publishing houses, including *Academiia* and *Young Guard* (*Molodaia gvardiia*), the *Industry of Socialism* exhibition, and essentially his removal from the public sphere. The objective behind the gathering of

artists and critics on March 11, 1937, then was to intervene in the artist's fate under the guise of a democratic process and to lift the label of "formalist." With this in mind, a closed viewing of Fonvizin's most recent works was arranged on the premises of MOSKh with a discussion ensuing, where Fonvizin made an opening statement about his material concerns:

At the moment, I am not working on anything, because I have nowhere to work. In a room of 18 square meters, there are four of us. I cannot turn on bright lights, because I have a baby at home. All that you can see on the walls here, I produced under great duress. I want to work. I am strong. The right to work exists, should exist, but in fact it does not.<sup>39</sup>

Fonvizin was referring to a two-year wait-list for larger accommodations and artist studios, which were allocated by MOSKh. Similar to Mal'kov, Fonvizin's first line of defense was the material conditions of production experienced by Soviet artists during the 1930s and the inadequacies of the organizational apparatus, which was run by the Union.

In the Union's meeting, another painter, Aleksandr Drevin (1889–1938) made a plea in defense of Fonvizin. He noted that "a critic can write articles on formalism, and these can be quite acceptable, but when he is called upon to assess a work using the same criteria he fails miserably."<sup>40</sup> Making the critic central to conversations around taste and judgment, Drevin's remark highlights the disparity between official criticism and the realities of Soviet artistic production. The criteria to describe formalist or socialist realist works of art were inadequate and the creative process was fraught with mistakes and their correction. Drevin's own reform was exemplary. Having been accused and termed a formalist in 1933 by Osip Beskin (1892–1969), Drevin took three years "to reform," and at the 1936 Vsekokhudozhnik meeting, his submission was recognized as the best realist painting on display.<sup>41</sup> The ability to change and adapt both style and content—as demonstrated by Mal'kov and Drevin—undermined any notion of artistic freedom and exposed the process by which an artist could conform to the demands of ideology. Drevin's success in stylistic reform, however, did not save him from repressions in the height of the Great Purges. Alongside the avant-garde artist Gustav Klut'sis (1895–1938), he was arrested in 1938, not for his formalist tendencies, but for his service in the Latvian Riflemen regiment, who fought for the Red Army after the October Revolution. Both artists were executed that same year.<sup>42</sup> As the minutes of the conversations between Fonvizin, Drevin, and MOSKh members illustrate, artistic progress and developments in socialist realism were achieved by means of trial and error by both the artist and the Union, which could often end in tragedy.

To conclude, episodes of artistic criticism—on the pages of a newspaper, in response to an exhibition, or in the form of a disciplinary discussion at MOSKh—acted as an important interface between the artistic establishment, official directives, and the public. It allowed for a three-way process of development and change, with each side influencing the other. Despite this seeming heterogeneity, the critics were the last in line to be reorganized, which also underscores that unlike artists, they were relatively exempt from censorship. As previously mentioned, the Department of Artistic Criticism within MOSKh was not formed until 1938. It was not until December 2, 1940, that the resolution "On literary criticism and bibliography" was passed. The latter aimed to reform the neglected Soviet critic, whose important role as a weapon

of propaganda was finally officially recognized. This was followed by another series of attacks in 1949, now on a number of critics at the Institute of Art History, such as Efros, Nikolai Punin, Beskin, and Ivan Matsa (1893–1974), all of whom were labeled as “unpatriotic critics.”<sup>43</sup> The Union itself underwent a set of reorganizational measures. In 1938, during a re-registration of MOSKh membership, which had totaled 900 artists, 154 were demoted from members to candidates.<sup>44</sup> A similar review took place between 1948 and 1953, during the second wave of the campaign against formalism and now also against cosmopolitanism. The cleaning of the ranks of MOSKh should in turn be considered parallel to the unprecedented repressions and show trials during this later period.

Were the cases of Mal’kov and Fonvizin exceptional or emblematic? Both episodes exemplify restrictions of artistic production and creative freedom in the 1930s. Fonvizin’s case suggests that issues of taste in the public reception of Soviet art were paramount. Both highlight the role of MOSKh and demonstrate that Soviet cultural policy was more accidental and chaotic, often looking retrospectively for the solution to what socialist realism should look like. The critical debates at MOSKh indeed confirm that socialist realism, as has long been theorized both in Western and Russian scholarship, was defined not by what it is, but by what it ought *not* to be. The direction for its development was not predetermined and notions of socialist realist art could only be built through the practice of criticism and, more importantly, self-criticism. Building on Susan E. Reid’s contention that “socialist realism never achieved a stable, concrete ontology,” this chapter demonstrated that the visual production of the 1930s was not a binary conflict between modernism and official art, but rather a more fragmented institutional struggle between individuals, Party bureaucrats, and state organizations, all of whom were vying for power in a highly charged political environment.<sup>45</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (Autumn 1939): 34–49; Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People’s Republic of China* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990).
- 2 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2007).
- 3 Andrei Zhdanov, “Soviet Literature—The Richest in Ideas. The Most Advanced Literature,” in *Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934. The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union*, eds. Maxim Gorky, Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin, Andrei Zhdanov, and others (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), 20–21.
- 4 Key texts include: Aleksandr Morozov, *Konets utopii. Iz istorii iskusstva v SSSR 1930-kh godov* (Moscow: Galart, 1995); Vitalii Manin, *Iskusstvo v rezervatsii: Khudozhestvennaia zhizn’ Rossii v 1917–1941 gg.* (Moscow: Editorial URSS, 1999); Galina Iankovskaia, *Iskusstvo, den’gi i politika: Khudozhnik v gody pozdnego stalinizma* (Perm: Izdatel’stvo Permskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2007); Galina Yankovskaya and Rebecca Mitchell, “The Economic Dimensions of Art in the Stalinist Era: Artists’ Cooperatives in the Grip of Ideology and the Plan,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 769–791.
- 5 Resolution of the TsK VKP(b) Politburo, “On restructuring literary and arts organizations,” Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (Rossiiskii gosudartvennyi akhiv sotsial’noi i politicheskoi istorii, RGASPI), fond 17, op. 3, d. 881, ll. 6, 22; op. 163, d. 938, ll. 37–38. Reproduced in *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953*, eds. Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, Andrei Artizov, and Oleg Naumov (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 151–153.

- 6 The Moscow Regional Union of Artists (MOSSKh) was founded in 1932; the Union of Soviet Artists of USSR (Soiuz sovetskikh khudozhnikov SSSR) was established in 1938, and MOSSKh was renamed into Moscow Union of Soviet Artists (Moskovskii Soiuz Sovetskikh khudozhnikov, MSSKh). In 1959 MSSKh was absorbed into the structure of the Union of Soviet Artists of RSFSR and changed its name to Moscow Department of the Union of Artists RSFSR (Moskovskoe otdelenie Soiuza khudozhnikov, MOSKh RSFSR). From 1991, it is known as the Moscow Union of Artists (Moskovskii Soiuz khudozhnikov, MSKh) and is still active today.
- 7 My analysis of the internal mechanisms of the Moscow Regional Union of Artists (MOSSKh) and the debates builds on the work of Susan E. Reid, Christina Kiaer, and Oliver Johnson. See Susan E. Reid, "Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: *The Industry of Socialism* Art Exhibition, 1935–41," *The Russian Review* 60, no. 2 (2001): 153–184; Christina Kiaer, "Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Alexandr Deineka in the 1930s," *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 3 (2005): 323–345; Oliver Johnson, "A Premonition of Victory: A Letter from the Front," *The Russian Review* 68, no. 3 (2009): 408–428; and Johnson, "The Stalin Prize and the Soviet Artist: Status Symbol or Stigma?" *Slavic Review* 70, no. 4 (2011): 819–843. For similar discussions in the disciplines of music and opera, see Kiril Tomoff, *Creative Union: The Professional Organization of Soviet Composers, 1939–1953* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Marina Frolova-Walker, *Stalin's Music Prize. Soviet Culture and Politics* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2016).
- 8 *Romantic Realism (Romanticheskii realizm, Sovetskaia zhivopis' 1925–1945)* was a free exhibition held in the Central Exhibition Hall "Manezh," Moscow, November–December 2015. The Aleksandr Gerasimov exhibition was organized to celebrate 135 years since the birth of the artist and was held in the State Historical Museum on Red Square, February 2015–April 2016, see *Aleksandr Gerasimov* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2016).
- 9 Anna Bronovitskaia, Valentin D'iakonov, Angelina Lucento, Gleb Napreenko, Aleksandra Novozhenova, Nadia Plungian, Aleksandra Selivanova, Anna Tolstova, and Maria Fadeeva, "Diskussiiia 'Sotsrealizm: Issledovatel'skie perspektivy i tupiki'," *Tatlin News* 2, 89 (2016): 677–703.
- 10 The independent Levada Center survey conducted in March 2018 in Russia shows that 40% of respondents view Stalin positively, 29% view him with respect, 2% with admiration, and 9% with sympathy. 31% are neutral in their feelings, and negative emotions were felt only by 12% of Russians. "The Perception of Stalin," April 17, 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2018/04/17/the-perception-of-stalin/>. Since 2014 new monuments to Stalin have been erected in Yakutsk, Lipetsk, Chita, Vladimir, and Novosibirsk, amongst others. The British satirical comedy directed by Armando Iannucci, *Death of Stalin*, was banned from public screening in Russia, when it was released in 2017.
- 11 A more critical approach was represented in a two-part exhibition *Modernism without Manifesto (Implicit Modernism)* at the Museum of Modern Art in Moscow in 2017. Nadia Plungian, ed., *Modernizm bez manifesta. Sobranie Romana Babicheva, Russkoe iskusstvo. 1920–1950* (Latvia: BNP Print, 2017).
- 12 Elizabeth A. Papazian, "Literacy or Legibility: The Trace of Subjectivity in Soviet Socialist Realism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, eds. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67–90; Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, "Rethinking the Soviet Subject: Stephen Kotkin's Magnetic Mountain and the State of Soviet Historical Studies," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44 (1996): 456–463; Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).
- 13 Kukryniksy was a collective name of three caricaturists, who worked together: Mikhail Kupriianov (1903–1991), Profirii Krylov (1902–1990), and Nikolai Sokolov (1903–2000), see *Kukryniksy vtroem* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1979).
- 14 The artists and critics, who have been identified in the caption to the satirical sketch include: left to right starting from the top row, Viacheslav Polonskii (editor of *Prozhektor*) and Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov (art critic); next row down: Iakov Tugenkhol'd, Aleksei Sidorov (art historian); Anatolii Lunacharskii (head of Narkompros), Pavel Novitskii (Rector of the Higher State Artistic and Technical Studios, Vkhutemas). In the ring below:

- Abram Efros leading the parade, Petr Konchalovskii with a broom-paintbrush, Abram Arkhipov with an axe-paintbrush; Aleksandr Osmerkin with a palette; Il'ia Mashkov with a trident-paintbrush; Aristarkh Lentulov with a broom; Pavel Radimov holding hands with Evgenii Katsman with a cigar behind his ear; Konstantin Iuon riding a horse with a palette; sculptors Lazar' Vainer and Iosif Chaikov; Vladimir Favorskii, Nikolai Piskarev, and Sergei Chekhonin holding hands; with Ignatii Nivinskii behind them; Aleksandr Labas is flying a plane; Aleksandr Kozlov is extending him his hand; and Petr L'vov running at the end; in the front row: David Shterenberg with scissors; Aleksandr Deineka with boxing gloves; Nikolai Kupreianov; and Vladimir Kozlinskii with Nikolai Denisovskii carrying some varnish.
- 15 Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman, eds., *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999).
  - 16 Matthew Bown and M. Lafranchi, eds., *Socialist Realisms. Soviet Painting 1920–1970* (Geneva: Skira, 2012); Olga Roitenberg, *Neuzheli kto-to vspomnil, chto my byli. Iz istorii khudozhestvennoy zhizni 1925–1935* (Moscow: Galart, 2004).
  - 17 Maria Silina, "The Struggle Against Naturalism: Soviet Art from the 1920s to the 1950s," *RACAR: Canadian Art Review* 41, no. 2, The Nature of Naturalism: A Trans-Historical Examination (2016): 91–104; Alison Hilton, "Holiday on the Kolkhoz: Socialist Realism's Dialogue with Impressionism," in *Russian Art and the West. A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts*, eds. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 195–217.
  - 18 "Conclusions from the conference 'Problems of Soviet Portraiture,'" 2 days, 8 and 9 December 1935, held at MOSKh; State Russian Archive of Literature and Art (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva, RGALI), fond 2943, op. 1, d. 38–43.
  - 19 Anon, "Sumbur vmesto muzyki," *Pravda*, January 28, 1936, 3. Other articles in *Pravda* included: "Baletnaia fal'sh" (The False Ballet), 6 February 1936, directed against the composer Dmitrii Shostakovich; "Grubaia skhema vmesto istoricheskoi pravdy" (Vulgar Scheme Instead of Historical Truth), 13 February 1936, against the film maker Aleksandr Dovzhenko; "Vneshnii blesk i fal'shivoe sodержanie" (Superficial Glimmer and False Content), 9 March 1936, about the play *Mol'er* by Mikhail Bulgakov; "Kakofoniia v arkhitekture" (Cacophony in Architecture), 20 February 1936, against Konstantin Melnikov. For a reproduction of archival documents, see "The Anti-Formalist Campaign," in *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953*, 229–261. For more on historical context see, Leonid Maksimenkov, *Sumbur vmesto muzyki: Stalinskaia kul'turnaia revoliutsiia, 1936–1938* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaiia kniga, 1997).
  - 20 Anon, "O khudozhnikakh pachkunakh," *Pravda*, March 1, 1936, 3.
  - 21 *Ibid.*, 3.
  - 22 RGALI, Committee of Art Affairs (1935–1953), fond 962.
  - 23 These debates included "For truthful realistic art," 2 days, 25 and 27 February 1936, held at the Committee for Art Affairs, RGALI, fond 962, op. 3, d. 66 and 67; "On formalism in art," 1 day, 27 February 1936, at the House of Film, RGALI, fond 962, op. 3, d. 69; and "Discussion on formalism in art," 3 days, 29 February, 6 and 10 March 1936, at MOSKh, among others.
  - 24 Jeffrey Brooks, "Socialist Realism in *Pravda*: Read All about It!" *Slavic Review* 53, no. 4 (1994): 973–991.
  - 25 RGALI, fond 2943, op. 1, d. 125, l. 1–7.
  - 26 RGALI, fond 2943, op. 1, d. 125, l. 6.
  - 27 RGALI, fond 2943, op. 1, d. 125, l. 7.
  - 28 Mal'kov painted two panels for the main pavilion and nine for the Moscow Regional pavilion. Evgeniia Butorina, ed., *Pavel Vasil'evich Mal'kov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1954), 10. For more information on the exhibition see, Greg Castillo, "Peoples at an Exhibition: Soviet Architecture and the National Question," *Socialist Realism without Shores*, eds. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 91–120.
  - 29 Zhdanov, "Soviet Literature—The Richest in Ideas," 21.

- 30 RGALI, fond 2943, op. 1, d. 136a.
- 31 Vladimir Kemenov, "O formalistakh i 'otstalom' zritele," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, February 24, 1936, in *Protiv formalizma i naturalizma v iskusstve* (Moscow: OGIZ-IZOGIZ, 1937), 28–35.
- 32 Vladimir Kemenov, "Formalisticheskoe krivlianie v zhivopisi," *Pravda*, March 6, 1936, and "Protiv formalizma i naturalizma v zhivopisi," *Pravda*, March 26, 1936. Other artists and art critics who came under Kemenov's attack in the newspaper article entitled "Formalist affectations in painting" and "Against formalism and naturalism in painting" were Aristarkh Lentulov (1882–1943), Ivan Kliun (1873–1943), and Nikolai Punin (1888–1953).
- 33 Kemenov, "O formalistakh i 'otstalom' zritele," 28–35.
- 34 Kemenov, "O formalistakh i 'otstalom' zritele," 29.
- 35 Evgeny Dobrenko, "The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste, or Who 'Invented' Socialist Realism?" *Socialist Realism without Shores*, 135–164.
- 36 Kemenov, "O formalistakh i 'otstalom' zritele," 30.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 38 Vera Gertsenberg, "Osenniaia vystavka Moskovskikh zhivopistsev," *Iskusstvo* 2 (1936): 13–62.
- 39 RGALI, fond 2943, op. 1, d. 136a, l. 4.
- 40 RGALI, fond 2943, op. 1, d. 136a, l. 46.
- 41 Osip Beskin, *Formalizm v zhivopisy* (Moscow, 1933).
- 42 Silina, "The Struggle Against Naturalism," 99.
- 43 Aleksandr Gerasimov, "Za sovetskii patriotizm v iskusstve," *Pravda* 41, 1949, reprinted in Gerasimov, *Za sotsialisticheskii realizm. Sbornik statei I dokladov* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Khudozhestv SSSR, 1952), 130–137.
- 44 RGALI, fond 2943, op. 1, d. 158, l. 47. In addition to demotions, 122 artists were expelled for unclear reasons; 26 of those artists were arrested.
- 45 Reid, "Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror," 154.

## 9 A Socialist Neo-Avant-Garde?

### The Case of Postwar Yugoslavia

*Nikolas Drosos*

A painting from 1956 by the Yugoslav artist Ivan Picelj (1924–2011) seemingly oscillates between abstraction and figuration (Plate 13). While at first sight it appears like an example of a “hard-edge” abstract painting that was commonplace in many parts of the world during the 1950s, a closer look reveals suggestions of a more conventional picture: a distinct horizon separates an angular shape alluding to jagged mountain peaks, while a darker, curved form conveys a reflective lake. If this is indeed an abstracted version of a cliché landscape composition, Picelj appears to keep it at a distance and bracket it by rendering it as a painting within a painting: the two central shapes are set against a white background, which in turn is framed by a dark border on the top and right edges of the canvas. Viewed in conjunction with the blue border on the left and bottom, this dark margin suggests a shadow of a three-dimensional canvas on a stretcher, contradicting the flatness of the composition. This subtle effect is enhanced by the shape of the white “canvas,” which appears almost foreshortened, like a photograph of a painting taken at an angle.

Picelj further emphasizes the leitmotif of a painting within a painting in his title: *Homage to El Lissitzky* (1956). The reference to the famous Soviet artist can be justified by Picelj’s commitment to abstraction in general, as well as the painting’s own device of flat colored shapes set against a white background, which is also a recurring feature in many of Lissitzky’s works. Yet, upon a closer reading, Picelj’s canvas contradicts many aspects of Lissitzky’s images. His static composition is far from Lissitzky’s usual dynamism, while his reliance on traditional renditions of space, such as the suggestion of a horizon and the use of foreshortening, is antithetical to Lissitzky’s efforts to disturb such pictorial conventions.<sup>1</sup> By inviting this comparison to Lissitzky, however, Picelj becomes vulnerable to the same invectives that have been often leveled against the neo-avant-gardes of the 1950s. His work could be seen as derivative, and as a domestication of avant-garde forms that are voided of their radical impetus. While there might be some truth to this, I would argue that works such as *Homage to El Lissitzky*, produced under the distinct political conditions of socialist Yugoslavia, challenge the standard narrative on the relationship between the neo-avant-garde of the post-1945 period and the avant-gardes of the 1920s.

Indeed, the sharp distinction between the two phases of modern art is one of the most persistent structures in the historiography of the field. The criticism of the neo-avant-garde as a bourgeois co-optation of the historical avant-gardes emerged in tandem with the establishment of dada, constructivism, surrealism and other movements of the 1920s as the undisputable models for a “revolutionary” art, and, eventually, as templates for the desired “critical” art of the later decades of the twentieth century.



Yet this articulation has highly specific historical roots in Western Europe (and, to a lesser extent, in the United States) in the years following the movements of 1968, at a time when the hopes for a revolutionary transformation of postwar society were quickly dashed.

Arguably the most emblematic of such theorizations is Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (*Theorie der Avantgarde*) (1974).<sup>2</sup> For Bürger, the historic avant-gardes such as dada and constructivism should be defined in political terms: they constituted critiques of the bourgeois conceptions of art's autonomy that began with the Enlightenment and reached their zenith in the late nineteenth century with the rise of aestheticism and other iterations of "art for art's sake." In response to them, the ensuing avant-garde of the early twentieth century challenged the autonomy of art and sought to criticize the very institution of art as it had been constituted in bourgeois society. According to Bürger's scheme, when key strategies of the avant-garde, such as the readymade and the monochrome, reappeared in the neo-avant-garde of the postwar period (for example, in Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* or Yves Klein's paintings), they were voided of their original critical potency. Reinscribed within the institutions of art—such as art galleries and the art market—that they had initially sought to upend, these gestures had the opposite effect: they reaffirmed art's autonomy.

Since its publication, Bürger's theory has been the subject of sustained criticism, from both literary theorists and art historians.<sup>3</sup> Specifically in the field of art history, scholars such as Benjamin Buchloh have taken Bürger to task for his simplistic view of the neo-avant-garde and for overlooking the complexities intrinsic to the neo-avant-garde's various modes of repetition.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Hal Foster has proposed that a "second" neo-avant-garde of the late 1960s and 1970s, one that includes conceptual art and institutional critique, did in fact resume the historical avant-garde's critique of the institution of art. Although these art forms were unfolding at exactly the same time that Bürger was writing his *Theory*, he unfortunately appeared to be unaware of them.<sup>5</sup> For Foster, it was only after the initial repetitions of the neo-avant-gardes that Bürger decried that the avant-garde's true political project—the critique of art's autonomy—was realized. Foster inscribes such repetitions of the avant-garde into a broader intellectual history of resurgences and returns in the second half of the twentieth century, a theme that structured his anthology, *Return of the Real*, which opens with an essay on the neo-avant-garde. He compared these artistic returns to similar phenomena in philosophy and psychoanalysis, such as Althusser's revisiting of Marx in the 1960s, or Lacan's re-reading of Freud in the 1950s. In his 1969 essay "What is an author?" Michel Foucault discusses such "returns to the origin" in discursive practices, showing how the reexamination of Freud's texts modifies psychoanalysis itself, just as a reexamination of Marx modifies Marxism.<sup>6</sup> Following Foucault, Foster proposes the term "radical readings" (in the sense of *radix*: root) for the artistic processes of the neo-avant-garde, and posits a connection between such theoretical returns and the post-1945 engagement with the avant-garde of the early twentieth century.

In this context, Picelj's return to Lissitzky should be interpreted in conjunction with the sociopolitical transformations of the first postwar years in Yugoslavia. As is well known, the country held a unique position within the world system of state socialism. Following the Tito-Stalin split of 1948, Yugoslavia embarked on its own path to socialism, often experimenting with novel ideas such as workers' self-management, which engaged directly with the early Soviet legacy of workers' councils (soviets).<sup>7</sup>

When the de-Stalinization of 1956 spread through the Soviet Bloc, Yugoslavia was *already* de-Stalinized. And while the Soviet approach sought to wrest Lenin's thought from what was seen as the perversions of Stalinism, Yugoslavia had already embarked on a *radical* re-reading of the heritage of the Russian Revolution, seeking to conjure a socialist vision that would not repeat the crimes of the Stalinist past. More importantly, de-Stalinization in the Soviet orbit had its limits, as it quickly became evident in 1956 with the violent crackdown on the Hungarian Revolution. In Yugoslavia, on the other hand, reformist Marxist thought continued to flourish through the 1960s, with theorists such as the philosopher Gajo Petrović and the sociologist Rudi Supek articulating trenchant Marxist critiques of the Soviet system.<sup>8</sup> Already during the first half of the 1950s, a sustained interest in Marx's earlier philosophical manuscripts and the problem of alienation put Yugoslav Marxism in the vanguard of the so-called New Left that was about to take shape in Western Europe, deepening the differences with the orthodox, dialectical-materialist Soviet doctrine.<sup>9</sup> By 1965, Petrović, Supek, and others founded the philosophical journal *Praxis*, which became an internationally renowned platform for the exchange between Eastern and Western Marxist perspectives. Until its closing in 1974, *Praxis* published texts by Henri Lefebvre, Jürgen Habermas, and Herbert Marcuse, along with those written by members of the *Praxis* group and other Eastern European Marxists.<sup>10</sup> The *Praxis* school ventured further into the critique of the Soviet system than most other East European Marxisms of the post-1956 period, eventually challenging Leninism itself—something that created significant friction with the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, the country's communist party.

