

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

USA & OTHERS \$7 • CANADA \$9 • GREAT BRITAIN £4 • DEUTSCHLAND DM 14
AUSTRIA OS 90 • ITALIA L. 8.000 • JAPAN ¥ 1000 • ESPANA Ptas 850
NEDERLAND g. 16 • FRANCE FF 45 • BELGIQUE BF 280 • SWITZERLAND SF 12
AUSTRALIA \$12 • USSR RB 4 50



Flash Art

THE LEADING EUROPEAN ART MAGAZINE • N° 151 MARCH/APRIL 1990 • US\$7



MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO, ANNO BIANCO, 1989.
BILLBOARD, VIA BRENTANO, MILAN, FEBRUARY 1989. COURTESY GALLERIA PERSANO. PHOTO: P. PELLION.

TIMUR AND AFRIKA

LENINGRAD NOMES, NECROREALISM AND THE DISADVANTAGES OF GOING WEST.

VICTOR AND MARGARITA TUPITSYN



TIMUR NOVIKOV, LENINGRAD, 1989. ACRYLIC AND APPLIQUÉ ON TEXTILE.

Victor Tupitsyn: *I saw Yufit's¹ necro realist movies yesterday, and it seemed to me that the painting of the Leningrad "Nome"² has a great deal in common with the aforementioned films. That is, both phenomena dwell within the framework of a single trend. If this is so, then what kind of relationship brought this similarity to life?*

Timur Novikov: You can say that this is a single artistic process in which both cinematographers and artists participate simultaneously. Today they both might make a film, and tomorrow, paintings. All these people—Yevgeni Yufit, Oleg Kotelnikov and many others, it would take

too long to name them all—are a single entity acting on the artistic arena in Leningrad. In the case of major cultural events they consolidate forces and appear as a united fist.

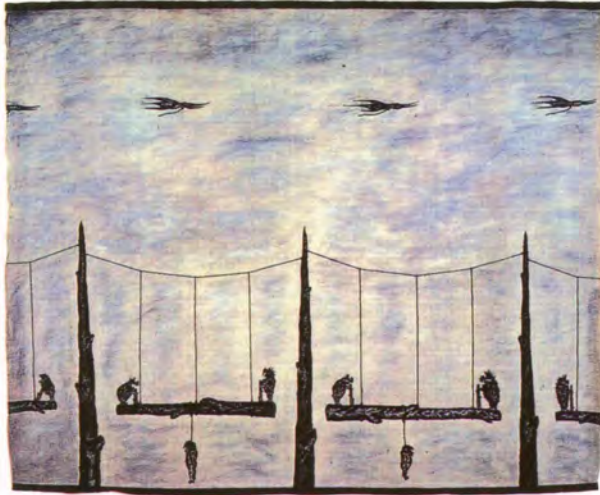
VT: *Which of the fingers of this fist do you associate with?*

TN: I'm just an opening for fingers: I take in everything and comprehend everything.

VT: *It's like submission versus aggression, right?*

Sergei Bugaev (Africa): This issue of mutual influences and mutual relations is the most interesting thing that's happening

now. Art at the end of the 20th century is a legitimate "formula of playing catch." In Leningrad this is expressed with maximum precision. Some kinds of conditions not existing in the reality of demarcations, divisions—making it possible to observe the throwing back and forth of the ball between speculatively little squares—create this formula. Yufit and his films gather in many of the things that are taking place here through the popular means of exchanging uncensored information. Moreover, all of this I connect with the tradition of "holy fools," of "penitents" and "jailers." Fools because, on the one hand, they were like laughing-stocks but, on the



YEVGINI YUFFT, COMPOSITION, 1988. OIL ON CANVAS, 65 x 80"

other, they were the only carriers and transmitters of a certain spiritual heritage, if such a thing ever existed.

VT: You could call them a "mouthpiece of the collective unconscious."