This turn to the roots of Marxism was accompanied by a marked interest in the sources of art under Socialism, especially the Soviet avant-garde, which still remained largely a taboo in the Soviet Union despite de-Stalinization. This engagement with the history of post-revolutionary Soviet art can be seen in a popular Yugoslav exhibition from 1957, which aimed to communicate the history of abstract art to a wider audience. Entitled the *First Didactic Exhibition of Abstract Art*, it consisted of ninety-two cardboard panels, each measuring 70 × 50 cm, with typewritten texts, photographs, and clippings from books and magazines pasted onto them (Figure 9.1).<sup>11</sup> Like enlarged pages of an ad-hoc textbook on the history of modern art, the panels narrated the development of abstraction, from its roots in neo-impressionism to its recent manifestations in the 1950s. The exhibition's format ensured its portability: the panels were easily packed and circulated throughout Yugoslavia, thus allowing the exhibition to be recreated a total of eleven times until 1963. The exhibition followed the familiar succession of "isms" as it had already solidified in Western historiography: it began with neo-impressionism, Van Gogh, and Cézanne, and proceeded through fauvism, cubism, futurism, suprematism, constructivism, dadaism (sic), surrealism, de Stijl, and Bauhaus, reproducing many key works along with brief descriptions and analyses of each movement.

The exhibition did, however, deviate from these established narratives by privileging the utopian practices of the 1920s, in particular constructivism and de Stijl, over earlier movements like fauvism and cubism. In fact, Soviet constructivism spanned ten panels, as opposed to cubism's mere five—a sharp contrast to the relative spaces that these two movements had occupied in Western art-historical narratives of the early postwar period. Significantly, the Yugoslav exhibition included examples such



Figure 9.1 First Didactic Exhibition of Abstract Art, 1957. Installation view. Courtesy of Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb.

as Vladimir Tatlin's counter-reliefs and the 1921 constructivist exhibition at the OBMOKhU (Society of Young Artists), which, although canonical today, were far from common in the art histories of the time, in which constructivism was mostly represented by politically moderate figures, most prominently by Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo.<sup>12</sup>

The *Didactic Exhibition of Abstract Art* emerged from the greater artistic milieu of the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde. Alongside the art historian and critic Josip Depolo, the organizing team also comprised many artists, including Ivan Picelj.<sup>13</sup> Most of them had already been collaborating since the beginning of the decade, when they formed a key neo-avant-garde artist group of postwar Yugoslavia, EXAT-51. An acronym for *Experimentalni Atelier* (Experimental Atelier) and the year of its founding, EXAT-51 was an association of artists, architects, designers, and art critics based in Zagreb, and also included the designer Bernardo Bernardi (1921–85), painters Picelj and Aleksandar Srnec (1924–2010), architects Božidar Rašica (1912–92), Vjenceslav Richter (1917–2002), Zdravko Bregovac (1924–98), Zvonimir Radić (1921–85), and Vladimir Zarahović.<sup>14</sup> The exhibition was thus closely tied to the group's agenda and constituted a culmination of its activities, now transposed into the unconventional medium of a didactic exhibition of photographic reproductions.

The founding of EXAT-51 took place on 7 December 1951, in a plenary meeting of the Association of Applied Artists of Croatia (*Udruženje likovnih umjetnika primijenjenih umjetnosti Hrvatske*). There, Bernardi read the founding manifesto of the group, asserting that EXAT-51's main task was "to focus its artistic activity first on the synthesis of all visual arts, and, secondly, to imbue its work with experimentation,

because without it one cannot imagine any progress in the field of the visual arts.”<sup>15</sup> Such emphasis on progress was widespread in the text, which was clearly positioned as a reaction to the status quo of contemporary Yugoslav art: “By understanding our reality as an aspiration for progress in all forms of human activity, the group believes in the need for struggle against obsolete concepts and modes of production in the visual arts.”<sup>16</sup> Following a Marxist line of analysis, the signatory EXAT-51 members stated that Yugoslav art was disconnected from the actual social and productive relations of the country. They saw their own position as emerging from the artistic debates of their time: “the group considers its founding and its activities to be a tangible positive outcome of the growing battle of ideas, which is a necessary prerequisite for the growth of artistic life in our country.”<sup>17</sup>

The “synthesis of the arts” was a common artistic trope in Western Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere at the time. Advocated by Le Corbusier and discussed in the postwar Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) conferences, it usually referred to the addition of murals, sculptures, and reliefs to modern architecture as a way to “humanize” it and counterbalance its machine aesthetic. The discourse on synthesis was generally apolitical, in accordance with the universalist-humanist, conciliatory tone of much public discourse during the early postwar period. While keenly aware of this version of synthesis, EXAT-51 adapted it to the conditions of socialist Yugoslavia, and envisioned a more politicized, utopian version. The desire of EXAT-51’s members was not simply to integrate art into architecture, but to abolish the categories such as art and architecture altogether, as well as the distinction between “so-called fine and so-called applied art.”<sup>18</sup> They likewise believed that such non-hierarchical synthesis should also take place in “real time and space.” This is key: the synthesis of EXAT-51 was driven by a desire to abandon the space of the gallery and the contrived institutions of art and join “real” life. This is a clearly articulated critique of artistic autonomy that seems to follow the definition of avant-garde as formulated by Bürger more than twenty years later.

However, during the first years of its existence, EXAT-51 was caught in a paradox of desiring “real space” yet being confined to the inherited institutional structures and conventional exhibition spaces that were unavoidably separate from the public space the group sought to influence. The first public manifestation of EXAT-51 following their intervention at the meeting of the Association of Applied Artists was a 1953 exhibition of paintings and drawings by founding members Picelj, Rašica, Srnec, as well as by Vlado Kristl, who had joined the group in the meantime (Figure 9.2). It was held from February 8th to March 4th in the Hall of the Architects’ Society of Croatia in Zagreb, a significant choice of location given the group’s program on the synthesis of the arts.<sup>19</sup> Although a conventional exhibition of two-dimensional abstract works, its presence within an institution that housed professional meetings and debates about architecture, signified the wish for abstract art to partake in such architectural discourse.

This conception of abstract painting as part of a larger, intermedial artistic program was made explicit during the opening, when the architect Vjenceslav Richter, a founding member of EXAT-51, proclaimed that the canvases on display represented *only a fraction* of the group’s activities.<sup>20</sup> To the many negative responses that the exhibition garnered at the time, Richter responded that the paintings should not be seen in isolation from the greater synthesis of the arts to which they aspired. A pamphlet



*Figure 9.2* Exhibition of EXAT-51 Members Ivan Picelj, Božidar Rašica, Aleksandar Srnec, and Vlado Kristl, Zagreb, 1953. Installation view. Courtesy Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb.

issued on the occasion reproduced the 1951 manifesto, thus making the connection to synthesis clear. In fact, in his speech at the opening, Richter criticized the exhibition's failure to adequately convey the synthesis that was to come, although he conceded that this would have exceeded the resources available to the group.<sup>21</sup> The most sympathetic reviewers of the 1953 show, including Ervin Peratoner, perceived Richter's claim through the more familiar category of the decorative arts: "abstract painting is just the most recent variant of decorative painting."<sup>22</sup> This, however, contradicted the basic premise of EXAT-51's program, which was the abolition of the distinction between decorative and fine art altogether.

Richter's rhetorical maneuver sought to defend abstract painting's potential for social efficacy, which was then being questioned in Yugoslavia as in many other parts of the world. Simultaneously, the speech also countered the critical narratives of autonomy and medium-specificity that habitually accompanied abstraction at the time. The abstract picture was thus reconceptualized as a fragment of a greater vision for the transformation of society through the integration of all "plastic forms," for which it temporarily stood. In this conception of "synthesis-to-come," an abstract painting in a gallery was a transitional object, which would wither away as the synthesis of the arts reached "real space." Such conceptualization of both abstraction and the synthesis of the arts is far from its concurrent manifestations in capitalist countries, and much closer to both the utopian socialism of Yugoslavia at the time and the artistic and political culture of the early post-revolutionary period in Russia.

From this point of view, Picelj's *Homage to El Lissitzky* thematizes its status as a transitional object, a fragment of a greater vision. By depicting what is in fact an image of an abstract painting hanging on a wall, Picelj visually suggests that his "work" is not confined by the limits of his canvas. Instead, it is a proposal for a larger application of abstract forms. In this sense, he truly seems to capture the spirit of Lissitzky's works, most notably the latter's Prouns (from *PROekt Utverzhdeniia Novogo*—project for the affirmation of the new). Besides, Lissitzky's own engagement with diverse media, and his background in both art and architecture, made him the ideal paradigmatic figure for EXAT-51's new conception of synthesis.

As an artist-architect, Richter perhaps sought to emulate Lissitzky more than any of his colleagues. His first encounter with the Soviet avant-garde occurred shortly after he began studying architecture at the University of Zagreb in 1937.<sup>23</sup> Despite the significant local avant-garde tradition from the 1920s that had centered around the journal *Zenit* (1921–1922), Richter discovered the work of El Lissitzky through a rather circuitous route: by reading the British trade journal *Commercial Art and Industry*.<sup>24</sup> Otherwise dedicated to design and advertising, the journal occasionally featured aspects of the continental avant-garde, although it was always framed as "commercial art," featured for its potential to drive sales through innovative looks rather than any aesthetic concern.<sup>25</sup> In 1931, an unsigned article recommended Lissitzky's exhibition designs, especially that for the *International Hygiene Exhibition* in Dresden in 1930, as successful models for commercial design, without any mention of their ideological specificity.<sup>26</sup> Richter, who was already active in leftist politics at the time, was attracted to these images for what they really were: examples of art functioning in the service of radical politics. Arguably, the texts in *Commercial Art and Industry* began the de-politicization of the avant-garde that would become widespread in the postwar period; yet they also, ironically, indirectly contributed to the emergence of the politically engaged neo-constructivism of socialist Yugoslavia.

Soon after the Second World War, Richter turned his attention to the design of exhibition pavilions, adapting Lissitzky's example to the new political and artistic conditions of the postwar period. Often in collaboration with future members of EXAT-51 like Picelj, Richter designed many of the official Yugoslav pavilions in several trade fairs, including in Trieste (1947), Stockholm (1949), Vienna (1949), Hannover (1950), Stockholm (1950), and Paris (1950).<sup>27</sup> Inter-medial and inter-disciplinary by definition, exhibition design functioned as both a conduit for the importation of Soviet avant-garde forms and a proving ground for EXAT-51 and other neo-avant-garde groups.

While EXAT-51's activities formally ceased by 1956, the artists and architects involved in the group continued to work towards their vision for a synthesis of the arts, often in collaboration—as seen in the 1957 Didactic Exhibition discussed above. The other prominent project to emerge from this context was the Yugoslav Pavilion for the Brussels World Fair of 1958, designed by Richter and containing a large number of artworks by Picelj, Aleskandar Srncic, and other former EXAT-51 members (Figure 9.3).<sup>28</sup> Widely admired as one of the most successful pavilions at the Brussels fair, the project marked the apex of modernism's espousal by socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>29</sup> It was the crystallization of a quasi-official modernist aesthetic that would come to represent the state at home and abroad for decades to come—often to the consternation of subsequent generations of artists and critics who advocated for conceptual art and other post-medium-specific practices. The association of such "socialist modernism" with technological progress, its lack of readily legible political content, and its



Figure 9.3 Vjenceslav Richter, Yugoslav Pavilion at the Brussels World Fair of 1958. Courtesy of Archives of Yugoslavia, Belgrade.

proximity to Western European and North American forms made it the ideal artistic corollary to Yugoslavia's own geopolitical aspirations during the period.

Yet, during this period, artistic experimentation and state endorsement were not necessarily incompatible. While the realized version of the pavilion is exemplary of the official "socialist modernism" of Yugoslavia, its roots lay in the experimental avant-garde forms of the 1920s. Richter's initial version of the project, which earned him the first prize in a 1956 state competition, entailed what he called "foundations in the air," which involved suspending the entire structure from a large central mast, leaving the building hovering above a shallow pool (Figure 9.4). This dramatic structural solution is reminiscent of early Soviet works, for example Ivan Leonidov's Lenin Institute project from 1927, which could have been known by Richter through reproductions, most likely El Lissitzky's 1930 report on Soviet architecture entitled *Russia: The Reconstruction of Architecture in the Soviet Union (Russland: Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion)*.<sup>30</sup>

The art historian Ješa Denegri, who has published extensively on EXAT-51, has argued that its activities should be seen as a continuation of Soviet constructivism's prewar program.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the group's utopian insistence on abstraction as a means of transforming society seems to affirm this. For EXAT-51, the radical legacy of

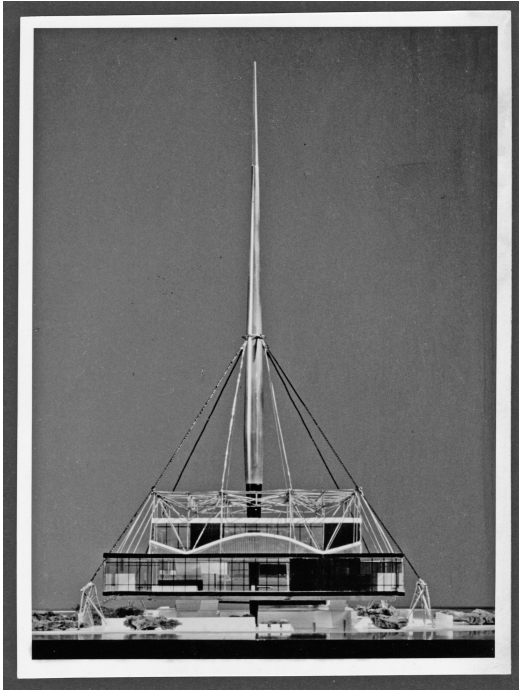


Figure 9.4 Vjenceslav Richter, Model of the winning competition entry for the Yugoslav pavilion at the Brussels World Fair of 1958, 1956. Courtesy of Richter Collection, Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb.

constructivism should not be seen as incompatible with the politically moderate discussions on the synthesis of the arts that took place in Western Europe at the time. Judging from the preference for non-medium-specific or “intermedial” practices, evidenced by the exhibition designs in the illustrated examples from the 1957 Didactic Exhibition, Yugoslav artists and critics seemed to have located a “synthetic” impulse in the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s.

In fact, one of the first post-revolutionary groupings of Soviet artists was the *Zhivskul’ptarkh*, an association of painters, sculptors, and architects led by sculptor Boris Korolev.<sup>32</sup> Its name, an acronym for *zhivopis’* (painting), *skul’ptura* (sculpture), and *arkhitektura* (architecture), is a manifestation of synthesis on a lexical level. Active from 1919 to 1920, it united artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko and Aleksandr Shevchenko, as well as architects including Nikolai Ladovskii, Ilia Golosov, Vladimir Krinskii, and others. Initially named *Sinskul’ptarkh* (synthesis of sculpture and architecture), the group was founded in opposition to Ivan Zholtovskii’s classicism and the academic division between mediums that he represented. Inspired by recent developments in painting and sculpture, *Zhivskul’ptarkh*’s main aim was a renewal of architectural form. Much of the group’s production took the form of cubo-futurist sketches of fantastic buildings. Many of the group’s members, like Rodchenko, would go on to form the better-known Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul’tury, INKhUK) upon *Zhivskul’ptarkh*’s dissolution in 1920 and would become



central figures in Soviet constructivism. This is not to suggest that the members of EXAT-51 were fully aware of Zhivskul'ptarkh; the Soviet group remained largely obscure until Selim Khan-Magomedov published a few articles on it in the 1980s and a monograph in 1993.<sup>33</sup> Still, the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde appears to have had better knowledge and understanding of the Soviet avant-garde than their Western European colleagues at the time.

By contrast, during the 1950s constructivism was often perceived in Western countries (such as Britain and the United States) as a rather apolitical form of art, as represented by the brothers Pevsner and Gabo. Benjamin Buchloh has named this “Cold War constructivism,” demonstrating how it aestheticized constructivist forms, voiding them of their political and utopian aspirations and thus adapting them for the Western culture industry.<sup>34</sup> Gabo’s 1957 public sculpture outside of the Bijenkorf department store in Rotterdam is an apt illustration: constructivism’s experimental forms were transformed into yet another polished metal sculpture, employed to decorate a site of conspicuous consumption (Figure 9.5). It was because of such widespread (mis-)conceptions of constructivism in the 1950s that the Soviet avant-garde had to be “rediscovered” in the 1960s, shifting the emphasis away from gallery-bound abstract objects like those produced by Gabo and Pevsner and towards the more ephemeral and openly political works of the Soviet 1920s.

EXAT-51’s neo-constructivism is therefore a unique case, distinct from the neo-constructivism then current in the West. As evidenced by the references to utopian



*Figure 9.5* Naum Gabo, *Untitled sculpture* in front of the Bijenkorf department store, Rotterdam, 1957. Photograph © Ary Groeneveld. Courtesy of Stadsarchief Rotterdam.

politics in the group's manifesto and writings, the activities of EXAT-51 fit neither the critical framework on the neo-avant-garde as established by Bürger, nor its revisions by Buchloh, Foster, and others. Besides, Bürger's work explicitly refers to "bourgeois society" (*bürgerliche Gessellschaft*), a term that is repeated throughout. While the term itself is a trope that reveals Bürger's own Marxist roots, it also serves as a caveat for the text's generalizations: it does not aspire to refer to all artistic practices indiscriminately, but only to those that developed under Western, liberal-democratic, capitalist societies. This specificity was lost through the translation of Bürger's text into English and the passage from the Marxist 1970s in Germany to the post-modern 1980s in the United States; the neo-avant-garde of bourgeois society became the neo-avant-garde *tout court*.

This chapter does not argue for a new socialist neo-avant-garde that is separate or contrary to the well-known, bourgeois neo-avant-garde described by the aforementioned authors. Instead, it challenges the geopolitical assumptions latent behind the concept of the neo-avant-garde and calls for its expansion. In fact, the contact and friction between the bourgeois and socialist models of the neo-avant-garde became evident upon their encounter in the "real space" of the Brussels World Fair of 1958, where Richter's pavilion was realized. After the commissioning authorities raised concerns about the feasibility and safety of the initial project's "foundations in the air," Richter proposed a more conventional structure on slender supports that, recessing from the façade, helped preserve some of the sense of levitation of the initial project. Now scrapped from the design, the central mast was converted into an abstract welded sculpture that stood tall near the entrance to the pavilion (Figure 9.3). It consisted of interlocking steel arches held together with tensile cables, in a repetitive arrangement that gave the impression of infinity. This was emphasized even further by the way an earlier version of the sculpture was photographed by Yugoslav photographer Tošo Dabac: obliquely from below so that it appeared to extend to the sky (Figure 9.6). Shown with workers climbing on it in the process of building, it formed a potent image of a socialist country in construction. Its debt to the Soviet avant-garde is evident, not only in its abstraction and emphasis on its industrial materials, but also in the photograph's references to the compositions of Aleksandr Rodchenko.

The sculpture thus became an after-image of both the initial project for the pavilion and the Soviet avant-garde that had influenced it. Entitled *Nada* ("Hope"), Richter's sculpture was a symbol for the utopianism of his generation. Yet *Nada* was also the name of Richter's wife (a detail often noted today), which leads to an expressionist interpretation of the work, as a subjective exercise in abstract form.<sup>35</sup> Besides, this was neither art-as-architecture, nor a complete fusion of the two, as Richter had envisioned earlier during his EXAT-51 years. Rather, it was a metal sculpture standing in front of a modernist building, a cliché of the period not unlike those produced by the "Cold War constructivists" Pevsner and Gabo.<sup>36</sup> The slender sculpture thus oscillated between two neo-avant-garde positions: on the one hand, the revival of constructivist forms as a utopian proposition, while on the other, the taming of its politics in order to converge with the capitalist West. Arguably, this complex position reflects Yugoslavia's own liminality within the world order of the Cold War: socialist yet non-aligned, part of the Western community, yet distinct from it.

Works such as *Homage to El Lissitzky* and *Nada* challenge the prevailing accounts of the neo-avant-garde. They reveal that this significant body of writing has thus far precluded a historiographical possibility for neo-avant-gardes that existed outside of



*Figure 9.6* Workers constructing a preliminary mockup of Vjenceslav Richter's *Nada* in Zagreb, 1958. Photograph © Tošo Dabac. Courtesy of Tošo Dabac Archive, City of Zagreb / Muzej Suverene Umjetnosti, Zagreb.

Western liberal-democratic contexts, among them a *socialist* neo-avant-garde, which not only repeated the forms of the historical avant-garde, but also strove to resume its utopian aspirations. Following Foucault, it is possible to suggest that EXAT-51's reception of constructivism sought to change it, to remove it from the margins of Soviet art (in which it had existed since the late 1920s) and to reclaim it as the best model for future artistic production under state socialism in its post-Stalinist form.

Despite their disagreements, Bürger, Buchloh, Foster, and others involved in discussions of the neo-avant-garde have thus far seemed to agree in their historical interpretations of the culture of the 1950s and early 1960s as a time of consumption, moderate politics, and capitalist expansion. In these narrowly viewed historical conditions, any avant-garde forms are doomed to be subsumed by the all-encompassing

culture industry. Accordingly, 1968 functions as both a horizon of revolutionary hope and a moment of reckoning for the failures and successes of the avant-garde project. It is telling that, in a 2010 article addressing some of his critics, Bürger inscribed his *Theorie der Avantgarde* into the post-1968 climate of disenchantment. Strikingly, he also insisted on the historicity of his claims on the neo-avant-garde, arguing that rupture, one of the key strategies of the interwar avant-gardes, had to be expunged after 1945 because it had become too associated with fascism.<sup>37</sup> Yet, for many parts of the world outside of Western Europe and North America, the same period was replete with ruptures: for places like Cuba, Hungary, Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, Ghana, and indeed Yugoslavia, it was a time of revolution, upheaval, and experimentation with new visions of the future. When artists in these contexts chose to converse with avant-garde precedents, they produced work that, more often than not, cannot be addressed by the theories that have served the field for decades, often written from restricted viewpoints that are still not fully declared.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, the discussion on Lissitzky's use of axonometry in order to unsettle the viewer from their traditionally fixed, Cartesian viewpoint, with the aim of producing a new, revolutionary subject, in Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility." *Art in America* (April 1988): 161–181.
- 2 Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974); translated into English as *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- 3 For an anthology of contemporary responses to Bürger in Germany, see W. Martin Lüdke, ed., *Theorie der Avantgarde: Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976).
- 4 Benjamin Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," *Art in America* 72 (Nov. 1984): 20.
- 5 Hal Foster, "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?" in *Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996): 1–32; previously published in a slightly different form as "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October* 70, *The Duchamp Effect* (Autumn, 1994): 5–32.
- 6 Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977): 113–138.
- 7 For a Yugoslav report, see Drago Gorupić and Ivan Paj, *Workers' Self-Management in Yugoslav Undertakings* (Zagreb: Ekonomski Institut, 1970). See also Predrag Vranicki, "The Theoretical Foundation for the Idea of Self-Management," in *Self-Governing Socialism: A Reader, vol. 1: Historical Development and Political Philosophy*, ed. Branko Horvat, Mihailo Marković, and Rudi Supek (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press), 454–466.
- 8 See Oskar Gruenwald, *The Yugoslav Search for Man: Marxist Humanism in Contemporary Yugoslavia* (South Hadley, MA: J.F. Bergin, 1983); for a comparison of the Polish and Yugoslav strands of Marxist Humanism, see James H. Satterwhite, *Varieties of Marxist Humanism: Philosophical Revision in Postwar Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).
- 9 For more on the discourse on alienation in Yugoslavia, see Branislav Jakovljevic, *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 83–86 and passim.
- 10 For an overview of the *Praxis* journal in English see Gerson S. Sher, *Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977); also, see the anthology of selected texts published in *Praxis: Gerson S. Sher, Marxist Humanism and Praxis* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1978).
- 11 The panels have been preserved and are currently held in the archives of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. They were recently exhibited again in the 2012 exhibition

- Socialism and Modernity*. See Ljiljana Kolečnik, “Conflicting Visions of Modernity and the Post-war Modern Art,” in *Socialism and Modernity: Art, Culture, Politics: 1950–1974*, ed. Ljiljana Kolečnik (Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art; Institute of Art History, 2012), 116–119. For a contemporary reappraisal of the exhibition, see the essay by the Croatian artists’ collective What, How, and for Whom, “Didactic Exhibition on Abstract Art,” in *Political Practices of (post-) Yugoslav Art: RETROSPECTIVE 01*, ed. Jelena Vesić and Prelom Kolektiv (Belgrade: Museum of 25th of May, 2010): 64–79.
- 12 See Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 1–6 and 225–238; Hal Foster, “Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism,” in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914–1932*, eds. Richard Adams and Milena Kalinovska (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1990): 241–253.
- 13 Other members of the team, listed on the first panel, included critics Radoslav Putar and Tihana Ravelić, architects Vjenceslav Richter and Neven Šegvić, painter Edo Kovačević, and the Gallery’s manager Vesna Barbić.
- 14 The painter (and later, experimental filmmaker) Vlado Kristl would join shortly thereafter. For more on EXAT-51, see: Ješa Denegri and Želimir Košćević, *Exat 51: 1951–1956* (Zagreb: Centar za kulturnu djelatnost; Galeria Nova, 1979); Jerko Denegri, *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2000); Ješa Denegri, “Inside or outside ‘Socialist Modernism’? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene, 1950–1970,” in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991* ed. Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003): 178–183; Katia Baudin, Tihomir Milovac, eds. *EXAT-51: Synthese der Künste im Jugoslawien der Nachkriegszeit / EXAT-51: Synthesis of the Arts in Post-War Yugoslavia*, exhibition catalogue, Kunstmuseen Krefeld (Dortmund: Verlag Kettler, 2017).
- 15 The manifesto was reproduced in the pamphlet *EXAT 51: Experimentalni atelier*, published on the occasion of an exhibition of Kristl, Picelj, Rašica and Srnc at the Gallery of the Graphic Collective in Belgrade (29 March–5 April 1953). An English translation of the manifesto has been published in *Impossible Histories*, 539.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.* It is important to note here that in the Western version of synthesis, as formulated by Le Corbusier, the architect was to remain the leader of any collaboration, thus maintaining an essentially hierarchical vision.
- 19 The exhibition was later shown at the Gallery of the Graphic Collective in Belgrade (29 March 29–5 April 5 1953). See Kolečnik, “Conflicting Visions of Modernity and the Post-war Modern Art,” 126.
- 20 Vjenceslav Richter, interview with Želimir Košćević, cited in Košćević, *ibid.*, 44. Ješa Denegri has interpreted the relatively small output of paintings by the group during the early 1950s as an indication that EXAT-51 members did not think that painting’s exclusive purpose was exhibition. Denegri, *ibid.*, 117.
- 21 Košćević, *ibid.*, 47.
- 22 Radio review of the exhibition by Ervin Peratoner, broadcast by Radio Zagreb on April 19, 1953, cited by Košćević, *ibid.*, 46. The sociologist and future member of the Praxis group, Rudi Supek, also interpreted abstract (mostly gestural strands, such as Abstract Expressionism and *informel*), as decorative at the time. See Rudi Supek, “The Confusion over Abstract Expressionism,” in *Croatian Art Criticism of the 1950s: Selected Essays*, 433–446.
- 23 See the biographical notes in: Vera Horvat-Pintarić, *Vjenceslav Richter* (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1970); Marijan Susovski, ed., *Richter Collection: The Vjenceslav Richter and Nada Kaeš-Richter Donation to the City of Zagreb* (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2003).
- 24 *Zenit* was edited by Ljubomir Micić and included contributions by Vladimir Mayakovsky, El Lissitzky, Vladimir Tatlin, Kazimir Malevich, Theo Van Doesburg, Karel Teige, and others. For more on *Zenit* and its impact on Yugoslav art, see Djurić and Šuvaković, eds., *Impossible Histories*.

- 25 The Bauhaus in Dessau was thus presented as a “University of Commercial Art” in a short feature: Edith Suschitzky, “A University of Commercial Art,” *Commercial Art* 10 (1931): 113–114.
- 26 “Display that Has Dynamic Force: Exhibition Rooms Designed by El Lissitzky,” *Commercial Art* 10 (1931): 21–26. A similar approach can be seen in other articles engaging with avant-garde art, such as Jan Tschichold, “The Composite Photograph and its Place in Advertising,” *Commercial Art* 9 (1930): 237–249, which reproduces photomontages by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, and Gustav Klutssis, again interpreted apolitically through the prism of advertising.
- 27 On Lissitzky’s influence of Richter’s exhibition designs, see Denegri, “EXAT-51,” 96–97. For a complete list of Richter’s pavilions, see Jasna Galjer, *Architecture for a More Humane World: Vjenceslav Richter’s Expo 58 Yugoslav Pavilion* (Zagreb: Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, 2011), 14.
- 28 On the Yugoslav pavilion, see Jasna Galjer, *Expo 58 and the Yugoslav pavilion by Vjenceslav Richter* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2009); Vladimir Kulić, “An Avant-Garde Architecture for an Avant-Garde Socialism: Yugoslavia at Expo ’58,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, no. 1 (January 2012): 170; Kulić, “Between Wars, Between Blocs: Yugoslavia at Expo 58,” in *Architecture of Great Expositions 1937–1959: Messages of Peace, Images of War*, ed. Rika Devos, Alexander Ortenberg, and Vladimir Paperny (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate 2015), 179–194; Mil De Kooning, “La Navette spatiale de Vjenceslav Richter: Le pavillon yougoslave,” in *L’architecture moderne à l’Expo 58: “Pour un monde plus humain,”* ed. Rika Devos and Mil De Kooning (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2006), 288–305.
- 29 On modernism’s status in postwar Yugoslavia, see Nevenka Stankovic, “The Case of Exploited Modernism: How Yugoslav Communists Used the Idea of Modern Art to Promote Political Agendas,” *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (April 2006): 151–159.
- 30 El Lissitzky, *Russland: Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion* (Vienna: Wien, A. Schroll & Co., 1930).
- 31 See Denegri, *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa*.
- 32 The most extensive monograph on the group is Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Zhivskul’ptarkh: Pervaia tvorcheskaia organizatsiia sovetskogo arkhitekturnogo avangarda* (Moscow: Architectura, 1993). See also Anatolii Strigalev, “The Art of the Constructivists: From Exhibition to Exhibition, 1914–1932,” in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914–1932* (Rizzoli: 1990): 28–31.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Benjamin Buchloh, “Cold War Constructivism,” in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990): 84–112.
- 35 See, for example, *Zbirka Richter*.
- 36 Another example is Pevsner’s sculpture for the General Motors campus in Warren, Michigan, which was also reproduced in the 1957 Didactic Exhibition of Abstract Art.
- 37 Peter Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 4: 695–715.

# 10 The Troubled Public Sphere

## Understanding the Art Scene in Socialist Hungary

*Katalin Cseh-Varga*

Between April 10 and 12, 1980, a symposium on the culture of the 1970s took place at the Budapest-based semi-official “storage basin” of local contemporary art, the Club of Young Artists (Fiatal Művészek Klubja). This retrospective reflection on the tendencies in the arts, cultural life, historiography, politics, and ideology in Hungary, was a rather delicate matter in the circles of the Hungarian Socialist Worker’s Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt or MSZMP). The event was in fact almost banned—and some of the intended participants had followed the advice not to attend the conference.<sup>1</sup> One of the speakers, Anna Wessely, gave an insightful paper on the stratification of culture: its separation into diverse groups, such as counter-culture and subculture. It was no coincidence that these social entities were addressed in a detailed cultural investigation devoted to the entire 1970s decade, since group culture, and a specific public sphere attached to it, flourished during that period. According to Wessely, counter-cultures are social entities of denial and renewal.<sup>2</sup> They intend to transform political institutional structures in order to realize total hegemony. Though counter-cultures borrow chosen characteristics of subcultures, they are mostly unlike them, since subcultures are integrated within a dominant culture and are only active within its boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Only in 1989–1990 did counter-culture(s) take over power and had the capacity to revolutionize aspects of social, cultural, political and public life; until then, besides MSZMP’s rule, various subcultures existed in late socialist Hungary. Wessely’s paper is relevant because on the one hand, it directs our attention to the importance of group culture in shaping attitudes, actions, and intellectual thought, and on the other, it is proof of how discourses of the time were established and on which platforms they were debated. It is productive to see both how counter-culture/subculture was diversifying the Kádarian public sphere, implementing areas of “independent” or partly dependent communication and action, and, again, how counter-culture was theorized in a public sphere different from socialist domination.

The Stalinist period in Hungary ended following the death of the Soviet ruler in 1953. Shortly after, in 1956, there was an attempt to revolutionize socialism in Hungary and to adapt it to national goals, but this revolution was defeated, and a new era began with the rule of János Kádár (1912–1989). From the mid-1960s onwards, the essence of Kádár’s regime was to arrange a separate peace with Hungarian citizens: political inactivism and the silencing of public voices would be rewarded with moderate social and economic stability. Those who accepted these rules could make the most out of the new dictatorship. Internal and external affairs, such as the tragic end of the 1968 Prague Spring, however, resulted in the constant modification of the set of rules, which either supported, tolerated, or banned political and cultural activities. Each action was

observed by a bureaucratized control apparatus. The 1960s and 1970s were a period of socialism in which dissent regularly confronted a powerful adversary. The 1980s belonged more to the preparatory phase for a civil society. Because the history of the Kádár regime was characterized by the previously mentioned oscillation between restrictions and permissions, it stands both for the completeness and incompleteness of a controlled public sphere. The microhistories that are discussed in this chapter, appeared all over the former Eastern Bloc, with their own local specificities.

Even before 1980 there was a certain interest in uncovering domestic and international social layers that did not adhere to mainstream culture and public sphere in Hungary. The public sphere, as a discursive arena of communication and action accessible to anyone, did not emerge in its pure form under socialist rule. A 1976 issue of the literary journal *Helikon* was almost completely devoted to the subject of deviating fields of living, acting, and communicating in the global context and in Soviet-type systems, such as Hungary. The issue contained a number of articles dealing with the mostly American phenomenon of counter-culture. For example, the issue included excerpts from Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), as well as an article on underground art written by László Beke, book reviews of Abbie Hoffman's *Revolution for the Hell of It* (1968) and Jerry Rubin's *DO IT! Scenarios of the Revolution* (1970), both authored by Tibor Hajas.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that, given the fact that *Helikon* was a state-funded periodical, all contributions were meant to serve as demonstrations of how many aberrations were implicit in capitalist societies. At the same time, however, this special issue served as an information register for those trying to understand the position of dissent in Kádárist Hungary and as a sourcebook to fuel intellectual discussion. Although Roszak's piece, for instance, centered on the factors and intellectuals influencing the unfolding of counter culture in the United States, it could have acted as inspiration to the youth beyond the Iron Curtain on how to take on the attitudes of communicating and mocking the "Great Refusal."<sup>5</sup> Generational antagonism could have existed in both geopolitical areas, but, the Hungarian counter-culture did not rebel against the capitalist, industrial technocracy. It would be daring to call the used strategies of system-denial and criticism a "revolt." Instead, on a variety of levels—the everyday, intellectual, political, and artistic life—one finds in Hungary semi-autonomous zones of a so-called *second public sphere*, where a bearable existence was possible despite obsessions with control, regulations, and bureaucracy. *Helikon's* issue represents such a zone of autonomy in the niches of a party-run journal. It was a forum for discussion of the international phenomena of parallel cultures and the various ways of relating them to socialist culture and art.

The decade of rising counter-culture, the 1960s, was about the design of theory, compared to the 1970s, which were more focused on pragmatism and facts: society became skeptical about each attempt of radical renewal and found its peace with existing conditions.<sup>6</sup> In Hungary, this shift meant that the 1968 generation turned its back on the utopian ideals of changing society and "defined the private sphere as the territory of revolution"—this is how Ákos Szilágyi has summed up the transformations in public attitudes during Kádárism.<sup>7</sup> Yet, ambitions to reform social and cultural structures, including those of the "monolithic" public sphere, were prevented by the existing politics of socialism.

Between 1965 and 1975, János Kádár consolidated his post-1956 regime, transforming it from a Stalinist system into a soft-dictatorship with economic and cultural compliancy.<sup>8</sup> Kádár's innovation, and what became known as Kádárism, was the



centralized state power's crossover into an overall mixture of repression and concession.<sup>9</sup> However, the unrealized utopias of 1968 overshadowed the aura of the thaw and led to disillusionment. Though a democratization of the Soviet-type system was not an option, the public sphere, nevertheless, clearly diversified, and parallel cultures appeared, forming a comprehensive second public sphere. This new zone was home to avant-gardist art that was not in line with MSZMP's cultural policy guidelines.<sup>10</sup> Living and creating under conditions that sometimes tolerated, and sometimes banned, nonconformist expression, were central to system-inherent paradoxes. The oscillation between "winking-at and oppressing," as driven by policy-making and personal interests, determined the characteristics of the *troubled public sphere* and the art produced within it.<sup>11</sup> The field of (semi-)autonomous communication and action, symptomatic of the second public sphere, substituted the functions of a civil society that had been repressed by the totalizing beliefs of the "dictatorship over needs."<sup>12</sup> The avant-gardist art that was created within these oscillations is proof that the totalization of the public sphere was never a complete success.

This second public sphere was not only a *condition* of Hungarian art and culture during late socialism, but a *narrative* and a *discourse* that emerged in the 1970s and was further developed in the 1980s. It was not only the special issue of *Helikon* that served as evidence that counter-culture and related social entities of dissent were systematically investigated. There were other periodicals. For example, the 1988 spring and summer joint edition of the journal *Social Research* brought into focus for its international readership alternative social models from within the Eastern Bloc. The second public sphere—and this was possibly the hope of the issue's editor Arien Mack—offered a different perspective on Eastern and Central Europe than simply that of "deformed socialism."<sup>13</sup> For one, the contributing text of Elemér Hankiss shed light on the complex social layers with the potential to transform Kádárist Hungary. Although rather utopian, Hankiss claimed that "[...] the dominant culture [is] unable to integrate [subcultures, counter cultures, alternative cultures] as alien elements in the [social body] and regards them as vehicles of a more or less dangerous antiparadigm."<sup>14</sup> His essay highlighted then the existence of diverse public spheres in Hungary's dictatorship and stimulated discourse-making, which had been the (indirect) purpose of contemporary international scholarship.

Hungarian art of the 1960s and 1970s was subject to complex hierarchical constellations, both top-down and bottom-up, and yet was simultaneously responsive to an understanding audience under specific conditions. Through its flexible and adaptive theoretical framework, an investigation of the second public sphere is then ideal for reflecting on the paradoxical context of the permissive-repressive regime as well as the circumstances of art production, distribution, and reception. It allows for a multiperspectival view of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, one that does not reduce it to a few heroic and antagonistic features, or to mere retrospectivism.

Indeed, the present essay introduces the very notion of the second public sphere as a fruitful narrative for understanding Hungarian art in the Kádár era. Following an overview of different approaches to defining the second public sphere, this chapter investigates four case studies that underline the importance of rethinking traditional, stereotypical concepts of parallel and counter-culture. The first two case studies will focus on the influence of cultural politics in the formation of a nonobedient public sphere, as seen at the 1966 and 1978 exhibitions of the Studio of Young Artists (Fiatal Képzőművészek Stúdiója). Then, two related examples of IPARTERV's

exhibitions will be explored. First Tamás Szentjóby's action entitled *Action-Reading* (Olvasni. Akció-Felolvasás) that occurred shortly before IPARTERV's 1968 exhibition; followed by Dr. László Végh's intuitive action at the 1969 IPARTERV show. The latter two case studies demonstrate the creative modes of reaction to the working and living conditions of artists during Kádárism. All four examples illustrate the overlapping of official and unofficial spheres of communication and action.

The works to be discussed belonged to a nonrealist and a nonnaturalist artistic tradition, the position of which was both specific and also a topic of ideological and official aesthetic debate. According to Éva Forgács, "[the contemporary art of the 1970s and 1980s] unfolded in the grey area that was called, to use the hard to translate German term, the *zweite Öffentlichkeit*, or the second, shady, non-official zone of public visibility."<sup>15</sup> Already in the second half of the 1960s, progression and experiment occurred in an environment of limited possibilities in a *public sphere without a (real) public sphere*, although resulting in unexpected potentials of creativity.<sup>16</sup> The Hungarian neo-avant-gardes defined themselves as radical, experimental, and as representatives of the most current art tendencies, all of which implies self-consciousness. József Havasréti identifies the neo-avant-gardist's feeling of authenticity and mission-consciousness as necessary to survival under a bureaucratized state order.<sup>17</sup> These artists followed the model of a *Lebenskunstwerk*, in which the artist identifies with the object of creation—the underground aimed to merge thinking and acting.<sup>18</sup> Thus, and this is one of the main arguments of this chapter, the understanding of any art production with its origin in the second public sphere cannot be separated from an investigation of a semi-autonomous terrain of an unconventional lifestyle, communication, and action.

In the 1970s, thinking about the second public sphere found fruitful ground. Those who embraced intellectual dissent began to further theorize their position, constraints, and possibilities. One of the most detailed examinations of how the layers of communication, action and living became more complicated during Kádárism is Elemér Hankiss' *East European Alternatives* (*Kelet-európai alternatívák*, 1989; published in English in 1990). Hankiss' main question is how a social protagonist's scope of action and communication had widened or narrowed since Soviet forces had overtaken power in Hungary in 1945. He mostly deals with factors influencing individuals' as well as groups' freedom.<sup>19</sup> Hankiss not only presents his opinion on these phenomena, but lists a variety of research outcomes that have dealt with the hidden, "second" sphere of society, both in Hungary and in other countries of the bloc. In turn, focusing mostly on literature, in *Velvet Prison* (*A cenzúra esztétikája*, 1986; translated to English in 1987), Miklós Haraszti, outlines how effective "directed culture" ("irányított kultúra") was in pushing authors to the margins of a closed culture—meaning that different kinds of the second public sphere could only exist *within* an authoritarian order and not outside of it as rebellious counter-cultures.<sup>20</sup> In his pessimistically tempered book, Haraszti envisions censorship as an overwhelming authority, yet one that leaves some space for the appearance of uncensored content in the shape of a "public sphere located between the lines."<sup>21</sup> The message of dissent was rarely transmitted in a straightforward manner; it mostly demanded decipherment. Haraszti's book is about not only how dependent relations of the public sphere functioned, but also which strategic rules needed to be observed in order for an artist to exist in the aesthetic dictatorship of Hungary.<sup>22</sup>

Although at first glance the division of the public sphere into a first and a second suggests a simple dualism, in actuality it actively challenges the dichotomy of Cold

War thinking. In the footsteps of György Konrád, who suggested implementing “cultural criticism of the most intensive kind” as a way of reaching polycentrism, the second public sphere allows for observation from multiple viewpoints and questioning of the self-evident contrast between barbarian bureaucrats and courageous critics.<sup>23</sup> Konrád was one of the first to present the idea of the second public sphere abroad. In 1979, the German daily newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* published an interview with him about his home country. Here he explained that in Hungary there was dissent which was mostly located in the second public sphere (“zweite Öffentlichkeit”). He considered this second public sphere as unofficial and the first public sphere as the sphere where communication and action needed to take place: “The two of them are tied to each other as communicating containers. The one can extend the other. The latter [the second public sphere] can extend the previous one. If a second public sphere exists, the possibilities of the first public sphere can expand.”<sup>24</sup> Konrád directs our attention to the interlocking aspects and dependency of the public spheres’ different layers. Just like Haraszti, he emphasizes that separation between the two is almost impossible, and the very nature of parallel cultures can only be grasped by keeping in mind the soft dictatorship’s cultural, social, and political coordinates.

The same idea comes up in Václav Havel’s short paper “Six Notes on Culture” (1984), which divides socialist culture into “official” and “parallel,” or “unofficial.” A parallel culture existed within state structures, although it was denied the use of state media, and instead constructed semi-independent communication channels and strategies. For Havel, parallel culture, which is close to what I call the second public sphere, should never be viewed as uniform, neither in certain periods nor in geopolitical regions.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note that most theorization of the second public sphere in Hungary was supposedly inspired by Czechoslovak dissident intellectuals. Hankiss, for instance, knew about their concepts for social alternatives and summarized most of them in *East European Alternatives*. Two authors and their ideas should be mentioned here: Ivan M. Jirous’ “second culture” and Václav Benda’s “parallel polis.” Jirous envisioned a complete dissolving of the first and second culture’s interdependence: for him, autonomy, self-organization, and a caring collective were key to realize a better society and a real public sphere.<sup>26</sup> His perception was rather a vision than a description of reality. He turned the hopes of the existing underground into a utopia, which in part explains the positive myth-construction connected to the present-day historiography of the second public sphere. In contrast, Benda’s “parallel polis” was a more practical approach towards the allotment of the second public sphere. Benda, again, sees the parallel polis as an integrated unit of the Soviet system, that is, one that is not directed explicitly against authoritarianism. As a substitution for a comprehensive public sphere, it fulfills all functions missing from official culture.<sup>27</sup> In the words of Barbara J. Falk, the parallel polis “[...] was both refuge from ‘violence’ of the party state, as well as crucible of nonviolent resistance, where of pluralism and tolerance—often in the guise of a Bohemian, countercultural lifestyle—were cultivated.”<sup>28</sup> To contemporaries, both intellectuals and artists, there existed a public sphere that widened their scope of creative freedom and served as a substitute for a real public sphere. Beyond a heroic view of dissent, these political and cultural players still acted within the framework of the Kádár regime. They invented strategies to defeat obedience and dependency.

These particular understandings of the condition of the second public sphere and ideas about discursively overcoming the limitations imbedded in a state socialist regime indicate that access to public discussion was not guaranteed in Kádárist Hungary. It is the indefinite flow and exchange of information between all social groups that is key to a Habermasian public sphere.<sup>29</sup> Although many criticized Habermas and proposed instead arguments for multiple public spheres or an anti-bourgeois model, he still remains the defining voice in studies on almost any kind of public sphere.<sup>30</sup> However, for analyzing Soviet-type dictatorships' field of communication and action, his liberal notion of the public sphere is not adequate to describe the mechanisms of publicity constitution there and then.<sup>31</sup> Ferenc Fehér and Ágnes Heller were aware that the Habermasian public sphere was far from lived and practiced in "goulash communism," when in 1987 they considered his model of "undistorted communication" and the "ideal speech situation" for their re-conception of the socialist public sphere. Fehér and Heller desired/hoped for a public sphere where "[...] not only [...] the 'interchangeability of dialogue-roles' [becomes real], but also [...] the equality of the 'speakers' as active people and excludes 'onesidedly binding norms'."<sup>32</sup> Based on Habermasian principles, they envisioned a sphere of "verbal acts" in "both institutionalized and spontaneous forms."<sup>33</sup>

It is not a surprise that intellectuals of the region designed ideals and fabricated masterplans on how to construct a terrain for free dialogue and action, since access to the public sphere as a democratic and basic human right was violated by state socialist rule. In the present chapter, I build on preceding theorists and define the public sphere as a discursive field of an existing (sometimes nonexistent) social, economic, political, cultural, and aesthetic communication, as well as action, the reality of which remains to be formed by power constellations. The second public sphere then becomes a way to observe and examine dependency within the public sphere and the alternative forms of communication and action to counteract it.<sup>34</sup> The totalization of Soviet-type systems, despite all attempts, was never complete, and this explains the emergence of another complex layer of public discourse.

I would like to propose here a more nuanced definition of the second public sphere and to show how it is productive for constructing a narrative of the Hungarian avant-garde art of the 1960s and 1970s. The second public sphere is a pluralistic, stratified pool of communication, action, knowledge, and artifact production that varies historically and geopolitically. As an umbrella term, it embraces both contradictory and conflicting elements and is therefore ideal in creating an understanding of the paradoxical features of Kádárian socialism. In the second public sphere, individuals' and groups' creative action strategies for autonomy become manifest—through its looking glass, one can retrace what reactions the condition of constant restrictions and tolerations evoked in artists. The flexible format of parallel culture is due to the inability of institutionalizing its features, and yet it is an integral part of official doctrines, often oscillating between system-non-conformism and state support. This explains, for example, how party-funded locations were often home to neo-avant-garde tendencies. The notion of the second public sphere, however, never existed in a pure, homogeneous form of clear-cut antagonisms. In many cases, the second public sphere cannot be separated from the subjective histories of individuals, their conflicts, as well as the archaic knowledge of ambivalent relations between actors. As a result, its discourse needs to be adaptive.<sup>35</sup>

Archival research and oral historical sources have shown that during late socialism, Hungarian artists created an autonomous atmosphere of production, action, exchange, and perception, which cannot be separated from one another and can only be grasped through an analysis of the second public sphere. The following case studies reveal the possibilities and the scope of action that avant-garde artists deployed to overcome the limitations of state-supported aesthetics. The artworks and art shows were part of a self-made culture and lifestyle that existed parallel to the first public sphere. Sometimes this art was openly critical, while at other times it was reticent in its criticism; in certain instances, it completely reinvented socialist infrastructure.

The Studio of Young Artists, or simply Studio, was the youth section of the Foundation for Fine Arts Fund (Képzőművészeti Alap), a financial organization founded in 1958. Its aim was to support fresh graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts by providing scholarships, studios, and funding, as well as exhibition opportunities. The Studio held annual shows, for which a specialist jury selected the artworks to be included.<sup>36</sup> Two rather exceptional shows, one in 1966 and the other in 1978, demonstrate how exhibitions could serve as temporary places for an accessible, free public sphere. In the case of the 1966 Studio exhibition, uncertainties in cultural politics caused a gap within the first public sphere and, on realizing this, were quickly closed. By contrast, in 1978, slow adaptation to relaxing cultural politics bore fruit, albeit under controlled circumstances.

In 1966, there was no selection committee involved in the organization of the Studio's annual exhibition. This was probably the consequence of internal debates among core Party ideologues to whom socialist realism was the "trademark" of the past hardliner Stalinist regime that had ended in 1953. Around the mid-1960s the guidelines for a new progressive socialist art in Hungary had still not been defined. Accordingly, the status of abstract art was similarly unknown. As Mónika Zombori argues, this explains why "the most prevailing tendencies, styles" were included in the show.<sup>37</sup> It was exceptional: a member of the directory board of the Studio pressed charges against another member (namely the president of the institution, István Bencsik) on account of the latter's support of bourgeois art. In reality, the 1966 exhibition was the outcome of strategic negotiations between Bencsik and the head ideologue of cultural politics, György Aczél. Bencsik's aim was to widen the scope of artistic freedom, which was paving the way for the adaptation and revision of modern Western styles in Hungary.<sup>38</sup> As a result, typically unwelcomed examples of abstract and non-figurative works were included, opening up a forum for the second public sphere (Figure 10.1). Because the exhibited works did not fulfill the expectations of a socially conscious art and the exhibition resulted in the first public appearance of abstract art in nine years, supporters of the neo-avant-garde became enthusiastic and opened up discussions in the art press. For László Beke, for instance, this event marked the cornerstone of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. The 1966 Studio exhibition was one of the most important forerunners of the IPARTERV-shows, which are registered as foundational for the neo-avant-garde.<sup>39</sup>

Between 1966 and 1973 islands of parallel culture such as happenings were constantly popping up, but due to uncertainties of how to deal with these nontraditional genres, they were typically followed by almost complete, systematic repression. The period of strict prohibition slowly loosened up during the mid-1970s.<sup>40</sup> In the end, for example, the 1978 Studio show took place at the prestigious venue of the Hungarian National Gallery. Thanks to a new selection method, which was based on individual



Figure 10.1 Visitors at the Studio of Young Artists 6th nation-wide exhibition at the Ernst Museum (Ernst Múzeum). Budapest, April 16, 1966. Photograph by Géza Szebellédy. Courtesy of MTI Zrt. Photo Archive.

applications—and of course the favorable circumstances in cultural politics—many artworks that were usually considered to be outside of traditional genres, such as action art, conceptual art, and installation, were exhibited. Art that was until then only accessible at alternative venues, small galleries, and clubs—in the second public sphere—was in 1978 presented to a broad public sphere (Figure 10.2). During the installation of the exhibition and after its opening, reactions were manifold. Dezső Tóth, the Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs at the time, for instance, visited the show a couple of days before it opened. Ferenc Veszely's installation, which was an arrangement of all of his previously produced works, reminded the minister of the burning of books. For this reason, Veszely's piece was ultimately banned from the show. The same thing happened to a graphic drawing by András Wahorn, entitled *The Black Mercedes of the Minister Passes the Liquor Store No. 1124 (A miniszter fekete Mercédese elhalad az 1124-es italbolt előtt)*. Nevertheless, the exhibition, with its individually curated box-structure, still featured conceptually motivated works, such as Orsolya Drozdik's glass-breaking action. The press either characterized the 1978 Studio show as scandalous and as some kind of anti-art, or celebrated the artistic bravery in re-inventing the National Gallery's ordinary exhibition halls.<sup>41</sup>

This brief insight into the history of the Studio exposes the powerful forces of decision making that shaped the extent and position of the second public sphere within a state-supported framework. The 1966 and 1978 shows also demonstrate how the



*Figure 10.2* György Buczkó takes a photograph of his work that is reflected in the mirror in front of him. The 1978 exhibition of the Studio of Young Artists at the Hungarian National Gallery. Photograph by György Buczkó. Courtesy of The Archive of the Studio of Young Artists.

character of the second public sphere changed throughout the years of Kádárism: it belonged once to the terrain of illegality, was subsequently partially tolerated, and occasionally, served as the corridor between underground and supported art.

The following two case studies, both realized within the framework of the legendary IPARTERV exhibitions, point to the remarkable place of process-based art as both a phenomenon and a creator of the second public sphere slightly apart from Party financing.

In 1967, a recent art history graduate, Péter Sinkovits, had the idea to put together an exhibition of international contemporary trends and to include in it young Hungarian artists, who were experimenting beyond traditional genres.<sup>42</sup> The show, or what became known as IPARTERV, and its accompanying publication resembled Documenta 1968, which could indeed have served as the background for the 1968 exhibition,<sup>43</sup> as well as the second one in 1969. The aim of IPARTERV was to collect, present, and discuss Hungarian occurrences of actual nonfigurative (e.g. happening, performance, and action art) and figurative art (e.g. Pop Art and Hard Edge). The official attitude towards the initiative was highly hostile, and both shows were closed after just a couple of days. Yet, the venue was in the center of Budapest, at the event hall of the Enterprise for Industrial Architecture Design's (Ipari Épülettervező Vállalat, shortly: IPARTERV) main building. As one of the participants, sculptor György Jovánonics remembered that Sinkovits worked at that time in the bureau and

came up with the idea to exhibit there.<sup>44</sup> Exhibited works of event-based art were met with particular skepticism and nescience. The open-ended structure of actions and performances, their fleetingness and the unpredictable reaction of the audience, did not correspond to the realist style or predictable content of painting. Because performative artworks were the opposite of rigid Party control, they belonged almost exclusively to a non-obedient public sphere. The reaction of the authorities is to be explained by the already mentioned ambiguity in cultural politics at the time; regardless, the artists utilized this moment to get attention in the second public sphere.

The modes and the message of event-based art pieces are significant and trace the characteristics of the second public sphere in a subversive, provocative way. Actions' specific form of criticism was brought into being by parallel culture and pushed further its differentiation. This was true for the two performative interventions: Tamás Szentjóby's *Action-Reading* and Dr. László Végh's intuitive action.

Tamás Szentjóby's *Action-Reading* stands for a radical opinion of the neo-avant-garde. On November 29, 1968, a few weeks before the actual opening of the first show, IPARTERV I, a series of actions under the title *Do You See What I See? (Látod amit én látok?)* took place at the exhibition's venue. Szentjóby performed two actions, of which the second was called *Action-Reading*.<sup>45</sup> In this highly interactive piece, the artist "[...] was tied to a rope, whose end was controlled by members of the audience. The poet and writer Nicolaus Urban held a book (in this case the German physicist Werner Heisenberg's *Selected Writings*) at a varying distance, making it possible or impossible for Szentjóby to read from the pages, depending on how much rope the audience released" (Figure 10.3).<sup>46</sup> *Action-Reading* belongs to Szentjóby's works that deal with

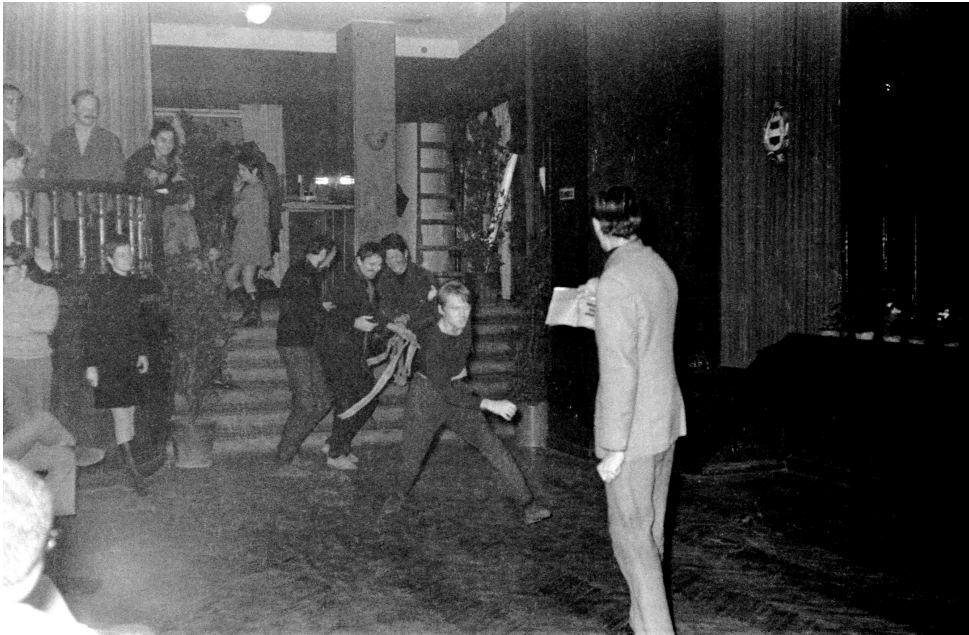


Figure 10.3 Tamás Szentjóby, *Action-Reading*, November 29, 1968. At the DONOR-est, Budapest. Courtesy of Tamás Szentjóby.



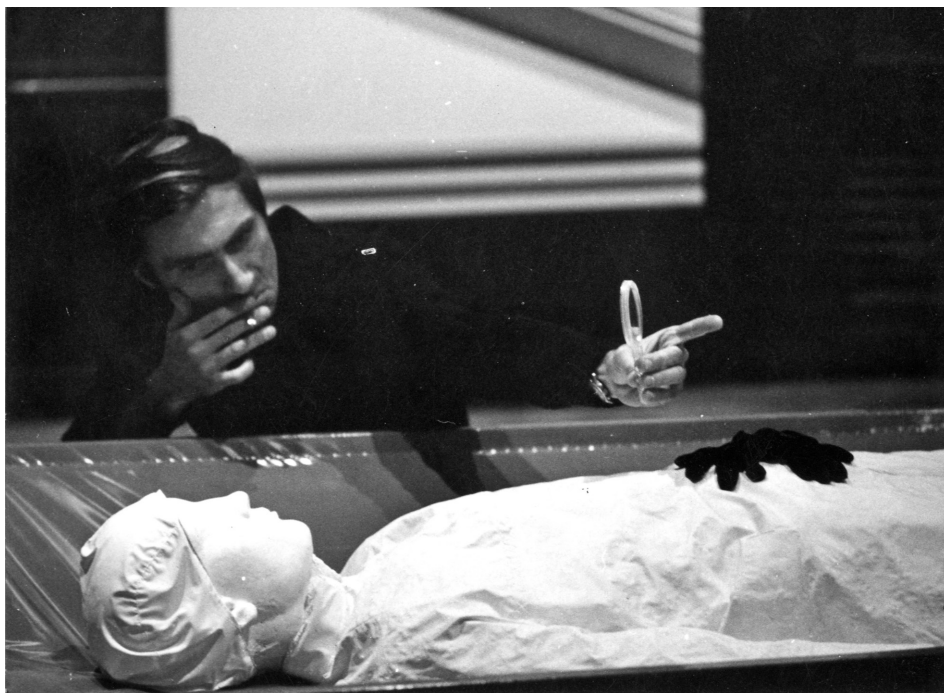


Figure 10.4 László Végh with the sculpture of György Jovánovics at IPARTERV II, 1969. Photograph by Endre Schwanner. Courtesy of László Végh Archive.

the duality of prohibition and permission. The artist got caught between the controlling, restrained factors of the first public sphere (represented by the rope and the audience) and the unforeseeable possibilities of the artist within/beyond the second public sphere (represented by the book). The condition of in-betweenness was characteristic of the entire Hungarian neo-avant-garde, although only Szentjóby turned his dissatisfaction, anger, and frustration into a performance.<sup>47</sup> The struggle of the neo-avant-gardists to unlock hidden capacities and to create something new was the purpose of the IPARTERV generation. For many years their creative capacity could only unfold in the second public sphere, which was in a continuous battle with Kádárist authoritarianism.

Végh's intervention, on the other hand, was centered around Jovánovics's sculpture, entitled *Lying Figure (Problem)* (*Fekvő figura (Baj)*), a huge male figure lying on a red bed in a suit reminiscent of a Maoist uniform. Even though Jovánovics emphasized that the statue had no political connotation, it became indirectly politicized and was used as a visual provocation. It should be noted that in general, Jovánovics's works teetered between figuration and abstraction, and they dominated the space in each IPARTERV exhibition.<sup>48</sup> Taking up the Duchampian tradition of ready-mades, Végh playfully intervened with the objects found at the IPARTERV II show, in particular with Jovánovics's sculpture (Figure 10.4). Emese Kürti recounted that:

The exhibition space, with the emblematic piece of the neo-avant-garde, the plaster statue of György Jovánovics (*Lying Figure*, 1969), in itself served as an

opportunity for a performative intervention. Taking a seat beside the piece, László Végh held a thermometer in his hand, to measure the temperature of the plaster human being, which at a particular moment was covered with a map of Hungary. The symbolic political action (using the metaphor of a non-living person analogous for the socio-political reality of the communist country) was realised in the privacy of a guarded exhibition-space with no significant audience.<sup>49</sup>

Kürti's interpretation of the event directs our attention to the creative mode of critical commentary and to the contours of a public sphere within which this kind of system judgment was possible. The performative remark of Végh, the founder of Hungarian actionism, functioned on different levels: it marked the terrain in which one could practice creative dissent; like his previous interventions in public spaces, it tested how much critique the first public sphere could take; and finally, it highlighted the importance of neo-avant-garde tendencies, especially the status of event-based art. Végh's action around Jovánovics's statue was part of the process of leaving the privacy of apartments and conquering a different kind of public sphere, namely the second public sphere, where an "active environment" could be constructed.<sup>50</sup>

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that heroic myths about an oppositional public sphere in late socialist Hungary do not hold up, because a more complex public discourse formed the thinking and acting of neo-avant-garde artists. The second public sphere, seen as a discursive field of semi-autonomous communication, action, production, and perception in non-conformist art, was nevertheless committed to party hierarchies, which it proposed to challenge. As a narrative of East-Central-European art, the second public sphere allows a multi-perspectival view on how mechanisms of cultural politics shaped (sometimes regulated) parallel culture, what creative reactions and commentaries artists invented to answer their living and production conditions, how different public spheres overlapped, and how the second public sphere was constantly transforming between subcultural and counter-cultural existence over the course of time.

The second public sphere, as a discourse, was thus theorized from within and outside of its zone of influence. Though many theoretical approaches point to the publicization of the private, I am not convinced that the bi-polar categories of public and private can adequately describe the diversity of public spheres in Kádár's Hungary.<sup>51</sup> The second public sphere constituted a consistent search for and adaptation to the dictatorship's changing landscape, in which any location in the shadow of state socialist rule could be home to dissenting communication and action.

## Notes

- 1 András Veres, "Vita a hetvenes évek kultúrájáról," in *A hetvenes évek kultúrája. Tanácskozás a Fiatal Művészek Klubjában. 1980. április 10–12. Dokumentumválogatás: Irányított irodalom*, ed. András Veres (Budapest: Balassi, 2002), 7–9.
- 2 József Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek. A kulturális ellenállás formái a magyar neoavant-gárdban* (Budapest: Typotex, 2006), 99.
- 3 Anna Wessely, "A kultúra szociológiája," in *A hetvenes évek kultúrája. Tanácskozás a Fiatal Művészek Klubjában. 1980. április 10–12. Dokumentumválogatás: Irányított irodalom*, ed. András Veres (Budapest: Balassi, 2002), 192–6.
- 4 *Helikon Világirodalmi Figyelő*, vol. 22, no. 1.
- 5 The term "Great Refusal" signifies the general antagonistic behavior of the youth and student movements of the 1960s, including the lifestyle of hippies, the Vietnam War protests,

- and the feminist movement. For more on this, see Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 41.
- 6 Ákos Szilágyi, “Két szék között a pad alatt. Vázlat a hetvenes évek konzervativizmusáról,” in *A hetvenes évek kultúrája. Tanácskozás a Fiatal Művészek Klubjában. 1980. április 10–12. Dokumentumválogatás: Irányított irodalom*, ed. András Veres (Budapest: Balassi, 2002), 21.
  - 7 *Ibid.*, 17.
  - 8 Katalin Cseh-Varga, “Documentary Traces of Hungarian Event-Based Art,” in *Promote, Tolerate, Ban: Culture in Cold War Hungary*, eds. Cristina Cuevas-Wolf and Isotta Poggi (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2018), 85.
  - 9 József Böröcz, “A kádárizmustól a parlagi kapitalizmusig: a fejlett informalizmus építésének időszerű kérdései,” *Mozgó Világ*, no. 8 (1990): 62.
  - 10 Cseh-Varga, “Documentary Traces,” 85.
  - 11 Böröcz, “A kádárizmustól,” 62.
  - 12 Ferenc Fehér and Ágnes Heller and György Márkus, *Diktatúra a szükségletek felett* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1991), 232
  - 13 Arien Mack, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Social Research* 55, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1988): 3. Mack wrote: “The intent of these special issues is now to bring the work of Central and Eastern European social scientists and social theorists to the attention of our English-reading audience.” Of course, the spread of dissent was part of the United States’ ideological warfare against the Soviet Union. Research institutes and periodicals founded in the Western world, for example, helped get dissidents the “deserved” attention, while being financed e.g. by the Central Intelligence Agency. See Friederike Kind-Kovács, *Written Here, Published There. How Underground Literature Crossed the Iron Curtain* (Budapest; New York, NY: CEU Press, 2014), 39.
  - 14 Elemér Hankiss, “The ‘Second Society’: Is There an Alternative Social Model Emerging in Contemporary Hungary?,” *Social Research* 55, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1988): 24.
  - 15 Éva Forgács, *Hungarian Art. Confrontation and Revival in the Modern Movement* (Doppel House Press, 2016), 187.
  - 16 József Havasréti, *Alternatív regiszterek. A kulturális ellenállás formái a magyar neoavantgárdban* (Budapest: Typotex, 2006), 86.
  - 17 József Havasréti, “A neoavantgárd irodalom, képzőművészet, zene,” in *Színházképzés: neoavantgárd hagyomány*, ed. Magdolna Jákfalvi (Budapest: Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, 2013), 50.
  - 18 *Ibid.*, 52.
  - 19 Elemér Hankiss, *Kelet-európai alternatívák?* (Budapest, 1989), 1.
  - 20 Miklós Haraszti, *A cenzúra esztétikája* (Budapest: AB Független Kiadó, 1986), 7.
  - 21 *Ibid.*, 11, 80.
  - 22 Katalin Cseh-Varga, “Rebellische (Spiel)Räume und Underground Netzwerke. Die zweite Öffentlichkeit der ungarischen Avantgarde” (PhD diss., Ludwig-Maximilians Universität Munich, 2016), 68.
  - 23 Klara Kemp-Welch, “Autonomy, Solidarity and the Antipolitics of Net,” in *NET. The Art of Dialogue*, ed. Božena Czubak (Warsaw: Fundacja Profil, 2013), 47.
  - 24 “‘Ich weiß aber, Ungarn ist ein gedankenhungriges Land,’ Aus einem Gespräch mit dem Soziologen und Romancier György Konrad,” *Frankfurter Rundschau, Feuilleton*. August 18, 1979, III.
  - 25 Václav Havel, “Six Notes on Culture,” in *A Besieged Culture. Czechoslovakia Ten Years After Helsinki*, eds. A. Heneka and Frantisek Janouch and Vilém Precan and Jan Validslav (Budapest/Vienna: The Charta 77 Foundation/International Federation for Human Rights, 1985).
  - 26 Cseh-Varga, “Rebellische (Spiel)Räume,” 55.
  - 27 *Ibid.*, 56.
  - 28 Barbara J. Falk, “Reflections on the Revolutions in Europe. Lessons for the Middle East and the Arab Spring,” in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond. Transnational Media During and After Socialism*, eds. Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (New York, NY; Oxford: Berghahn, 2013), 285.

- 29 Berenika Szymanski, *Theatraler Protest und der Weg Polens zu 1989. Zum Aushandeln von Öffentlichkeit im Jahr der Solidarność* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 41.
- 30 Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere,” [http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/fraser01\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/fraser01_en.htm), accessed August 19, 2018.
- 31 Jan C. Behrends and Thomas Lindenberger, “Underground Publishing and the Public Sphere: Some Introductory Remarks,” in *Underground Publishing and the Public Sphere. Transnational Perspectives. Wiener Studien zur Zeitgeschichte*, eds. Jan C. Behrends and Thomas Lindenberger (Wien/Berlin: LIT, 2014), VI: 16.
- 32 Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller, *Eastern Left, Western Left. Totalitarianism, Freedom and Democracy* (London: Humanities Press International, 1987), 121.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Cseh-Varga, “Rebellische (Spiel)Räume,” 38.
- 35 Ibid., 77, 91–92.
- 36 Mónika Zombori, “Stúdió kiállítások a korabeli dokumentumok tükrében. 1. Rész: A hatvanas évek,” *Artmagazin*, no. 82 (2015): 32.
- 37 Ibid., 34.
- 38 Ibid., 35.
- 39 Ibid., 35–36.
- 40 Mónika Zombori, “Stúdió kiállítások a korabeli dokumentumok tükrében. 2. Rész. A hetvenes évek,” *Artmagazin*, no. 83 (2015): 60–61. The author is particularly grateful to Mónika Zombori for her thorough review of this essay. Her comments and suggestions were very helpful.
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- 44 Jovánovics, interview.
- 45 Emese Kürti, “Experimentalizmus, avantgárd és közösségi hálózatok a hatvanas években. Dr. Végh László és köre” (PhD diss., ELTE-BTK, Film, Média és Kultúraelmélet Doktori Iskola Budapest, 2015), 181.
- 46 Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence Under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 119.
- 47 Cseh-Varga, “Rebellische (Spiel)Räume,” 165.
- 48 Ibid., 162–163.
- 49 Emese Kürti, “Intuitive Actions,” *Acta Historiae Artium* 56 (2015): 199.
- 50 Ibid., 193.
- 51 For example, see Elzbieta Matynia, *Performative Democracy* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 31: “[...] the public sphere was completely replaced by the monological *official*, and so its genuinely public-spirited impulses were forced to hide in the private realm and remake themselves there. The relocation of the public into the private resulted in the occurrence of a peculiar species: the *privatized public*. [...] It demonstrated ways in which it was possible to bring some pieces of the public realm back and to reassemble them into a *publicized private*, a nascent public sphere. The *publicized private* meant here an objectified, embryonic, discursive sphere open to a limited public.”

# 11 The Nonidentity Problem in Contemporary Belarusian Art

*Tatsiana Zhurauliova*

In 2016, Belarusian artist Antonina Slobodchikova (b. 1979) participated in Michał Jachula's exhibition project, *Daily and Religious Rituals*, that took place in Białystok, Poland. She contributed a two-channel video titled *The Vote to the Ground. Ashes to Ashes (Golos Zemle. Prah k Prazu)* (Figure 11.1). Simultaneously broadcasted on two screens, the work shows the artist against the background of a dilapidated house burying a pig's tongue (screen 1), while a group of kindergarteners work on a crafts project at their desks (screen 2). The children's lively conversation and multi-directional movements on the one screen produce a stark contrast with the solemnity and silence of the action that unfolds on the other. The latter video starts with the image of Slobodchikova, dressed in black, presenting a pig's tongue to the viewer on a round reflective tray. She then goes through the motions of silently digging a shallow hole. The action unfolds in front of a one-story brick house, its dilapidated front wall featuring two closed doors and walled-up windows, which in their symmetry tightly frame the figure of the artist. At one point the camera angle shifts and allows the space behind the house to enter the frame. We see a road and an apartment building in the distance, an inclusion that locates the performance within an urban environment. As the pig's tongue is placed in the ground, the camera zooms in and focuses on the hole, which is covered by a piece of glass. The artist is then joined by her ten-year-old daughter; at the same time, the second screen goes dark. The camera—and by implication, the viewer—pauses on the faces of the artist and her daughter while they silently observe the tongue through the transparent barrier. The video ends with dry leaves and dirt being placed on top of the glass, gradually obscuring the view of the buried object (Figure 11.2).

In a recent interview, Slobodchikova described her initial concept for the work as follows: “when we are in an environment of totalizing control [...] the artist muffles (*zaglushaet*) himself, buries his voice, deprives himself of his right to speak (*lishaet sebia prava golosa*), because this voice is not needed by anyone, he is forbidden to speak.”<sup>1</sup> There are two important aspects to this statement. First, Slobodchikova's phrase “*lishaet sebia prava golosa*” serves as a useful elaboration on the English title of the video: *The Vote to the Ground*, since the Russian word “*golos*” can be translated both as “a voice” and “a vote.” Thus, the symbolical surrender of one's voice in the context of the work is understood in explicitly political terms, as a surrender of one's political agency. Second, what is striking about Slobodchikova's statement is the active role assigned to the artist in the process of surrendering her right to speak. In her view, when faced with both indifference and repression, the artist often chooses to respond by self-silencing, which results in the alienation of the self from the collective



Figure 11.1 Antonina Slobodchikova, frame from *The Vote to the Ground*, 2012. *Ashes to Ashes* (*Golos Zemle. Prub k Prabu*), 2012. Two-channel video, cinematographer Tanya Haurylchyk. Photograph © Tanya Haurylchyk.



Figure 11.2 Antonina Slobodchikova, frame from *The Vote to the Ground*, 2012. *Ashes to Ashes* (*Golos Zemle. Prub k Prabu*), 2012. Two-channel video, cinematographer Tanya Haurylchyk. Photograph © Tanya Haurylchyk.

body. The negative political implications of this choice appear to be in conflict with Slobodchikova's other works and statements from the same period, where she assigns silence with affirmative and healing qualities. For example, in her 2016 project entitled *Complete Silence*, the artist offers a definition of silence "as a state of complete acceptance of the given" and elaborates on its ability to foster an interpersonal understanding and build connections between individuals within the social sphere.<sup>2</sup> In fact, when compared to the artist's initial concept, *The Vote to the Ground* presents a more complex understanding of silence. In the video, silence operates both as a symptom of self-alienation, enacted through the symbolic act of surrendering one's voice, and as a generative force, a communicative space that exists outside of the semantic burden of language.

The political and artistic stakes of *The Vote to the Ground* are better understood when considered in relation to the work's immediate social and intellectual context and, in particular, to the persistent use of silence as a symbolic and representational trope in contemporary Belarusian culture. In order to address the multivalent role of silence in Slobodchikova's work, this essay focuses on its three specific conceptualizations: the muffling of societal apathy; silence as political protest; and the negational rhetoric of what anthropologist Serguei A. Oushakine defines as "apophatic nationalism"—a line of post-colonial thinking in contemporary Belarusian intellectual

discourse that emphasizes the productive capacity of negation, rejection, and absence.<sup>3</sup> I conclude my discussion with an analysis of Slobodchikova's work through the lens of the nonidentity problem, a philosophical paradox developed within the field of population ethics. Applied to the Belarusian context, the nonidentity problem offers a useful theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which *The Vote to the Ground* builds on silence's topical significance, while also exploring its generative and communicative potential.

Slobodchikova's video was created as a direct response to the events that occurred in October 2012 during the international project *Going Public. On the Difficulty of a Public Statement*. Initiated by the Goethe-Institut Lithuania, the project involved a number of events and workshops that took place in Germany, Lithuania, Belarus, and the Kaliningrad region. Within the framework of *Going Public*, a series of performances and interventions were scheduled throughout Minsk, the capital of Belarus. Slobodchikova's proposed contribution included an action, during which she and artists from other participating countries would bury a pig's tongue to represent symbolically the difficulty of artistic expression within the public sphere. However, the action was never realized. Slobodchikova's husband and fellow artist, Mikhail Gulin (b. 1977), who was also involved in the project, was arrested earlier in the day while performing his work *Personal Monument* (Figure 11.3). Reflecting on the events of that day, Slobodchikova noted in an interview that following the arrest, her action "lost its topicality, although in fact its topicality became so much stronger."<sup>4</sup> She returned to the idea four years later in *The Vote to the Ground*, but now the work revealed an important shift in her understanding of the role of artistic expression in Belarusian society. In this respect, the particular details inherent in the conflict around *Personal Monument* offer insight into the development of Slobodchikova's work.



Figure 11.3 Mikhail Gulin, *Personal Monument*, 2012. Photograph © Mikhail Gulin.

*Personal Monument* was conceived as an intervention into an urban environment, with four geometric modules (three pink cubes and a yellow parallelepiped) being moved through the city and temporarily installed at different locations in varied formal arrangements. During the intervention, the modules were transported by Gulin and his assistants between four major squares in Minsk: Yakub Kolas, Kalinin, Lenin, and October. When the group arrived at October Square, the site of the Presidential Residence, Gulin and his assistants were detained by representatives of the special police unit (OMON). They were transported to a holding cell, where they spent several hours before being charged with “resisting arrest.” Following a trial, the artist was cleared of these charges, but nonetheless had lost his teaching position at the Belarusian National Technical University.<sup>5</sup> The modules used in the intervention remained in police custody and were never returned.<sup>6</sup>

The state’s reaction to the intervention was not completely surprising given that October Square had been one of the main sites of protests following the presidential elections of 2006 and 2010. Directed against Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994, the protests questioned the legitimacy of his re-election for the third and fourth consecutive terms. *Personal Monument* brought to the fore the codified nature of public space in the nation’s capital. The moment Gulin and his mobile sculpture stepped onto the symbolically charged ground of the square, the artistic gesture of actively engaging the city’s built environment became perceived as a threat, a violation of an unwritten social order.

A contributing factor to this forceful state response to *Personal Monument* was its reliance on abstract forms that elude singular interpretation. The blank surfaces of the geometric modules and their nondescriptive colors produce a mutable signifier, one that invites a multiplicity of meanings. This semantic open-endedness stands in stark contrast to the direct expressive language of commercial displays, advertising, and national symbols, which dominate the visual landscape of the Belarusian urban environment. The use of abstraction also marks a departure from Gulin’s earlier work within public space. Over the last ten years, the artist had staged several actions, which aimed to solicit an interaction, to provoke a conversation or a reaction from the passersby. But, as the documentation for his projects demonstrates, his actions often ran up against an emphatic indifference, an active refusal of onlookers to react or engage with what appears to be different or out of place. For example, his 2011 project *Norka* (*A Little Hole*) directly responded to this trend, reflecting on what the artist calls a societal “conservation” (*konservatsiia*)—an all-permeating societal apathy, informed by a formless sense of worry and fear.<sup>7</sup> For *Norka*, Gulin produced a large portable object, reminiscent of a molehill, that was carried by a team of assistants through the streets, parks, and squares of Minsk. Throughout the action, the artist spent some time in the molehill himself, looking out to engage the onlookers. He also invited a number of people who noticed the action to climb into the object. With the exception of a couple of children, only one woman took the artist up on his offer, climbing into the molehill and using it as a platform to detail her current difficult family situation. In its form, *Norka* suggests a destructive undercurrent—moles are widespread in Belarus and are considered to be an agricultural pest, producing an invisible network of tunnels in the soil that undermines plants’ roots and compromises the stability of the ground surface. This implication of disruption, however, is undercut in the video documenting the action by the failure to solicit a reaction. By frequently using wide shots of *Norka* installed in an empty urban landscape, the artist appears to embrace



this failure, foregrounding instead the guarded silence that almost tangibly surrounds the object.

This same silence permeates the video documentation of the public reaction—or lack of it—to *Personal Monument*, recorded before the confrontation with the representatives of the state. According to Gulin, with this work, he was not looking to solicit public interaction; rather, he was interested in seeing his portable sculpture in context in order to create a visual dialogue between the modules' abstract forms and the city's built environment.<sup>8</sup> Despite the stated intention of the artist, the specificity of place (October Square) and the open-endedness of the abstract visual language triggered a reaction to *Personal Monument* by the state. Much like *Norka*, *Personal Monument*, however, failed to solicit public attention, even in the aftermath of Gulin's arrest. In his account of the events entitled "No One Cares about the Artist," Gulin notes the lack of immediate response on the part of the *Going Public* organizers, as well as the prevailing silence of the artistic community, and the general public more broadly.<sup>9</sup> It appears that *Personal Monument* ultimately failed to pierce the shield of societal apathy despite—or perhaps, because of—its perilous recognition by the authorities.

This failure is emblematic of contemporary Belarusian society. Discussing societal apathy in Belarus, philosopher Olga Shparaga attributes Lukashenko's staying power to his government's ideological emphasis on social stability, understood as an absence of conflict. She defines the state program as "the profitable opposition of the Belarusian model of democracy to both the European and Russian models" and thus as "a formation without essence."<sup>10</sup> In this respect, the government platform can remain vague and elusive since it is always defined as the contrary, always in opposition to the contested nature of the democratic process elsewhere. Furthermore, it is in the name of stability that the authorities are able to methodically suppress political opposition and swiftly eradicate any public display of social discontent. In Shparaga's view, by perpetuating the idea of stability as an absence of antagonism, the Belarusian government conditions societal apathy and thus ensures its own all-permeating control.

According to the work of Belarusian artist Sergey Shabohin (b. 1984), this process is compounded by the authorities' ability to mobilize a formless sense of worry (*trevoga*) in the population, cultivating it through the discursive multiplication of objects of fear. In his ongoing project *Practices of Subordination*, Shabohin methodically analyzes mechanisms of power, both in Belarus and more generally. Since 2010, the artist has been collecting a variety of objects, images, and textual fragments that within his archive serve as anchors for narratives of intimidation and state interference in the everyday life of its citizens.<sup>11</sup> These materials include such objects as the image of a foul-smelling drainpipe, a photograph of a sticky note with the words "I am afraid more. Dad.," and an account of a person returning home to find their chair standing on the table—a sign of someone else having been to the apartment (the photograph of the chair is accompanied by the text: "This is how THEY remind us of themselves") (Figure 11.4). Influenced by Michel Foucault's conceptualizations of power, Shabohin's project aims to make legible the mechanisms through which the state maintains totalizing control of daily life.<sup>12</sup> The seemingly infinite multiplication of materials presented within the ongoing project highlights both the persistence of the disciplinarian pressure and the simultaneous numbing of individual agency, with the continuously generated feeling of fear translating into a permanent state of paralyzing anxiety. Considered against this background, an action such as the forceful



Figure 11.4 Sergey Shabohin, *Practices of Subordination*, 2011. Y Gallery pavilion: *She Cannot Say Heaven*, the main program of the festival *Artvilnius'11*, Lithuanian Art Gallerists' Association, Vilnius, Lithuania. Photograph © Sergey Shabohin.

suppression of *Personal Monument* quickly loses its topicality, disappearing into an already oversaturated field of daily subordination.

In contrast to Shabohin's *Practices of Subordination*, Slobodchikova's *The Vote to the Ground* reduces content. Even within the work, the visual and auditory saturation associated with screen 2 underscores silence and visual blankness of the other screen. Prioritized over direct expression, silence suggests a multiplicity of meanings, functioning simultaneously as a symptom of fear and as a means of resistance to the discursive mechanisms of power. Slobodchikova's video reflects the artist's broader interest in exploring the notions of trauma and the alienation of the self. In particular, it encourages a psychoanalytical reading of its visual and symbolic apparatus by evoking themes of death, anxiety, and of the psychic split. At the same time, the work remains firmly grounded in its immediate social and political context by maintaining the specificity of its personal and discursive references. Produced four years after Gulin's arrest, *The Vote to the Ground* reads as a gesture of surrender and as a mourning of the impossibility of free and public artistic expression. Yet, it also harnesses the constructive connotations of silence in Belarusian social discourse and explores its communicative potential as a semantic space uncorrupted by language and ideological coda.

Visually, *The Vote to the Ground* fosters a sense of secrecy and intimacy with the viewer. The framing of the video on screen 1 forms a shallow space in front of the seemingly uninhabited house, its walled-off windows and closed doors compounding the claustrophobic effect. The dilapidated nature of the structure and the unkempt space around it create a sense of trespassing, and the resulting feeling of illicitness binds the viewer to the artist. Similarly, the frequent use of close-up frames on both screens produces a sense of physical and emotional proximity to the action. In addition, the prominent role of reflective surfaces, such as those of the tray and of the glass covering, interferes with the legibility of objects on each screen. In this respect, the attentive faces of the artist and her young daughter, as they look to the ground at the end of the video, function as a directive for the viewer—following them, we are compelled to look closely, to examine the sight that is made harder and harder to discern.

Slobodchikova has said that *The Vote to the Ground*, as well as some of her other works, are influenced by the children's game known as "secrets" (*sekretiki*), which was popular in the former Soviet Union. The "secrets" were arrangements of found materials that would be buried in a shallow hole with the goal of preserving their composition from natural degradation and vandalism by other children searching for materials to make their own "secrets." A typical "secret" usually included three layers, starting with a reflective liner to cover the bottom of the hole, such as a piece of foil. The next layer was the filler—a variety of organic and inorganic matter, chosen for its visual attractiveness or perceived value (such as its rarity, difficulty of acquiring, or subjective value). Finally, the composition was overlaid with a protective layer—usually a piece of broken glass. In fact, in *The Vote to the Ground*, screen 2 documents the kindergarteners fashioning "secrets," while their game is echoed by the solemn ritual of Slobodchikova burying the pig's tongue on screen 1. Anthropologist Svetlana Adonieva has noted that the game of "secrets" relied on the existence of the other—a trusted friend to whom the "secret" was revealed.<sup>13</sup> In Slobodchikova's work, the viewer becomes that trusted other, becoming privy to the "secret" within.

The work also draws on the notion of fragility and disappearance integral to the practice of "secrets." In the game, the glass screen serves both as protection for the matter within, and also as a barrier between the "secret" and the child who produced it. As

the “secret” is unearthed again and again (either to be shown to a friend or checked for signs of destruction by other children), the passage of time becomes visible in the deterioration of matter under the glass. Informed by this *memento mori* aspect of the game, Slobodchikova’s work articulates the transparent barrier as the mechanism of alienation and, given the symbolic implications of the work, self-alienation of the artist. By being placed into the ground, the tongue enters the realm of the other; it becomes subject to natural decomposition. The glass cover, placed over the hole, carries with it the anticipation of inevitable degradation. Yet, as the camera turns downward towards the hole in *The Vote to the Ground*, the viewer’s eyes are met with the thickness of reflections on the surface, which obscure the object underneath. Gradually, the tongue becomes less and less discernible as dry leaves are placed on top of the glass surface.

It is important to note that it is the working of the camera, its angle and focus, that produces the mirroring effect on the glass, obscuring the tongue underneath. The glass surface, mediated through the cinematic apparatus, functions akin to the screen in Jacques Lacan’s formulation of the term. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan describes a fundamental split between the eye, as the subject’s faculty to see, and the gaze, as that which is directed at the subject from outside: “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.”<sup>14</sup> Within this split, he proposes the notion of the screen as a protective mechanism: “Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation.”<sup>15</sup> Along similar lines, in *The Vote to the Ground*, the reflection on the glass captured by the camera functions as the screen that both blinds the viewer to the object beneath and protects her from its gaze.

The notion of the screen as a protective mechanism occupies an important role in Slobodchikova’s artistic practice. Encouraging a psychoanalytical reading of her work, the artist often evokes the concept of the screen as a response to the feeling of formless anxiety, which she characterizes as “the totalizing fear.”<sup>16</sup> For example, she describes the concept for her 2012 installation *Yano Tut (It is Here)* in terms of an omnipresent feeling of fear: “It is everywhere; you wake up, you fall asleep—it is always with you.”<sup>17</sup> For this installation, the space of the gallery was divided into two rooms. The first room was framed by large alphabetic skeletons of phrases “Es ist da”/ “Yano tut” (“It is here” in German and Belarusian), covered with artificial black flowers (Figure 11.5). Between the sculptural forms of the text, a video of identical textual skeletons being burned in a snowy field was projected onto the gallery wall. In the second room, the words “here” and “it” populated numerous collages, displayed in a crowded arrangement on one of the walls in the exhibition (Plate 14). Written, scratched, and painted on the multi-media surfaces of each collaged board, the words overlaid a variety of popular imagery chosen by the artist: fragments cut out from advertisements, architectural details and individual portraits found in history books, definitions of words and phrases from dictionaries, pieces of commercial wrapping, nostalgic depictions of rural landscapes, etc. In an interview, Slobodchikova described the collages as stand-ins for individual narratives of self:

Each board is a worldview, an individual ideology. Some of us cover (*prikryvaiut*) ourselves up with religion, understand our life through it and exist within the system of religious signs [...]. To some degree, each board exists as an icon of a person who found some kind of cover (*prikrytie*) from the fear of death, of the inevitable, of what could happen to you.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 11.5 Antonina Slobodchikova, *Yano Tut (It is Here)*, 2012. Y Gallery, Minsk, Belarus. Photograph © Viktoriya Kharitonova.

The artist's description brings to mind Lacan's notion of the screen, understood as an accumulation of cultural codes, in which the self is constructed from the preexisting cultural material in response to the threat of the external gaze.<sup>19</sup> For Slobodchikova, this threat is death, its invisible yet constant presence that permeates all aspects of one's life.

*The Vote to the Ground* can then be seen as performing a traumatic encounter with one's own death, mapped onto the animal's tongue. As the tongue is placed in the ground, the reflection on the glass cover acquires a dual role: it both obscures what is underneath and marks its very spot. In the blankness of the reflective surface, the viewer is confronted with a series of psychologically charged oppositions—living versus dead, human versus animal, subject versus object. The latter split carries in itself not only psychic, but also social ramifications, an aspect that inevitably relates *The Vote to the Ground* back to the specific circumstances of its creation. Informed by a dual act of suppression (Gulin's arrest and Slobodchikova's consequent inability to realize her action within the *Going Public* project), the work focuses on the question of artistic agency. How can an artist respond to the pressures of external threats and internalized fears? In *The Vote to the Ground*, the answer figures as silence, performed both as an absence of speech and as a semantic open-endedness of the blank reflective surface.

Slobodchikova's use of silence in the video and in her description of the work's initial concept situates *The Vote to the Ground* in its immediate cultural context, given the particular resonance of the term in Belarusian intellectual discourse of the last two decades. Most recently, silence has been conceptualized as an act of protest, with a series of silent protests taking place in different Belarusian cities in the spring and summer of 2011. Coordinated through the Russian-language social network VKontakte, the gatherings were characterized by the deliberate and persistent silence

of the protesters, accompanied by periods of clapping. These silent expressions of discontent were suppressed by the authorities, leading to arrests and forceful dispersal of participants. Nonetheless, the strategy found wide resonance in cultural discourse, with the concept of silence as an expression of personal agency echoing across different media. For example, the exhibition of contemporary Belarusian art that took place in 2012 at the EFA (Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts) Project Space in New York was entitled *Sound of Silence: New Art Strategies and Tactics of Belarusian Artists*. Curated by Olga Kopenkina, the exhibition explored the theme of silence as a state of existence anchored in both suppression and protest.<sup>20</sup> In addition to referencing the silent protests, the title of the exhibition evoked a project that would be familiar to an international audience—the play *Zone of Silence*, produced by the Belarus Free Theatre.<sup>21</sup> Established in 2005, the theatre troupe currently exists in exile due to its explicitly anti-government stance. One of its best-known productions, *Zone of Silence*, first opened in Belarus in 2008, and has since been performed on a number of international stages, including New York’s La MaMa Theatre in 2011.

In his analysis of *Zone of Silence*, Oushakine notes the ways in which its portrayal of contemporary Belarusian society plays into an international audience’s expectations about life under “the last dictatorship of Europe.”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, he finds the performance emblematic of the broader impulse in Belarusian culture that envisions the present in terms of absences, silences, and erasures. Oushakine proposes the term “apophatic nationalism,” which he defines as an emphasis on “the constructive aspects of negation, rejection, and withdrawal through which Belarusian nationalists express their arguments and shape their communities.”<sup>23</sup> His analysis includes writings by several key figures of the so-called Adradzhenne or the national Rebirth, a cultural and intellectual movement that lasted from approximately the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Influenced by postcolonial theory, writers of the Rebirth characterized the postcommunist condition in Belarus as a lack or absence of a coherent national identity, destroyed by the periods of political, cultural, and linguistic domination. These authors conceptualized the process of decolonization as a “war in the name of the stolen past”—a process of reclaiming some sort of intrinsic national or ethnic Belarusian identity that is conceived of as having existed before the period of Soviet colonization.<sup>24</sup>

Oushakine also explores the legacy of the Rebirth’s nationalist rhetoric through the work of one of its most prominent critics, Belarusian writer Ihar Babkou (b. 1964). For the latter, a search for a coherent historical narrative results in the loss of the sense of the present. According to Babkou,

The Belarusian transculturalism thereby is above all a worldview of cultural abnormality, which is subjectively experienced as an inferiority complex, as a specific cultural trauma—a trauma of the absence of a strong, homogenous, national cultural space. Cultural absence becomes a permanent metaphor of the modern Belarusian reality and ultimately leads to the substitution of the reality itself in the cultural system—substituted by the ideal of a normal, happy, but so far unattainable future.<sup>25</sup>

He instead proposes an understanding of Belarusian transculturalism as a method for “recognizing and reading the present, which in the past three or four centuries has remained unnamed, despite existing as a silent condition of most cultural practices.”<sup>26</sup>

He describes this present as the experience of the borderland—an inherently dynamic, contradictory, and often conflicted field of cultural production. In this respect, his writings exemplify what Oushakine terms as “the constructive aspects of negation, rejection, and withdrawal.” For Babkou, the refusal to name or to define the terms of the Belarusian transcultural configuration functions as a generative site of ontological nomadism.<sup>27</sup>

It is this notion of silence as a refusal to name the specific terms of identity that makes Babkou’s writing resonate with Slobodchikova’s *The Vote to the Ground*. In her video, the artist is similarly concerned with “recognizing and reading the present,” rather than defining it in terms of a particular past or imagined future. This interpretation may appear somewhat paradoxical given the resonance of the work’s symbolic imagery with the specific circumstances of its conception. However, the contradiction can be productively explored through the theoretical framework of the so-called “nonidentity problem.” Sometimes referred to as the “paradox of future individuals,” the nonidentity problem was formulated within the field of population ethics in the late 1970s and early 1980s independently by Derek Parfit, Thomas Schwartz, and Robert M. Adams.<sup>28</sup> A sustained investigation into the relationship between identity and existence, the nonidentity problem concerns cases in which an individual appears to be wronged by an action that is the condition of his or her own worthwhile existence. As a philosophical line of thought, it arises from the tension between the plausibility of certain general claims and the implausibility of certain specific conclusions that seem to follow from them.<sup>29</sup> Although usually considered in relation to future-directed cases, if applied to the contemporary Belarus, the nonidentity problem could be postulated through the following set of contradictory claims:

1. The Soviet past wronged contemporary Belarusians.
2. If the Soviet past wronged contemporary Belarusians, the way it wronged them was by harming them.
3. The only way the Soviet past could have harmed contemporary Belarusians is by making them worse off than they otherwise would have been.
4. The Soviet past did not make contemporary Belarusians worse off than they otherwise would have been.

The underlying logic of this formulation assumes that a particular cause or event that appears to be the source of some future people’s hardship is in fact not the case, since it did not make these persons worse off than they would have been otherwise. There are two implicit premises here: the first suggests that in the absence of this particular cause or event, a different set of future persons would have been born; the second hypothesizes that existence is always worthwhile and is preferable to nonexistence. Thus, persons who experience hardship due to a particular event or cause in the past exist in part due to that very event occurring or cause existing, while their existence, even if flawed, is preferable to not existing at all. There are a number of solutions that have been proposed to this problem, all of which focus on different parts of the argument, whether it is the question of the definitions of harm or the very issue of existence as being always preferable to nonexistence.<sup>30</sup>

My goal here is not to contribute to the body of work on possible solutions to the nonidentity problem; rather, I propose to consider the parameters of the nonidentity problem as a framework for understanding the specificity of the contemporary

Belarusian political, social, and cultural contexts. If applied to the Belarusian case, the conditional cause within the problem can be continuously reformulated without the problem as a whole losing its valence. Thus, the causal term “the Soviet past” can be substituted for “the collapse of the Soviet Union,” or “the absorption into the Russian Empire” from a more distant historical past, or “the (re)lection of Lukashenko” from a more recent period. In fact, the project of naming one or numerous conditional causes has been a key aspect of Belarusian political discourse since the late 1980s. For instance, some of the causal terms mentioned above figure prominently in the postcolonial/postcommunist thinking of the Rebirth and inform the rhetoric of the “apophatic nationalism” described by Oushakine. However, when formulated as part of the nonidentity problem, the historical narratives of distant and recent pasts become subsumed by the question of the present. Considered through the theoretical lens of the paradox, Belarusian contemporary society can be examined beyond the terms of who or what afflicted contemporary Belarusians with harm, instead shifting the emphasis onto the notion of their worthwhile existence. The resulting theoretical reorientation hinges on the question of agency, offering an alternative to the narratives of victimhood inherent in the image of Belarus as a “zone of silence,” presented in some of the Rebirth writings or the Free Belarus Theatre play.

I want to suggest that it is a similar concept of agency that informs *The Vote to the Ground*. The artist’s silence functions as a semantic pause, while the screen of the reflective glass marks the spot of a deeply felt personal experience. Symbolically represented by the pig’s tongue, it remains there: it may be shed away, but in a way that reflects back onto the subject, holding her in its object-gaze. At the same time, it is not just the artist and the viewer who look down in silence; Slobodchikova also includes her then ten-year-old daughter. Given the work’s personal resonance as a reflection on the suppression of *Personal Monument*, the inclusion builds a temporal link, probing the relationship between the past, the present, and the future. As the child looks down, her eyes—figured as ours—are met with the thickness of the blank reflection. Is she worse off now than she otherwise would have been? And yet, her figure represents the other side of the paradox: as a subject, would she exist otherwise?

## Notes

- 1 Antonina Slobodchikova, interview with the author, Minsk, July 31, 2018.
- 2 Slobodchikova, interview; “Imena otkryvaiut unikal’nuuu vystavku o belarusakh,” Imena Media Platform and Fund, last modified May 6, 2017, <https://imenamag.by/posts/art-proekt-imena>.
- 3 Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “How to Grow out of Nothing: The Afterlife of National Rebirth in Postcolonial Belarus,” *Qui Parle* 26, no. 2 (December 2017): 423–490.
- 4 Slobodchikova, interview.
- 5 Aleksei Tolstov, “Politicheskoe v iskusstve Belarusi desiatykh,” *Moscow Art Magazine* 101 (2017), accessed September 11, 2018, <http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/55/article/1128>
- 6 Mikhail Gulin, “Do khudozhnika nikomu net dela,” interview by Ilona Dergach, *Art Aktivist*, published October 21, 2012, <http://artaktivist.org/mixail-gulin-%E2%80%9Cdo-khudozhnika-nikomu-net-dela%E2%80%9D/>.
- 7 Mikhail Gulin, “Norka,” Artist Youtube Channel, published November 1, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kN-ZOPtBfWk&t=211s>.
- 8 Mikhail Gulin, “Do khudozhnika nikomu net dela.”
- 9 Ibid.



- 10 Olga Shparaga, "Otchuzhdennoe obschestvo v tsentre Evropy," *Art Aktivist*, published June 1, 2011, <http://artaktivist.org/otchuzhdennoe-obshestvo-v-centre-evropy/>.
- 11 Tolstov, "Politicheskoe v iskusstve."
- 12 Lena Prents, "Sergey Shabohin: Archive-Museum-Laboratory," Artist Website, Sergey Shabohin, accessed September 11, 2018, <http://shabohin.com/a-m-l/>.
- 13 Svetlana Adonieva, "Igra v 'sekreteki,'" in *SSSR: territoria liubvi*, ed. Nataliia Borisova et al. (Moscow: Novoe izd-vo, 2008), 208–223.
- 14 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY; London: W.W. Norton, 1981), 72.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 16 Slobodchikova, interview.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Although the meaning of the term remains somewhat elusive within the body of Lacan's work, the notion of the screen has been widely used in the field of visual studies. Here, I am drawing on the formulation by Hal Foster, who interprets Lacan's screen as "the cultural reserve," that which can be called "the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture." Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 140.
- 20 Olga Shparaga, "Sound of Silence," *Art Aktivist*, published March 22, 2013, <http://artaktivist.org/english/sound-of-silence-new-art-strategies-and-tactics-of-belarusian-artists/>. It should be noted that neither Slobodchikova nor Gulin took part in the exhibition. It did, however, include an installation of Shabohin's *Practices of Subordination*.
- 21 The play had a brief yet widely publicized run in New York in 2011. See, for example, Ben Brantley, "Dynamic Drama, Limited Means" *New York Times*, April 19, 2011, C1.
- 22 Oushakine, "How to Grow," 428.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 435–437.
- 24 Aliaksandar Lukashuk, "Bliskavitsa u dyamentse," in *Belaruskaia Atliantyda: Reali i mify eurapeiskai natsii*, ed. Viachaslau Rakitski (Place: Radyio Svabodnaia Europa/Radyio Svaboda, 2006), n.p., quoted in Oushakine, "How to Grow," 431.
- 25 Ihar Babkou, "Etyka pamezhzha," in *Karaleustva Belarus: Vytlumachenni ruinau* (Minsk: Lohvinau, 2005), n.p.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 For a discussion of Babkou's work as an example of "apophatic nationalism," see Oushakine, "How to Grow," 465–474.
- 28 Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 359; Thomas Schwartz, "Obligations to Posterity," in *Obligations to Future Generations*, eds. R. Sikora and B. Barry (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1978), 3–13; Robert M. Adams, "Existence, Self-interest, and the Problem of Evil," in *Virtue of Faith* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 65–76; and Gregory S. Kavka, "The Paradox of Future Individuals," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 11, no. 2 (1982): 93–112.
- 29 For a comprehensive overview of the paradox, see David Boonin, *The Non-Identity Problem and the Ethics of Future People* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 30 The latter includes David Benatar's provocative book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

## 12 Marking Memories, Mediating Histories in the Work of Deimantas Narkevičius

*Ksenia Nouril*

This chapter explores the phenomenon of the historical turn in the work of one of the most widely recognized Lithuanian artists, Deimantas Narkevičius (b. 1964). Close analysis of two of his short films reveals the fraught discourses of post-communist memory in Eastern Europe today. Focusing on the urban landscape of his native Vilnius, Narkevičius uses the narrative, technical, and compositional strategies of interruption to revive, reinscribe, and rewrite history through a direct engagement with public monuments. By recycling, montaging, collaging, and remixing historical forms in contemporary contexts, he produces discontinuous histories that urgently demand our renewed attention to the past and challenge our understanding of communism's legacies in Eastern Europe today.

Narkevičius' films are a platform for the artist to act as historian who, in the words of Hayden V. White, "not only mediate[s] between past and present," but also possesses the ability to actively combine different "modes of comprehending the world that would normally be unalterably separated."<sup>1</sup> While art historians and curators have identified the historical turn as a trend in contemporary art, I argue here for its specific significance in Eastern Europe, given the region's political transitions since 1991.<sup>2</sup> Communism itself may no longer be a viable social, political, and economic system, but its legacies endure, provoking questions about the lasting representations of its official and unofficial histories in contemporary culture within and beyond the region. Less than thirty years after the dissolution of their communist regimes, the countries formerly comprising the Eastern Bloc are threatened once again by the rise of totalitarianism in the form of right-wing, ultra-conservative, nationalist movements. Art is a medium through which we can see the gaps as well as the sutures between the communist and post-communist periods, which are often historically isolated but, in fact, interdependent.

The decade immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union was particularly tumultuous for a newly independent Lithuania as well as for Narkevičius, who graduated in the early 1990s from the Vilnius Academy of Arts with a degree in sculpture. During this formative period, he witnessed the disintegration of Soviet society: he saw firsthand the effects of the Soviet Union's failed attempts at *perestroika* and the rise of the Lithuanian Reform Movement *Sąjūdis*. He was part of a new generation of Lithuanian artists, who transitioned from their classical Soviet educations, which were founded on Marxism, to the so-called postmodern practices of contemporary, often conceptually motivated, art.<sup>3</sup> With increased opportunities to exhibit abroad in addition to the pressure of supporting a burgeoning infrastructure for contemporary art at home, Lithuanian artists in the immediate post-Soviet period looked both inward

and outward, backward and forward. Reflecting on this complex time of democracy building and national reawakening, Narkevičius says:

The ideological “orientation” that dominated [the Soviet Union] for decades was—among other things—an attempt at creating a society above and beyond history. The new political situation [after 1991] re-inserted us into the rotating circuit of history, which inevitably requires a vision. But as we started working on such a vision for ourselves, things re-emerged from the past; phenomena that had been hidden under the surfaces of ideology.<sup>4</sup>

From his earliest works in sculpture to his more recent film-based practice, Narkevičius looks back at the past in order to take stock of what the Soviets left behind. He claims, “I am not exploring history from some neutral outside position—I live in it [...] trying to find my own place in history.”<sup>5</sup> For him, history is not a burden but a responsibility. By interrogating established histories through his work, Narkevičius radically disrupts the properties of linearity and synchronicity intrinsic to traditional historiography. He calls upon us as viewers to join him in questioning our connections to the past and, in light of that, reimagine our potential futures.

### Marking Memories

Narkevičius’ film *Once in the XX Century* (Figure 12.1) chronicles the erection of a larger-than-life statue of Vladimir Lenin, the first leader of the Soviet Union, to the cheers of a crowd gathered in Vilnius’s main square. This eight-minute film with ambient sound was released in 2004—more than a decade after the statue was taken down on August 21, 1991, and almost a half-century since it was dedicated on July 20, 1952. The artist made the film by sourcing and combining analog Betacam footage of the statue’s removal from the Lithuanian National Television Archive and a private videographer. He then reversed the image sequence so that Lenin appears to be installed rather than dismantled. Thus, an action long associated with the drawing of the Iron Curtain is subverted, bringing our attention to the carefully constructed nature of history.

In Soviet Vilnius, Lenin stood prominently in the center of Lenin Square off Lenin Avenue.<sup>6</sup> The tenets of state-sanctioned socialist realism dictated the leader’s image, which was canonized by this monolithic monoculture in countless statues as well as paintings, posters, stamps, banners, lapel pins, and other paraphernalia that dominated urban and rural landscapes alike. Unlike his successor Joseph Stalin, who was denounced for his crimes against humanity in the mid-1950s, Lenin’s reputation remained untarnished throughout the Soviet Union until, and in some places, even after, its dissolution.

Today, the Lenin statue from Vilnius’ Lenin Square can be found in Grūto Parkas, Lithuania’s graveyard for Soviet monuments.<sup>7</sup> Decommunization, which began in 1990 with the establishment of the Lithuanian Ministry for Culture and Education, stripped Lenin’s name from buildings and streets across the country, overwriting history.<sup>8</sup> This deconsecration of communist symbols has become a perennial subject for artists both in and outside the region.<sup>9</sup> Statues of Lenin continue to fall across the former Eastern Bloc in a phenomenon known as *Leninopad*, which literally translates



Figure 12.1 Deimantas Narkevičius, frame from *Once in the XX Century*, 2004. 16mm film transferred to video (color, sound), 8 min. Photograph © Deimantas Narkevičius.

to “Lenin falling.” During the 2013 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine, for example, a surge in topplings was captured in countless photographs and videos that circulated in international media. Although the rampant razing of Lenin statues—then, immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, and now, under renewed geopolitical tensions in the region—must be viewed within the larger discourse of public memory in Eastern Europe, it parallels more recent controversies surrounding historical monuments in the United States. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are over 1,700 monuments, place names, and other symbols honoring the Confederacy in public spaces across the country.<sup>10</sup> Citizens, including many artists, are now more actively reckoning with these memory markers, which are representative of a strikingly different but equally critical history of injustice.<sup>11</sup>

Turning to film in 1997, Narkevičius used the medium to bear witness to the disappearance of communism’s byproducts, which produced powerful breaks in the region’s already fragile historical narratives. Thus, it is fruitful to frame *Once in the XX Century* as well as Narkevičius’ work at large within the Brechtian concept of interruption. During the interwar period in Weimar Germany, Bertolt Brecht developed the concept of “epic theater” in opposition to dramatic theater, which he saw as a form of passive entertainment employing a linear structure and method acting meant to provoke empathy in the viewer.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, epic theater creates *Verfremdungseffekt* or an effect of distancing or “estrangement” that results in the viewer becoming conscious of

her own conditions. Interpreting Brecht, Walter Benjamin cited the aim of epic theater as “discover[ing] the conditions of life [...] through the interruption of happenings.”<sup>13</sup> Interruption becomes a didactic tool since it “suggests the interchange between audience and actors and vice versa [...] [through which] every spectator is enabled to become a participant.”<sup>14</sup>

In Narkevičius’ work, this interruption often plays out within the vast network of buildings, monuments, memorials, and sacred spaces in Vilnius’ urban landscape. These markers are equal parts physical and mental as their relationships with city dwellers wax and wane over time based on the social, political, and economic conditions of the collective consciousness. Art historian Kirk Savage writes that, “By organizing the surface of the city into a meaningful pattern, the monuments enabled the eye, mind, and body together to experience a sense of command over the territory.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the cartographic plane of the urban landscape becomes a site of performance for the epic theater that is everyday life. *Once in the XX Century* captures an interruption on the stage that was everyday Soviet life, forcing us not only to acknowledge the physical presence of Lenin’s monument in the urban landscape, but also reflect on its fluctuating meaning across time.

Brechtian interruptions produce a temporal slowing down and offer the viewer time for reflection and, thereby, further distance the viewer from the action. Through the presentation of conspicuously edited documentary footage, *Once in the XX Century* subtly conflates two disparate historical moments—the raising and the removal of the Lenin statue. The film’s temporal ambiguity revives memories of the Soviet occupation of Lithuania and gestures to the aggressive decommunization of the country in recent years. The double X in the title *Once in the XX Century* can be read as the Roman numeral twenty or as a placeholder for an unknown or unspecified time. The juxtaposition of the tricolor flag of an independent Lithuania with the richly patinated surface of the monument (Plate 15) also confounds any attempt to accurately situate the film in time. The title playfully deploys the narrative structure of a fairytale, which traditionally begins with the cliché “Once upon a time....” This narrative construction signals a looking back. Narkevičius comments on the effect of such displacement in his work: “For me, it’s interesting to make it possible for film to not fix a document, for the images to be unplaceable, uncertain to some extent, for the audience to be unsure exactly when or how or who they were made by.”<sup>16</sup> The artist purposefully exposes and exaggerates the inconsistencies within the film in order to parse the problematic relationship between ideology and history in Lithuania during, as well as after, the Soviet era.

*Once in the XX Century* employs montage, reverse play, and the viewpoint of a handheld camera, thus compressing an epic and drawn-out event into a few minutes. These techniques echo the practices of Dziga Vertov (1896–1954), Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), and other Soviet avant-garde filmmakers of the early twentieth century, whose work remains influential today. Their films had an effect on Narkevičius, who was exposed to their techniques during the late Soviet period, once ideology had fully co-opted and corrupted the innovative approaches of the avant-garde. For instance, in the opening sequence of Eisenstein’s *October* (1928), the crowd violently topples a statue of Tsar Alexander III.<sup>17</sup> Later in the film, when the fate of the Russian Revolution appears uncertain, the statue reassembles itself, as if it were fighting back. Both Eisenstein and Narkevičius use these monuments of political figures—symbols

of power, stability, and continuity—to play with temporality, compelling the viewer to question how history is constructed, inscribed, and recalled in the everyday urban landscape. Time is not proscribed but manipulated by ideology.<sup>18</sup> Time is also malleable in the hands of artists, like Narkevičius, who work to fill in the gaps of history.

While he shirks the label of historian, Narkevičius produces artworks that Hayden V. White would classify as “fictions of factual representations.”<sup>19</sup> In *Once in the XX Century*, for example, the facts of the historian mix with the fictions of the novelist, breaking down the borders between temporalities, and thus, the disciplines of history and literature.<sup>20</sup> Since the majority of histories are written in retrospect, it is not possible to confirm the accuracy of all the details. The past moves into the present and, undoubtedly, is altered as the historian succumbs to the literary devices of the novelist in order to tell a good, captivating story. “The facts do not speak for themselves [...] the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is—in its representation—a purely discursive one,” writes White.<sup>21</sup> For both the historian as well as the novelist, language is “the instrument of mediation” between fact and fiction, the past and the present that “implies and entails a specific posture before the world, which is ethical, ideological, or more generally [...] politically contaminated.”<sup>22</sup> Like the author of a novel, the author of a historical chronicle has the freedom to negotiate rhetorical devices. No single literary device or, in White’s terminology, mode—be it metaphor or metonymy, synecdoche, or irony—is better than another, and “any given linguistic protocol will obscure as much as it reveals.”<sup>23</sup> In short, neither the historian nor the novelist is infallible; yet the mark of success is in one’s ability to manipulate language deployed in narrative form. Applied to Narkevičius, White’s postulates help us understand how the artist navigates the past through his work, and the significance of his rhetorical—aesthetic—choices as they pertain to reinscribing meaning to the past in the present.

### Mediating Histories

Narkevičius’ films, such as *Once in the XX Century*, bridge the long-forgotten original intentions of monumental forms commemorating Soviet heroes with contemporary nationalist impulses. The results enable viewers to acknowledge the context of a monument’s historical production while critically reflecting on what it represents today. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century as the General Conservator for the Austro-Hungarian Imperial and Royal Central Commission for the Research and Preservation of Monuments, Alois Riegl (1858–1905) identified the importance of associating monuments with the activities of everyday life as a means of promoting historic preservation. Regarding the reuse of monuments since antiquity, he stated that “the interest in specific intentional [artistic, as opposed to unintentional or historical] monuments, an interest which typically tended to vanish with the disappearance of those who created them, now was revitalized, as an entire population began to regard the achievement of earlier generations as part and parcel of their own.”<sup>24</sup> By taking on the responsibility of caring for monuments, we make the past relevant again. We also reassess the past in light of recent histories, allowing a more diverse range of voices to be heard. While not all monuments can or even should be preserved, those that remain act as mediators of the past, and also make us actively aware of our own place and time. Narkevičius reclaims, rehabilitates, and redeems lost, forgotten, neglected,

overshadowed, and erased histories by making monumental forms the subjects of his films. This kind of adaptive reuse brings the fraught discourses of individual and collective memory in Lithuania and, more broadly, the post-Soviet sphere to the foreground.

Narkevičius' more recent film fulfills this aim. *20 July 2015* (2016) is a fifteen-minute, three-dimensional stereoscopic film that features the removal of several socialist realist statues from Vilnius' Green Bridge (*Žalioji tiltas*).<sup>25</sup> The film begins with slow and steady pans of the four pairs of bronze statues in situ. The sharply focused close-ups pause on the statues' severely corroded surfaces. As integral features of the city's skyline for more than sixty years, the statues had weathered harsh environmental conditions, occasional hooliganism, and numerous rehabilitations. Cast in iron by prominent Lithuanian sculptors of the Soviet period, the statues represent universal communist themes in a hyper-naturalist style: agriculture (Bernardas Bučas, Petras Vaivada), industry and construction (Napoleonas Petrulis, Bronius Vyšniauskas), education (Juozas Mikėnas, Juozas Kėdainis), and the military (Bornius Pundzius).<sup>26</sup> Each approximately 10 feet tall, the sculptures were dedicated in 1952, along with the bridge, which is one of several crossings connecting the two parts of the city.<sup>27</sup> As Viktoras Liutkus notes, "these groups [...] presented stereotypical figures, or in the period's terminology, 'a typical hero in typical circumstances,' rather than an individualistic interpretation."<sup>28</sup> During Lithuania's status as a Soviet Republic, the statues reminded passersby of the nation's achievements on the path to building communism. On the one hand, they were propaganda tools aimed at influencing the local population; while on the other, they were representative of mainstream Soviet culture. The Green Bridge was first registered as a protected object of cultural value in 1993. It was re-registered in 1997, along with each of the four pairs of statues that were previously unlisted.<sup>29</sup> Thus, in the immediate post-Soviet period, the Green Bridge and its statues were spared from demolition, remaining frozen in time until the night of July 20, 2015.

Multiple visual and compositional interruptions mark this technically advanced and logistically complicated film. Unlike his earlier films, which can be viewed on a monitor or in a black box, *20 July 2015* is Narkevičius' first 3D production, requiring strict installation and viewing procedures. 3D glasses are necessary to focus the image; however, they also mediate the viewing experience—and by extension—the relationship between the artwork and the viewer. Narkevičius provides further interruption to the film's initial visually seductive panorama by breaking it up with commentary. A voiceover within the first few minutes of the film proclaims: "If a splinter piece falls down, it could kill a fish."<sup>30</sup> This unattributed sound bite is an exaggerated reference to the abysmal state of the statues. Are the statues in such disrepair that they threaten not only passersby but also the fish that swim underneath the bridge? If they are literally falling apart, why have they not been conserved or already removed? Why only now has attention been so urgently directed to the Green Bridge statues?

Later in the film, a scruffy, middle-aged man appears several times as another form of interruption. First, he enters the frame flailing his hands in an exaggerated clapping motion (Plate 16). A member of Narkevičius' crew, he is calibrating the static, twin stereoscopic cameras, so they are in sync, literally in time, with one another, in order to create the impressive three-dimensional effect achieved in this film. This action punctuates the film several times—in the early morning when the bridge is empty and again during rush hour when the bridge is clogged with people, cars, and buses. This man reappears also later in the film, when he enters a shot to clean the camera

lens (Figure 12.2). Although Narkevičius has employed teams of camera operators, sound engineers, and other technicians in the production of previous films, they have never had a visible role. This man's interruptions easily could have been cut; however, they now serve to disturb the viewer, bringing greater awareness to an already hyper-sensory filmic experience.

The disruptions in *20 July 2015* detract from the film's otherwise plodding pace. Perched atop scaffolding, workers with hardhats and safety vests use blowtorches to separate the statues from their pedestals. The film's ambient sound grows louder with construction noises. The workers methodically encase the statues in steel frames (Figure 12.3). Then, on the night of July 20, 2015, the workers attach straps to the frames, and the crane swoops in, lifting the statues one by one onto the flatbed of a truck. For a moment, each statue—approximately two to three tons in weight—delicately balances in the air. The scene recalls Narkevičius' *Once in the XX Century* in which a statue also appears to fly straight out of the dustbin of history.

At the time of filming, the debate over the Green Bridge statues had reached a climax in the media. Preempting any official decision, Narkevičius and his crew set up in and around the site more than a week prior to the statues' removal. On July 20, 2015, Narkevičius captured the event along with a crowd of international reporters and photographers. Media presence at the site was visibly greater than that of passersby, who were, on the whole, apathetic. Most passersby caught on camera do not stop to look or ask questions. Yet, out of curiosity, a few gather along the guardrails, tinkering on their mobile phones. Their passion pales in comparison to that of the boisterous crowds gathered for the removal of Vilnius' Lenin in 1991, as seen in *Once in the XX Century*. Reflecting on the night, Narkevičius commented: "There was no public interest [...] All of its importance was mediatized [...]." <sup>31</sup> *20 July 2015* concludes with



Figure 12.2 Deimantas Narkevičius, frame from *20 July 2015*, 2016. 3D video, 15:08 min. Photograph © Deimantas Narkevičius.





Figure 12.3 Deimantas Narkevičius, frame from *20 July 2015, 2016*. 3D video, 15:08 min. Photograph © Deimantas Narkevičius.

a clip of a flustered reporter from *Rossia*, the Russian state-owned television station, making several failed attempts to record a story for the morning news (Figure 12.4).<sup>32</sup> Against the backdrop of the statues' removal, she describes them as being "in a state of emergency" and dismally projects that they "will not be returned to the bridge." Her outtakes, which are intentionally included in Narkevičius' film, are interruptions of an interruption within the urban landscape and make his film a meta-commentary on the mediatization of history. Like the crewmember calibrating the cameras, the Russian reporter's broadcast could have easily been cut; yet she remains in the film, providing an alternative narrative to the night's events.

This final vignette gestures to the scope of the debates surrounding the Green Bridge statues, which were not limited to Lithuania. In 2010, Iurii Luzhkov, then mayor of Moscow, offered to restore the pair of soldiers in honor of the upcoming 65th anniversary of the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany.<sup>33</sup> For Russia, these statues represent the liberation of Lithuania from fascists in 1944, while for Lithuania, they signify the subsequent colonization by the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> Yet, long after the fall of the Soviet Union, the soldiers continued to don their Red Army uniforms and hold a Soviet flag topped with a hammer and sickle, a symbol banned in 2008 by Lithuania's strict anti-communist laws.<sup>35</sup> Despite the prohibitively expensive cost of restoration of even just one statue, the city of Vilnius refused Luzhkov's offer. With this unprompted Russian intervention, the Green Bridge statues became a transhistorical and transnational issue steeped in the history, trauma, and memory of a post-Soviet state. Remigijus Šimašius, then mayor of Vilnius whose mayoral campaign coincided with the rise of this debate,



Figure 12.4 Deimantas Narkevičius, frames from *20 July 2015*, 2016. 3D video, 15:08 min. Photograph © Deimantas Narkevičius.

publicly stated that that “the statues represent a lie [...] a mockery of the real people who had to live during the Soviet period [...]”,<sup>36</sup> Others, like Larisa Dmitriieva, a representative of the Lithuanian Union of Russians, disagreed: “This is our history and there’s no way we can change it [...]”,<sup>37</sup> Yet another faction suggested the statues be relocated to Grūto Parkas, where they could still be seen, but in the company of other divested Soviet symbols. Framing the Green Bridge statues as *sculptures* or decorative works of art, art historian Skaidra Trilupaitytė argues that they should be judged first for their aesthetic, then for their political value.<sup>38</sup> A range of opinions among officials and citizens alike surrounded the events on July 20, 2015.

Although entrenched in these debates, Narkevičius’ *20 July 2015* does not pass judgment on the removal of the Green Bridge statues but rather presents the events as they unfolded, albeit enhanced or even distorted by 3D technology. The artist says, “I do not think there are good or bad monuments. We need to develop correct and clear articulation of our history. Monuments are just silent artifacts.”<sup>39</sup> In reflecting on his film, he characterized the removal as “outdated revenge on our past in a quite destructive form.”<sup>40</sup> Like Trilupaitytė, Narkevičius sees the statues as works of art that, although ideologically charged, deserve to be seen from multiple points of view. “If we were to look at art objects as relics of political regimes, we would need to remove a lot of art from museums,” he observes.<sup>41</sup> Having long dealt with such objects in his work, he is acutely aware of the multiplicities in meaning. Socialist realist statues, like those found on the Green Bridge, are evidence of a specific ideology, time, and place. Noting that the bridge itself is of Soviet design, Narkevičius questions whether a true purging

of history is even possible. “When there are no marks of the former occupation,” he says, “people are probably not learning from the past, and they repeat the past.”<sup>42</sup> In March 2016, the Department of Cultural Heritage in the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture approved the reevaluation of the Green Bridge and its statues based on the recommendation of an expert committee convened the previous spring.<sup>43</sup> Officially removed under the pretense of restoration, the statues have yet to be returned.

Vulnerable to the fluctuating environment to which they are bound, memory markers like the monuments of Lenin and the statues on the Green Bridge provide us with a false sense of historical closure. Although made of stone or metal, they are only as permanent as the consensus that built them. Today, both in and outside Eastern Europe, we are reckoning with these objects and the histories they have written as well as erased. Through films that directly engage with monumental forms, Narkevičius stakes a claim to the reuse of monuments, which, in turn, invests the viewer in acknowledging the multiplicity of histories. Following the artist’s lead, we are asked to deconstruct and reconstruct established histories in order to imagine monuments anew for the future. By seeking out already inscribed sites of memory and highlighting them in works of art, artists like Narkevičius do the work of remembering by never allowing us to forget.

## Notes

- 1 Hayden V. White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 112.
- 2 See Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 3–22; Mark Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian,” *October* 120 (Spring 2007): 140–172; Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York, NY: International Center of Photography, 2009); Dieter Roelstraete, “The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art,” *e-flux journal* 4 (March 2009), accessed July 19, 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art>.
- 3 For an overview of Lithuanian contemporary art, see Kęstutis Kuizinas, “Lithuanian Art from 1988 to the Present,” in *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 354–361; and Linara Dovydaitytė, Renata Dubinskaitė, Asta Vaičiulytė, and Simon Rees, eds., *Lithuanian Art: 2000–2010: Ten Years* (Vilnius: Contemporary Art Centre, 2010).
- 4 Kęstutis Kuizinas and Jonas Valatkevičius, *Deimantas Narkevičius: La Biennale di Venezia 49* (Vilnius: Contemporary Art Center, 2001), 16, 18. Narkevičius repeatedly identifies the early 1990s as a critical moment of self-reflection in light of the socialist past. See Krzysztof Kościuczuk and Deimantas Narkevičius, “Deimantas Narkevičius in Conversation with Krzysztof Kościuczuk,” *Archive* 1 (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2008): n.p.
- 5 Kuizinas and Valatkevičius, *Narkevičius*, 14.
- 6 After Lithuanian independence, it was renamed Lukiškės Square. Copies of the Lenin statue by Russian sculptor Nikolai Tomskii still stand in the Russian cities of St. Petersburg, Voronezh, and Irkutsk. Eglė Mikalajūnė and Rasa Antanavičiūtė, *Vilnius Monuments: A Story of Change* (Vilnius: Lietuvos dailės muziejus, 2012), 186.
- 7 Grūto Parkas is located on a multi-acre private estate near the spa town of Druskininkai, 130 kilometers south of Vilnius. Several dozen statues are on display in this open-air museum, along with indoor exhibitions, a café, and a souvenir shop.
- 8 Eglė Rindzevičiūtė, “Boundary Objects of Communism: Assembling the Soviet Past in Lithuanian Museums,” (Paris, 2013), 1–28, accessed August 24, 2017, [https://www.academia.edu/36252151/Boundary\\_Objects\\_of\\_Communism\\_Assembling\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Past\\_in\\_Lithuanian\\_Museums](https://www.academia.edu/36252151/Boundary_Objects_of_Communism_Assembling_the_Soviet_Past_in_Lithuanian_Museums)
- 9 Most notably, the émigré artist duo Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid initiated the international project *Monumental Propaganda* in 1993. Taking its name from Lenin’s

- official plan to promote communist ideals through large-scale commemorative plaques and sculptures after the 1917 October Revolution, they called for “a creative collaboration” with Socialist Realist monuments. See Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, “What is to be Done with Monumental Propaganda,” *Artforum* (May 1992): 102–103.
- 10 Southern Poverty Law Center, “Whose Heritage? A Report on Public Symbols of the Confederacy,” released in 2016, updated in 2018, accessed June 10, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/data-projects/whose-heritage>.
  - 11 Narkevičius and I have discussed these events. He writes, “I do not know if we can compare those Confederate monuments with our [Lithuanian] post-war sculptures. Nevertheless, people are still giving so much importance to the political figures.” Email correspondence from artist to author, May 27, 2017. While hesitant to compare the situations, he notes the importance of didactic materials, regardless of whether or not a monument is removed. “The action is politicized and not articulated enough from the historical perspective,” he writes. Email correspondence from artist to author, August 16, 2017.
  - 12 See Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles, eds., *Brecht on Art and Politics* (London: Methuen, 2003); John Willett, ed., *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic* (London: Methuen, 1974).
  - 13 Walter Benjamin, “What Is Epic Theater?” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1968), 150.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, 152.
  - 15 Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 163.
  - 16 Martin Clark, “Deimantas Narkevičius and Martin Clark in Conversation: Starr Auditorium, Tate Modern October 24, 2004,” in *Deimantas Narkevičius: Once in the XX Century* (Bristol: Arnolfini, 2006), 51.
  - 17 Svetlana Boym calls the film “a war on monuments.” See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001), 89.
  - 18 See Boris Groys, “Back from the Future,” in *Arteast 2000+: The Art of Eastern Europe* (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 2001); reprinted in *Art Institutions of Eastern Europe*, ed. Alenka Gregoric (Karlsruhe: Badischer Kunstverein, 2008), 9.
  - 19 “I emphasize—again—that the historicity of my works should not be associated with history as a scholarly discipline,” says Narkevičius in Kuizinas and Valatkevičius, *Narkevičius*, 16. Hayden V. White, “The Fictions of Factual Representations,” in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, eds. Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 22.
  - 20 The novelist can be replaced by any creative type, such as an artist.
  - 21 White, “The Fictions of Factual Representations,” 26.
  - 22 *Ibid.*, 29–30.
  - 23 *Ibid.*, 30–31.
  - 24 Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin” (1903), *Oppositions: The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies Journal* 25 (Fall 1982): 26. Riegl advocates for systematizing the preservation of monuments on the basis that they are artistic and culturally significant objects. They exemplify what he calls *Kunstwollen* or “artistic will,” the force driving the dominant style of a given period.
  - 25 The bridge takes its name from its green-painted steel guardrails and side panels.
  - 26 In Lithuanian, the students are known as *Akademiniš jaunima* or “academic youth,” and soldiers are known as *Taikos sargyboje*, literally “Guiding Peace.” Marija Drėmaitė, Rūta Leitanaitytė, and Julija Reklaitė, eds. *Vilnius, 1900–2016: An Architectural Guide* (Vilnius: Leidykla Lapas and Architektūros fondas, 2016), 112; Jolanta Marcišauskytė-Jurašienė, *Vilnius Sculpture Walks: A Guide to the Outdoor Statues of Lithuania’s Capital*, trans. Darius Sužiedėlis (Vilnius: Modernaus meno centras, 2013), 76–79.
  - 27 The Lenin statue in Narkevičius’ film *Once in the XX Century* was dedicated in the same year. In the Soviet period, the bridge was named after World War II General Ivan Cherniakhovskii.
  - 28 Viktoras Liutkus, “Breaking the Barriers: Art under the Pressure of Soviet Ideology from World War II to Glasnost,” in *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic*

- Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991*, 306. Liutkus is quoting Frederick Engels, who defined realism as, “the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances.” See Frederick Engels, “Engels to Margaret Harkness in London,” April 1888, accessed June 26, 2017, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1888/letters/88\\_04\\_15.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1888/letters/88_04_15.htm).
- 29 Kultūros Ministerijos Kultūros Vertybių Apsaugos Departamentas Įsakymas Dėl Nr. 380 Objektų Įrašymo į Registrą, 1997 m. gruodžio 31 d. (The Ministry of Culture, The Department of Cultural Values Protection: Order No. 380 on the Registration of Objects in the Register, December 31, 1997), accessed October 2, 2017, <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.DE6550C6E655>.
- 30 This quotation is reminiscent of a statement made by Vilnius’ Mayor Remigijus Šimašius: “The sculptures are simply in critical condition and, from a gust of wind, could fall at any moment on the head of passersby.” “Vlasti Moskvoy vosstanovliat pamiatnik voïnamosvoboditeliam v Vil’niuse,” *Ria Novosti*, February 2, 2010, accessed October 7, 2017, <https://ria.ru/moscow/20100204/207702835.html>.
- 31 *BALTIC Bites: Deimantas Narkevičius*, October 17, 2016, accessed October 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKkSP5yjP80>.
- 32 “Na Zelenom mostu v Vil’niuse demontirovali znamenitye skul’ptury,” *Rossia*, July 22, 2016, accessed October 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ee9jqI0tnCE>.
- 33 “Maskvos valdzia ketina restauruoti skulptūras ant Žaliojo tilto Vilniuje,” *Delfi*, February 4, 2010, accessed October 2, 2017, <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/maskvos-valdzia-ketina-restauruoti-skulpturas-ant-zaliojo-tilto-vilniuje.d?id=28611043#ixzz3M8ihFCe>.
- 34 In Russia, the soldiers are represented on the new five-ruble coin, which began minting in August 2016. See “Litva raskritikovala vypushchennye v Rossii monety so skul’pturami iz Vil’niusa,” *RT*, August 3, 2016, accessed October 7, 2017, <https://russian.rt.com/article/315131-litva-raskritikovala-vypushchennye-v-rossii-monety-so>.
- 35 See James Kanter, “Silent Sentinels at Center of Lithuanian Debate on Bygone Era,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2013, accessed October 2, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/12/world/europe/silent-sentinels-at-center-of-lithuanian-debate-on-bygone-era.html?mcubz=0>.
- 36 “Last major Soviet statues come down in Lithuanian capital,” *Reuters*, July 20, 2015, accessed October 2, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lithuania-statues-idUSKCN0PU0OW20150720>.
- 37 Šarūnas Černiauskas, “Russian-speaking Lithuanians upset at plans to remove Soviet-era monument,” *The Guardian*, July 16, 2015, accessed October 2, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/16/russian-speaking-lithuanians-upset-plans-remove-soviet-era-monuments>.
- 38 Skaidra Trilupaitytė, “Monuments, Memory, and Mutating Public Sphere: Some Initiatives in Vilnius,” *Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences* 60 no. 2 (Summer 2014), accessed October 2, 2017, [http://www.lituanus.org/2014/14\\_2\\_02Trilupaityte.html](http://www.lituanus.org/2014/14_2_02Trilupaityte.html).
- 39 Email to author, August 16, 2017.
- 40 Alessandro Vincentelli, wall text, *Deimantas Narkevičius: Double Youth*, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, October 14, 2016–January 8, 2017.
- 41 Kościuczuk and Narkevičius, “In Conversation,” n.p.
- 42 *BALTIC Bites: Deimantas Narkevičius*. Certain statues from the Soviet period remain in situ in Vilnius and across Lithuania. See Marcišauskytė-Jurašienė, *Sculpture Walks*, and Drėmaitė, Leitanaite, and Reklaitė, eds. *Vilnius, 1900–2016*.
- 43 The committee was formed in May 2015 and led by Romas Pakalnis, Chair of the Lithuanian National Commission for UNESCO. “Reshena sud’ba skul’ptury Zelenogo mosta v Vil’niuse,” *RuBaltic*, March 2, 2016, accessed October 2, 2017, <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/02032016-skulptury-zelenogo-mosta/>. This article speaks of the shame associated with the statues.

## 13 History in the Future Tense

### On Recent Installations by Igor Makarevich and Elena Elagina

*Jane A. Sharp*

When we speak of post-war Russian art, that is, art produced after the Second World War, vocabulary/terminology counts. For most scholars a roadblock immediately arises: do we address official or unofficial art; socialist realist or nonconformist art? Each of these terms activates historical, interpretive frameworks that are by no means fixed. Our dilemma is compounded when we invoke a vocabulary and paradigm associated primarily with the consolidation of critical discourse in Western Europe and the United States around modernism and its many discontents, such as the canon, definitions of postmodernism, and the like. This chapter does not attempt to review this troubled territory, rather, I am obliged to remind readers that they should remain unsettled by the consequences of such historical reckonings: the promotion and neglect of artists/oeuvres and the over-determined discourse that has constrained others. Perhaps more compelling now is the way terminological preferences, so often structured in binary or dialectical modes, miss or reduce the extraordinary *thickness* of time. Here I seek to intervene to consider a kind of historical modeling that might be called *stratigraphic* rather than anachronic in the sense that the artworks discussed are shown to be related to each other not through a singular unfolding of causal connections, nor do they embrace a universal theory of time.<sup>1</sup> They are linked, rather, through a creative approach that resembles archaeological excavation of the past in which layers and materialities become confused and exposed. As we shall see, in the process of discovering and examining these ruptures, viewers may find their understanding of recent Russian art especially vulnerable to ongoing methodological revision.

I do so by returning to yet another problem of historical framing. If we recognize only a particular strand of Russian twentieth-century art as *avant-garde*, we are shunted down one of the paradigm constraining channels invoked above. Dominating decades of exhibitions, monographs, and dissertations are the radical practices of Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) and Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953) that emerged from the 1917 October Revolution, and the Marxist-materialist commitments of those artists connected at one time to the Moscow-based Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury, or INKhUK)—and the various constructivisms that developed from it.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I revisit the oeuvres of two Muscovite artists, Elena Elagina (b. 1949) and Igor Makarevich (b. 1943), who are deserving of study precisely because they complicate this picture by juxtaposing and embedding ambivalent views of a longer modernist history—and create parafictional characters to inhabit the spaces in between. Their work sows doubt in the avant-garde project that always looked to the future as anticipated in the present, by continually reshuffling elements that seem to turn our attention to the reverse perception: that the past is always ever-changing, and always troubled by new encounters with it in the present. In terms borrowed

from the framework proposed by François Hartog, as we contemplate Elagina and Makarevich's oeuvre, we are braced by the interweaving, and in some instances, collision of "regimes of historicity," generated by a shared sense of crisis in the present, or more specifically, the period immediately following the dismemberment of the USSR.<sup>3</sup>

Although conceived separately and with distinct trajectories, two projects by these artists are frequently curated together. The first, most recently displayed in Warsaw (Profile Foundation, 2015) under the title *Mushrooms of the Avant-Garde* and *Pagan* (Plate 17 and Figure 13.1), is a reinstallation of a number of paintings and sculptures created as a coherent series, and shown previously in London (2008) and partially in Moscow (2005, 2015).<sup>4</sup> The second, set in Lodz (Atlas Sztuki, 2015), is titled *Homo Lignum* and is the latest episode in an epic history, part narrative (based on the fictitious diaries of a character named Nikolai Borisov), and part visual and sculptural realization of allusive motifs within that narrative. It was composed of two sections, or halls: "Borisov's Museum" (Figure 13.2) and "History of the Cupboard" (Figure 13.3).



Figure 13.1 Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich, *Pagan* (or *Mushrooms of the Avant-Garde*), gallery view, Profile Foundation, Warsaw, 2015. Photograph © Igor Makarevich.



Figure 13.2 Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich, *Homo Lignum* (*Borisov's Museum*), gallery view, Atlas Sztuki, Lodz, 2015. Photograph © Igor Makarevich.



Figure 13.3 Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich, *Homo Lignum* (*History of the Cupboard*), gallery view, Atlas Sztuki, Lodz, 2015. Photograph © Igor Makarevich.

Both have become self-generating creative systems as installed in a variety of contexts and locations.<sup>5</sup> These installations repeat several elements: in *Pagan*, the image of the fly-agaric mushroom recurs with varying ornaments, while in *Homo Lignum*, the artist introduces new configurations of Borisov’s life, artifacts, and fantasies. Although this last project, like *Pagan*, results from the two artists’ collaboration, it is authored by Makarevich in the sense that he created the “autobiographical” text—the diary entries—and most of the visual imagery.<sup>6</sup> The reorganization of *Homo Lignum* in Lodz contains, for the first time, Borisov’s/Makarevich’s new diary entries, and a revived locus of traumatic resonance: the repurposed cupboard. The diary documents the primary character’s activity and state of mind; it also amplifies the visual impact of the objects displayed. In each installation text (diary) fragments are paired with photographed and silkscreened images created by Makarevich that show the author/character in a state of exhaustion, capitulation, and meditative trance.

Repetition, or the altered recurrence of motifs and visual elements across time, is amplified through the gaps viewers experience encountering each work in Vienna, Moscow, and Lodz. Each installation builds on those of the past and sharpens our sensitivity to time. We thus perceive singular events, both in the narrative, and in the sequence of images, as linked in ways that may not be anticipated or adequately explained. Viewers become aware of each project generating its own temporality (like the character Borisov’s biography). Each iteration sparks an awareness of time’s course punctuated by events reshuffled out of chronological sequence. The cabinet, or cupboard (*shkaf*), concentrates their sensory and symbolic registers in an accumulated



layering of the past. In the State Tretyakov Gallery installation, objects appeared that were not all present in the Lodz cabinet (Figures 13.4 and 13.5). In each installation, elements are repeated, deleted, and others introduced, as if a site once excavated, but not emptied, had suddenly, miraculously continued to yield new treasures—while others are “lost.” Indeed, in each location the artists must hunt for a new cabinet—a readymade object, fashioned by someone other than the artists themselves. But, in a gesture very different from Duchamp’s, the cabinet serves as a material and metonymical extension of the regime explored—whether oriented to a projected future, or an event in the past. It encloses and reveals objects and artworks created by the character (and Makarevich), while transferring to them historical textures of a different time and place. In Lodz, the cupboard housed, among other instruments, a guillotine—overlaying an icon of eighteenth-century revolutionary violence with the distinctive materialities of the nineteenth and twentieth. The aesthetic choices displayed here ultimately connect both to the artist’s fascination with the recent Soviet past, and in this way differ dramatically from those of the para-utopian *Pagan*.<sup>7</sup>

The interdependency of the two projects is thus not immediately obvious. Yet, it is crucial that viewers understand the artists’ insistence on the formative, and self-delusional, role played by Russia’s still dominant avant-garde figures—as examined in the *Mushroom* paintings—as they contemplate the history and obsessions of the *Homo Lignum*. The *Mushroom* paintings (authored by both artists) bear witness, as do the diary entries, to a compulsive—never-ending—self-referential practice. The iconography (predominantly the “fly-agaric” or *mukhomor*) may be repeated, much as rectangles, circles and interpenetrating planes are—to demonstrate its viability as an epistemology of self-knowledge and historical transfiguration. If in *Homo Lignum*, the character (Borisov) succumbs to self-delusion while repeatedly returning to his constructed world, he, like the figures summoned by the paintings, does so by seeking—and failing to find—unity within a larger social, and indeed, cosmic, order.<sup>8</sup> The recurring images that arise in the diary drawings become *topoi* of humility and emulation that should lead to ultimate revelation. They are reinforced by the rituals enacted by Borisov (recorded by the diary and materialized in sculpted or constructed wooden objects), which produce states of spiritual ecstasy and orgasmic release. They all register the character’s fear of a tragic end. Similarly, the mushroom imagery in *Pagan*, as other commentators have observed, is informed by the ritual reenactment of popular beliefs; consumed as a remedy for illness or vehicle for trance, the fly-agaric may lead to death.<sup>9</sup> The paintings, then, like the things to which they refer, are an unreliable “source of life” (the title of a related series of paintings in an earlier co-authored installation [*Kladez’ zbizni*]). By using this quintessential icon of Russianness as they cite Malevich, whose paintings the series in *Pagan* emulate, the artists suggest that duplicity and betrayal may be the ultimate outcome of following a system *ad absurdum*. Makarevich, voiced as Borisov, emphasizes the underlying structural logic of his character’s struggle (also Malevich’s) by detailing his (Borisov’s) prescriptions with methodical exactness. But the viewer’s apprehension of risks taken also constitutes the projects’ affective appeal.

The shift from serious social purpose to ingenious, if often speculative, verbal play also betrays the presence of Elagina, as instigator, and actual creator, of elements within both projects. Because Makarevich signs the painted images using his own name, tautology and paradox come to define our encounter with the “artist,” persuading us of the excessive function of authorship—whether of a national idea, or a universal visual language. The paintings perform, as Makarevich and Elagina have consistently described their aims, “archaeological work on the field of historic destruction.”<sup>10</sup>



Figure 13.4 Igor Makarevich, *Borisov's Cupboard*, 2015, mixed media. On view in State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2015. Photograph © Igor Makarevich.



Figure 13.5 Igor Makarevich, *Borisov's Cupboard*, 2015, mixed media. On view in Atlas Sztuki, Lodz. Photograph © Igor Makarevich.

They signal the unavoidable legacy and futility of the Russian avant-garde's utopian program, which Makarevich and Elagina identify repeatedly with Malevich and Tatlin in their other series: *Within the Limits of the Sublime* (1992–present) and *Source of Life* (1995–present). Shown together, the paintings, photographs, and repetitions of the spiral form, link the messianic resonance of Malevich's and Tatlin's art with that of their contemporaries in the 1920s. An imagery of infinite abstract space, of monochrome grounds and striated horizons, extends the artists' interest in anachrony (signing a visual vocabulary they could not have authored) to the poetics of writers from the Association for Real Art (Ob'edinenie real'nogo iskusstva, or *Oberiu*), Daniil Kharms (1905–1942) and Aleksandr Vvedensky (1904–1941), and even to the bizarre—if once persuasive—cosmic preoccupations of philosopher-scientists, Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903) and Konstantin Tsiolkovskii (1857–1935).<sup>11</sup> For as repetitions, the images serve no immediate goal of generating (or regenerating) a new world from the old; rather, excessive quotation in *Pagan* conveys the absurdity and painful consequences of these (past) projects and their futurological utopias, nesting in politics of the present moment (the 1990s–2000s). During the first decades of the twenty-first century, critical interventions into national narratives of Russian art by contemporary artists have led to censorship, and, on occasion, the violent destruction of artworks. Such agitational inflections of action and reaction remind us as well that Elagina and Makarevich's generation (like that of the revolutionary era) witnessed the collapse of two economic systems, and the reinvigoration of the police state.

As in Borisov's diaries, over-identification with a specific avant-garde lineage in the paintings of *Pagan* defends against the pretense of authenticity that freights such authorial delusions with the potential for self-destruction. Viewed as contemporary paintings, the series dramatizes the act of impersonation rather than emulation. Shown in sequence and signed, they ask us to reconsider the role played by the creative individual in Russia today by redirecting our attention to the choices made by others in the earlier historical moment of the 1910s–20s. Malevich's rectangles (mushrooms) interrupt colored planes; the figure of the square elides with Tatlin's spiral—inconceivable doubles for the art historian and artist alike (their enmity is well known). The painted forms are hollowed out; the genus supplanted with an abstraction of the more generic *boletus*. Representing both, the images signal the provocative ambiguity of abstraction in Russian art history and figure the present moment as a traumatic gap—a result of historical neglect and outright official suppression. To the extent that the resemblance of the paintings to Malevich's and Tatlin's work succeeds, their allusive power overwhelms, conveying the real impact of other careers abandoned, distorted, or forgotten.

Elagina and Makarevich's projects also reveal how the postwar avant-garde's marginal encounters with their predecessors still constrain research on contemporary Russian art, both in Moscow and abroad.<sup>12</sup> For decades, unofficial artists have drawn parallels between institutional neglect of the historical avant-garde and that of their own, working as most did, in studios and apartments on the margins of Soviet and Western modernist art systems.<sup>13</sup> Following the collapse of the Soviet empire, they have become equally concerned with the constant expansion of the avant-garde's mythic status. Komar and Melamid were among the first to argue, in 1980, that Malevich's dominance obscured the real connections that linked generations, and the impact their own generation might have on new audiences.<sup>14</sup> Both pairs are concerned with what Igor Golomstock pithily termed the *Malevich complex*: “a designation of the inner split between the artist's unmediated experiencing of the world, and his rational outlook on the world,” a split that he argues became definitive as radical artists (Malevich in particular) were appointed commissars, and the course they had begun, “the destruction of past culture, became deeply inimical and dangerous to him [them] [...]” In both oeuvres, past (Malevich) and present (Komar and Melamid), it is apparent that the use of key terms, such as “avant-garde,” “right/left,” “official/unofficial” are calculated and hint at a foregone conclusion: that coherent ideologies separating the two, by the 1980s, had become confused, overburdened with the ambitions of a modernist visual culture that had neutralized the real stakes in political engagement: capitulation, exile, and emigration.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, in *Homo Lignum* and *Pagan*, self-realization occurs precisely in these gaps, with the rematerialization of their hidden connections. By following the artists' narratives as a sequence of reversals, of promises made and retracted, viewers *re*-trace the material logic of each event. The retrospective gesture enacted becomes primary, overwriting an earlier historical one—a process anticipated by the artists, and encoded into the artworks. Just as Malevich's fictional “first” suprematist painting—the *Black Square*—is haunted by ghosts of earlier experiments (the black surface of the 1915 version barely conceals an earlier composition), so too, the *Mushrooms*, with their ghostly echoes, intervene in a linear trajectory that has its own complex history of agency.

*Source of Life: Life in the Snow* (1995) was created to explore the seeming contradiction of one “regime of historicity” enmeshed in another. A series of paintings reproducing Malevich's progression from cubism to suprematism in fact disguised a second narrative. Aleksei Tolstoy's variation on the Pinnochio tale, *The Golden Key* or

*the Adventures of Buratino* (1935), is present in the underpaint, as ghostly images of the wooden puppet emerge through close scrutiny of their surfaces, the faktura of which remains nearly identical to that of the originals (the backs of the canvases also fraudulently reproduce Malevich's historical titles). However, this series owes its origins equally to the more recent Soviet era story of a creative oeuvre emerging, by accident, from a peasant woman hit on the head with a wooden log by her drunk husband.<sup>16</sup> The often recited Soviet ideal of self-taught, naïf genius constituting a unique talent is materialized in the rural gables that frame the cardinal images of the black and red square (Figure 13.6). This incident merges with Malevich's own parable of origins in *Source of Life*; as in *Pagan*, the emotional register of a preposterous narrative overwhelms that of creative invention. Both installations prevent us from taking history as myth by supplanting the transfigurative promise evoked in the paintings with the affective power of its lived experience. Utopias are never what their authors once proposed as ideology, and the visual evidence provided by their artist-advocates is at best ambiguous. These projects restore our ability to discern the difference.

In Tolstoy's novella, *Buratino*, the wooden boy, ultimately finds solace, and self-realization, in a magical theater. Makarevich's *Borisov* reverses this character's attributes (he seeks to merge with nature as a wooden hybrid), and recalls many other fictional heroes, too, from Nikolai Gogol's Akakii Akakievich Bashmachkin in the *Overcoat* (1842), to Edouard Manet's *Boy with the Cherries* (1859) (as recounted by Charles Baudelaire), and most of all, Georges Bataille's disturbed narrator in his novella, *Story of the Eye* (1928).<sup>17</sup> Chapters from this erotic tour de force, especially "The Antique Cupboard," inspired *Borisov's* imaginary world, created in Moscow and then (differently) in Lodz, in "History of the Cupboard" and "Borisov's Museum." However, unlike the source text, in Makarevich's story, the cupboard itself becomes the image upon which the character fixates, as materials and objects, with all their associations enhance the imaginative and physical use to which it is put.

Among Makarevich's earliest painted subjects, the cupboard is a source of fascination in itself (Figure 13.7). A found object, with traces of its use rendered materially



Figure 13.6 Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich, *Source of Life: Malevich's Hut*, mixed media, gallery view, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2005. Photograph © Igor Makarevich.



Figure 13.7 Igor Makarevich, *Cupboard in a Violin Master's Studio*, 1966, tempera on wood, 60 x 40 cm. Collection of the Artist. Photograph © Igor Makarevich.

in its textures—the desk/cupboard is a motivating agent for the artist. Memory resides there; untold stories abound within its collections of detritus and valued shards of past lives. As in his meticulously detailed paintings of medical instruments, in the cupboard paintings, Makarevich attaches the rhetorical power of ornamental excess to descriptive fact—thereby inverting a legitimating feature of socialist realism (its pretense to record “truthfully”). True to his own sources, the artist has reiterated Kharms’s (and the *Oberiu*) statement on the metaphorical importance of the object to both: “art is a cupboard.” Its contents remain closed to the viewer until examined—when its potential as a vehicle for imaginary release is demonstrated to be inexhaustible.<sup>18</sup> In *Homo Lignum*, the items stocked in the cabinet signal a shift in temporal emphasis. The present does not (or not only) mirror future ideals and fantasies, but addresses a different regime of historicity, one in which past compounds upon past to mix registers of affect—of horror, delight, and fear.

Although drawn from the same literary lineage, Makarevich’s character, Borisov, differs drastically from Bataille’s, especially in narrative voice. Both speak in the first person singular, as if mimicking an authorial presence. Yet if Bataille’s adolescent seems, in Susan Sontag’s words, to “use a small crude vocabulary of feeling, all relating to the prospects of action,” Makarevich’s is polyphonic: at times plaintive, fearful and pathetic, at others, paranoid, hyperbolic, and ecstatic.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the artist’s purpose is clearly not pornographic. Borisov endures endless apparent or imaginary humiliations with the simple goal of remaining in his tedious job. His actions are masochistic rather than sadistic. Suffering social injustices must be endured so as to experience suffering as sexual and spiritual catharsis. All forms of pleasure are the result of self-inflicted pain, physically rendered present in the exhibition as bed-rack, cupboard/guillotine.

As viewers, we may feel a certain sympathy for the character, but identification with him is thwarted. The visual prompts remind us of our public presence, a fact that organizes the fictional narrative. The act of looking is part of Borisov’s debilitating social animus—his obsession with the objects he builds also makes him fearful of being seen creating or using them.

29/06/1953. The cupboard that I hid in the shed fills all my time with some sort of pleasure and tranquillity but at the same time anxiety. I keep imagining that someone will discover those planks and either will throw them away or take them. This much is evident: I was watched all the time. As soon as I get distracted, they plot against me, so I need to stay alert. (*The Notebooks of Nikolai Ivanovich Borisov* [new entry; 2015])

What kind of persona (*personazh*) emerges from this scopophobic condition? Like Bataille’s narrator, Borisov is more extravagant than any we might expect to find in a picaresque pornographic novel. Superficially, he seems to have inherited Makarevich’s fellow conceptualist Ilya Kabakov’s communal voices. But *Homo Lignum* is a different order of misfit; his deeper pathologies mirror a parallel world of past and present social exclusion.

Over time, the installations have accentuated different aspects of voice, and different preoccupations (creator’s) with history. In each elaboration, Makarevich’s own biography cleaves to, while still remaining distinct from, that of his character. In the first iteration of *Ligomania*, created in 1996, we were introduced to a character whose

obsessions ostracized him. Borisov has a biography, a family history that in Soviet terms would have been regarded as marginal—these are not the model workers of Soviet industry or party administration. Though very different from the artist's own, Borisov's biography may allude instead to Makarevich's generation, perhaps even to his cohort of artists excluded from narratives of both Soviet official and Western modernist art. Their tragedy resembles Borisov's to the extent that they share the traumatic experience of dependency on values inherited from the Stalinist era—and their real outcomes.

In these installations, Elagina and Makarevich generate a creative world that exceeds the devices of quotation, structural parallelism, and allegories of past choices shaping the present. Borisov's preoccupations seem to emerge organically from a deeper archaic past (of the *longue durée*), often associated with Russia's rural primitive social and even pre-historic cultural origins.<sup>20</sup> The imagery, both graphic (visual) and sculptural, is drawn from a very real urban environment in which temporalities, like material strata, have become mixed and confused. The locations named in the texts, as well as the roles assigned to objects within the installation, are directly drawn from Makarevich's own memories of Moscow in the 1950s and 1960s, especially the central area of Bol'shaia and Malaia Bronnaia streets. Found objects that are described (and recreated in the exhibition) are echoed in other works, including his *Readymade Reliquaries* (1992).<sup>21</sup> By the late 1990s, *Homo Lignum* (1997) and *Excerpts from the Notebooks of Nikolai Ivanovich Borisov, or the Secret Life of Trees* (1999) had been formed by these earlier memories and experiences. Related fragments in the section of this installation titled *Borisov's Museum* include the Buratino masks and skull, and bed and chair as torture-rack (all but the skull created by the artists themselves). Made of wood and designed (by Borisov) to effect the process of merging flesh with matter, the material configuration of each object is nearly Eucharistic—as if through use and transubstantiation a new world order might emerge.

Understood in light of these various temporal shifts, however, the strata uncovered in "Borisov's Museum" and "Story of a Cupboard" estrange automatic associations of formal tautology with utopian thought. Wood literally represents wood, and metonymically evokes another pan-European wooden past of punitive instruments (including machines/ guillotines). Also contained in the Museum, in wooden boxes, are objects that suggest wood working equipment. For Makarevich, these elements invite endless tautological variation. Borisov works as an accountant in a woodworking plant, so as to remain close to the natural (wooden) world; we learn that as a child he lived on Plotnikov (Carpenters') lane. The redundancy is both wryly humorous and cathartic. As material objects the bed and guillotine are particularly shocking, because they disrupt the leftist/materialist social narratives we might impose as contemporary viewers looking from the outside world into his. They have a rigorous logic of their own—one that satisfies, ecstatically, the individual in his own elaborately conceived, and rich environment. Elagina explains their strategic importance:

Thus, tautology of the verbal-visual order generates a specific illusory cultural-conceptual space. The external structure of objects depends on various types of traditional ideological clichés. On the one hand, materially realized verbal stereotypes acquire concrete, sensory form, and on the other, utilitarian objects attain the status of global symbol.<sup>22</sup>



Accordingly, in the very materiality of the object-installation we see the chaotic collapse of versions of the present, of its plural regimes of historicity. For if the wooden object evokes a multilayered past, in the narrative, their present “reappearance” makes sense in terms dictated by the (para-)utopian visions of its main character. How is a skull “wooden,” but in the merging of real and ideal worlds imagined by Borisov? And in a turn that signals the artists’ continuing excavation of the recent past—their experiences of official culture and the preferences enforced by art pedagogical institutions—they reintroduce painting into the mix.

In Lodz, painting enters the scene in the form of realistic depictions of a woodland paradise created by the artists to resemble the approved canon of socialist realism, whereas in Moscow (2015) the installation of cupboards and objects were positioned next to paintings by others—suggesting a dialogue with, rather than organic integration of, one aesthetic method into another. By deploying painting within the narrative, *Borisov’s Museum* confirms the artists’ investment in the politics that attended the Soviet regime’s collapse in 1991. Here the tautological function of materials coincides with the representational rhetoric that determined value in Soviet art. Painting *as a realist*, Makarevich represents what is already known (yet has not actually transpired) as guaranteed, verifiable fact. His paintings, like the ideal socialist realist work, depict a recognizable yet illusory world. Similarly, the sculptures, whether ready-made, wooden, or carved out of wood, present a projective fantasy as formal, self-evident truth. They exhibit the historical avant-garde’s belief in the authenticity of materials by affirming their own inherent characteristics—the faith of a Tatlin in the faktura of his counter-reliefs, or in the materials chosen for his *Monument to the Third International* (1920). The fetish of realism in this narrative also issues from the solipsism of modernist practices. In both systems, Elagina and Makarevich seem to suggest, art should be held accountable to the illusion (and fanaticism) of ideological orthodoxy.

This ironic doubling of representational methods continues to link exhibitions across time and place. In Lodz, the drawings created by Borisov as studies of the objects he (and the artist) builds, resemble, and are, in fact, Makarevich’s own drawings. Makarevich gives voice to Borisov’s character by writing the narrator’s diary entries, and derives from this process a deeply felt connection to his own past. In Moscow’s Tretyakov Gallery, the wooden cabinets themselves match the interior design of the museum space, dissolving authorial presence in the period style of the 1950s and 1960s. What the temporal density of both projects demonstrates is Elagina’s and Makarevich’s immediate ethical commitment to their critical-historical view of contemporary Russian culture, one that they share with some of their former conceptualist cohort. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, other artists frequently cited in connection with Elagina and Makarevich may be found, similarly, to thicken historical narratives of time and authorship through recombinations of works in installation. Like Elagina and Makarevich’s practice of re-installation, Kabakov’s return to painting, and especially Irina Nakhova’s layering of media, from photography to plaster casts, painting, and video, position the viewer precariously looking backward, while remaining aware that at least one future, already overwritten, and luster lost, continues to reshape the present. For each artist, style remains an open question (they frequently change styles), while the consequences of embracing one regime of historicity over another remain seductive, and real.

## Notes

- 1 For an overview of the art historical scholarship on the question of time and an analysis of numerous perspectives on the methodological issues such studies have provided, including anachrony, see Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey, eds. *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology, and Anachrony* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).
- 2 An example of the assumptions guiding this academic preference are the writings of Boris Groys, who, having collapsed all avant-garde practices into a singular model once argued that they served as the ground upon which Stalin's later totalizing policies developed: *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Paul Rogle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). Scholarship published in 2018 has provided refreshing new perspectives on this era: Kristin Romberg's discussion of tectonics in *Gan's Constructivism: Aesthetic Theory for an Embedded Modernism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 70–98; and Maria Taroutina's reworking of a particular modernist paradigm informed by the Russo-Byzantine legacy in *The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 2018).
- 3 François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, translated by Saskia Brown (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015). For his summary of his approach to the three regimes identified in this book, see 15–21. Hartog explains that his choice of terms (regime instead of form; historicity) depends on recognizing the interconnectivity, of “the idea of degrees, of more or less, of mixtures and composites, and an always provisional, or unstable equilibrium. Speaking of a ‘regime of historicity’ is thus simply a way of linking together past, present, and future, or of mixing the three categories [...]”—in which one or the other tend to be dominant. Historicity signals here as in his text the sense in which we (artist and viewer) become aware of ourselves as historical beings: “how individuals or groups situate themselves and develop in time, that is, the forms taken by their historical condition,” xv. I argue here that encounters with these artworks (especially repeated encounters over time) enable a particularly trenchant experience of historical self-perception.
- 4 *Makarevich and Elagina: Mushrooms of the Russian Avant-Garde*, curated by Nadim Samman (A-Foundation, and Rochelle School, London, and Galerie Sandmann, Berlin 2008). An earlier installation, *Pagan* (this exhibition included only photographs and sculptures) was staged in 2003 at XL Gallery; elements were also included together with paintings in installations in 2005 and 2015 at the State Tretyakov Gallery, also in Moscow. A different version (and fragment) of this chapter was published in Polish in Warsaw in 2015 on the occasion of Elagina and Makarevich's exhibitions, curated by Natalia Goncharova and Bozhena Chubak at <http://www.atlazztuki.pl/80.html> (active February 5, 2019): Jane A. Sharp, “Historia i zmysli (o szafach I grzybach),” *Igor Makarevicz: Museum Borisowa*. Exhibition Catalogue. Project Atlasz and Profile Gallery, Lodz and Warsaw, 2015, 6–8. I am grateful to the artists for their continuing support of my research, and for granting permission to reproduce images from each installation. The Avenir Foundation has funded much of the research for my publications, including this one, on unofficial art from the former Soviet Union.
- 5 The character Nikolai Ivanovich Borisov first appeared in the context of a fictitious diary and installation in two exhibitions of work by Igor Makarevich at XL Gallery in Moscow: *Ligomania* (1996) and *Homo Lignum* (1997). Related silkscreened prints titled *Selections from The Diary of Nikolai Ivanovich Borisov, 1927–1989* were created for the Hand Print Workshop International, and shown in Alexandria, VA, USA in 1998; photogravures were produced at the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper, New Brunswick, NJ, USA. A larger installation of *Homo Lignum* was created in 2003 at the National Center for Contemporary Art in Moscow. Makarevich frequently draws individual objects from this larger project into his exhibitions, most prominently at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (2009) and the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (2015). In both museums objects and paintings were integrated into historical collections.
- 6 Elagina and Makarevich have coauthored many works and installations; it is often important, as in these works, that authorship is regarded as an ongoing collaboration. Each object introduced is part of an authorial project they share in series that continue for years

(and those discussed here are not yet exhausted). In this essay I focus mainly on the elements of the narrative manufactured by Makarevich, while certain aspects of the narrative addressing the utopian ideals of the avant-garde, and the rhetoric underlying the material appearance of the installations were generated by Elagina. Elagina also created or collaborated in creating a number of the material objects in each installation. Correspondence with the author, April 23, 2019.

- 7 I adapt Jonathan Hay's coinage of the term "para-modern" in this essay to suggest the historical complexity marking contemporary engagement with modernist, and in this case, specifically Russian utopian visual traditions. He explains that the ideology of the para-modern "could be described as a form of contemporaneity: what one might call a simultaneous claim to contradictory temporalities, or temporal disjunction, for short." This term is wide enough (in his writing) to allow for particular inflections of modernism, post-modernism, and various cultures of reproduction and forgery, yet also distinguishes the discursive aims developed for such objects/artworks whether in China or Côte d'Ivoire from the dominant interpretive traditions available to writers (Western European and Anglo-American). See Jonathan Hay, "Double Modernity and Para-Modernity," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Nancy Condee, Onkwei Enwezor, and Terence Smith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 125–126.
- 8 Kazimir Malevich's program of instruction and self-tutelage for students at the Vitebsk VKhUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios) in 1920–21 involved the constant repetition of individual suprematist forms. See for example Lazar Khidekel's series of drawings of squares (rotating and splitting the square, reconfiguring the whole from fragments) which he described, following Malevich's example, as meditative projects, the enactment of which would lead to self-transformation/transfiguration. Regina Khidekel, ed., *Lazar Markovich Khidekel: Suprematism and Architecture* (New York, NY: Leonard Hutton Galleries, 1995), 12–23.
- 9 Nadim Samman explores this theme in, "Of Mushrooms and Malevich," *Makarevich and Elagina: Mushrooms of the Russian Avant-Garde*, ed. Nadim Samman (London, 2008), 9–12.
- 10 See for example Igor Makarevich's interview with Gerald Pirog in "Unusual Perspectives/Fantastic Possibilities," in Diane Neumaier, ed., *Beyond Memory* (Exhibition catalogue, The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, NJ, 2004), 281.
- 11 The writings and theories of philosopher Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903), and one of his most devoted disciples, pioneer in rocket science Konstantin Tsiolkovskii (1857–1935), have been central to several long-term projects by Makarevich and Elagina, in part because of the first Russian Cosmist's influence on the avant-garde artist, Kazimir Malevich, among others. As Makarevich explains, Fedorov dedicated much of his writing to his fantasy/philosophy of resurrecting the dead, which Tsiolkovskii planned to achieve through the use of interplanetary rockets (which would move "ancestors" to distant planets): Letter of May 3, 2013, to the author. Groys attributes much of Kabakov's narrative focus in *Ten Characters* to his reception of Fedorov's writings: *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment* (London: Afterall, Central St. Martins College of Art and Design, 2006), 7–22. For the texts (in Russian), see Boris Groys, ed. *Russkii kosmizm: antologiya* (Moscow: Garazh and Ad Marginem press, 2015).
- 12 Beyond the scope of the present essay is consideration of the extent to which recognition of the precarity of the "last avant-gardes," of *Oberiu* poetics, and the Cosmism of Fedorov, by the post-Stalinist generations of unofficial artists informed other practices. A sense of failure, or of the lost fabric of connections between generations is common, and discussed frequently in general terms by scholars, see for example, Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, NY: Basic, 2001). I understand and represent here Elagina and Makarevich's projects as critical interventions into the process of "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia characterized by Boym, both having shaped current narratives around Russian history.
- 13 Elagina worked as a studio assistant for Ernst Neizvestnyi prior to his emigration in 1976 and, unofficially with Alisa Poret; Makarevich has written about the impact of his teachers at the Moscow Middle School of Fine Arts. Elena Elagina, Igor Makarevich,

- “Dialogicheskii Monolog ‘Pro Eto,’” in Georgii Kizevalter, ed. *Eti Strannye Semidesialetie, ili Poteria Nevinnosti* (Moscow, 2010), 66–77.
- 14 Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, “Barren Flowers of Evil,” *Artforum* (March 1980): 46–52. See also Ilya Kabakov, “Not Everyone Will Be Taken into the Future,” *A-Ya* (5, 1983): 34–35. I link Makarevich and Elagina with these artists in an earlier publication: Jane A. Sharp, “Action-Paradise and Readymade Reliquaries: Eccentric Histories of Russian Art,” in *Byzantium/Modernism: The Byzantine as Method in Modernity*, ed. Maria Taroutina and Roland Betancourt (Leiden: Brill Press, 2015), 271–310.
  - 15 Igor Golomstok, “The Malevich Complex,” *A-Ya* (3, 1981): 41–44.
  - 16 *Life in the Snow* as installation merged with that of the *Gallery of Buratino*. See Igor Makarevich’s explanation of the significance of E. Novikova-Vashnetseva’s story “How I Became a Writer” in his essay “The Well of Time,” *Elena Elagina, Igor Makarevich, Within the Limits of the Beautiful: Objects and Installations* (State Tretyakov Gallery and XL Gallery, Moscow, 2005), 95.
  - 17 Published in 1928 by Georges Bataille (under the pseudonym, “Lord Auch”) as a work of erotic fiction in the context of seeking a “cure” with an analyst, and “critiquing the idealist uses of Freud and Sade by [his] contemporary André Breton,” *The Story of the Eye* is less concerned with the narrative development of plot and character than with the symbolic act of looking, as examined in Roland Barthes’s major essay on the work, “The Metaphor of the Eye” (1963). For a comprehensive study of the work and its reception, see Tim Themi, “Lacan, Barthes, Bataille and the Meaning of the Eye—or Gaze,” in *The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 3 (2016): 93–123. The passage quoted above may be found on page 93.
  - 18 Igor Makarevich, Letter to author dated July 16, 2015. In this letter he links the cupboard as a structurally unifying image and object to the longer history of his cupboard/cabinet portraits of artist-friends (including Kabakov, Bulatov, and Chuikov) created in the 1980s.
  - 19 Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” *Partisan Review*, 34 (Spring 1967): 181–212; republished in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969) responds as well to Roland Barthes’s study of the same text in “The Metaphor of the Eye” (1963), republished in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 239–248.
  - 20 Further study of the artists’ invocation of archaeology might yield insights into their identification of the Soviet era as “timeless,” prefiguring the temporal complexity perceived in the present moment. For a penetrating study of Soviet constructions of prehistory and summary of the literature on the range of definitions given (in the modern era) to pre-history, including the concept of the *longue durée* see Michael Kunichika, “The Cave Paintings of Kapova: Toward a Socialist map of prehistory,” *Res* 69/70 (Spring/Autumn, 2018): 118–135, esp. 122–123.
  - 21 In 1992, Makarevich created his two *Reincarnations of the Relics of St. Ignatius*. See Jane A. Sharp, “Action-Paradise and Readymade Reliquaries,” 292–301.
  - 22 Elena Elagina, “O moikh rabotakh srednego roda,” unpublished text, ca. 2010, forwarded to the author, June 15, 2015.



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Plate 1 Karl Briullov, *Bathsheba*, 1832, oil on canvas, 173 × 125.5 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.



Plate 2 Karl Briullov, *Bathsheba*, 1830(?), oil on canvas, 87.5 × 61.5 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © 2019, State Russian Museum.



Plate 3 Vasilii Perov, *Yaroslavna's Lament*, 1880, oil on canvas, 150 × 80 cm. Collection of Alexander Volodchinskii, Moscow. Photograph courtesy of Alexander Volodchinskii.



Plate 4 Vasilii Perov, *Drowned Woman*, 1867, oil on canvas, 68 × 106 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.



Plate 5 Ilya Repin, *They Did Not Expect Him*, 1883–1888, oil on canvas, 160.5 × 167.5 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.



Plate 6 Ilya Repin, *They Did Not Expect Her*, 1882–1883, oil on wood, 44.5 × 37 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.



Plate 7 Mikhail Vrubel, *Study for Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga*, 1896, watercolor, graphite, whitewash, and varnish on cardboard, 12.1 × 41.3 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Tretyakov Gallery.



Plate 8 Mikhail Vrubel, *Vase*, 1890s, majolica, colored enamels, 14.5 × 32.5 × 27 cm. State Historical Museum, Moscow. Photograph © 2019, State Historical Museum.



Plate 9 Mikhail Vrubel, *The Dream Princess (La Princesse Lointaine)*, 1893–1903, Metropol Hotel, Moscow, 1893–1903. Photograph © 2019, Maria Taroutina.



Plate 10 Jože Plečnik, Ljubljana Sluice Gate, 1939 (built 1940–1943), Ljubljana, Slovenia. Photograph courtesy of Julia E. Frane.



Plate 11 Aleksandr Gerasimov, *Artists at Stalin's Dacha*, 1951, oil on canvas, 123 × 142 cm. Private Collection.



Plate 12 Artur Fonvizin, *Portrait of Vladimir Tatlin*, 1939, watercolor on paper, 65 × 44 cm. State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. Reproduced from *Artur Vladimirovich Fonvizin, 1882–1973*, ed. E. Romanenko (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1984).



Plate 13 Ivan Picelj, *Homage to El Lissitzky*, 1956, oil on canvas, 96 × 96 cm. Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb. Photograph courtesy of Anja Picelj-Kosak, Zagreb / Muzej Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb.



Plate 14 Antonina Slobodchikova, *Yano Tut (It is Here)*, 2012. Y Gallery, Minsk, Belarus. Photograph © Viktoriya Kharitonova.



Plate 15 Deimantas Narkevičius, frame from *Once in the XX Century*, 2004. 16mm film transferred to video (color, sound), 8 min. Photograph © Deimantas Narkevičius.





Plate 16 Deimantas Narkevičius, frame from 20 July 2015, 2016. 3D video, 15:08 min.  
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Plate 17 Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich, *Pagan (or Mushrooms of the Avant-Garde)*,  
gallery view, Profile Foundation, Warsaw, 2015. Photograph © Igor Makarevich.