TN: I don't know about a mouthpiece, but I've heard stories about Yufft that he once picked up some staggering drunks on the streets, gave them vodka until they passed out, and then fucked them in the mouth. One of them was later seen with his mouth all torn up.

VT: The mouth became like a mouthpiece. Isn't this story you related an example of what can be called a master narrative of necrorealism?

David Ross: If every culture has its pornography, where is Russian porno and where is the influence of either Soviet pornography or the reality of Soviet pornography?

TN: It all exists and is manifest in its completely traditional form as it was before the Revolution. But this is apocryphal, a "secret history" of Russian sexuality which contains the memory of repression, censorship, control and the struggle with all of that.

SB: That prohibition on sex from the Stalinist times gave birth to "peculiar" forms of sexuality. For example, one person expressed his sexual attraction to another person by reporting him to the authorities, thereby condemning the object of his affections to suffering. This was a form of satisfaction.

DR: There seemed to be a sense of sexuality mixed with the behavior that took its place. It was a substitute for desire so

that all the killings were surrogates for fucking.

Elisabeth Sussman: To what extent do you know about American gay liberation?

TN: I don't know how far how far the situation allows for

SB: About 20 centimeters!

TN: Soviet law only prohibits anal intercourse. A homosexual who does not have intercourse in the anus but takes it in the mouth is not considered a criminal. But in general, prosecution of sexuality was introduced by Stalin. Until 1933 we had different laws under which everything was possible. Moreover, Soviet marriage bureaus registered couples of the same sex. Men with men, women with women. I read about this in the 1932 Soviet encyclopedia. They wrote that insofar as in bourgeois

countries (and here before the Revolution) homosexuals and lesbians suffered and were very unhappy people, so in our country all the necessary conditions for living were created for them.

Margarita Tupitsyn: Only recently you have begun to speak openly about sexual orientation. You're homosexuals, right?

SB: Yes!

MT: It would be interesting in this context, to discuss the Sots art works of Guryanov where he copies Rodchenko's portraits of hero-aviators or male-athletes. If the originals allegorize utopia as the space of desire, then with Guryanov these are simply sex objects.

VT: In connection with this I would like to pose a question on the following theme: Leningrad art strongly differs, of course, from Moscow art. Precisely by the fact that transgressivity of gesture remains important here to this day. How do you explain this? Why is there this insistence on expressionistic articulation? Is this not connected with the fact that a submissive stance in relation to real life is compensated for by aggression in the sphere of creative manifestations?

SB: This question is very easy to answer. Leningrad is a city with an enormous revolutionary tradition. Officially it is called the "city of three revolutions." In principle, as far as I can determine, transgressivity is not too harmonious with well-tempered representations in a lot of ways. This revolutionary character continues to preserve itself here in painting.

TN: I might also add that one of my friends always says, "Painting and politics are one and the same. The gesture of Van Gogh is the gesture of Hitler." Leningrad differs from Moscow in that here the expressionistic tradition was independent. It was not imported from the West via the



AFRIKA, DESTRUCTIBLE PAINTING ("HERE"), 1987. OIL ON STEEL



ANDRE KHLBYSTIN, UNTITLED, 1988.
OIL ON BOARD.

"neue wilden" or "figuration libre" or "graffiti." If the "Kindergarten" group in Moscow departed from Western neo-expressionism, then here we had the artist Koshelokhov who considered this type of painting to be his own, unlike anyone else's. He did this back in the 70s. Before Koshelokhov there were Vasmi, Shagin, Shvarts and Arefyev. The same thing but in a smaller format. There was also the outstanding artist Cherkasov who did abstract paintings. This tradition still continues. The exceptions are probably Khlobystin, Kozin and Maslov. But Oleg Kotelnikov is a purely local phenomenon. He didn't look in Western books, didn't see any catalogues. His work is his own and that's why it has held up for so long. If someone is not a follower of fashion then he doesn't even know that it's time to change the fashion once it goes out of style.

MT: I wanted to ask about your connection to the legacy of the historic Russian avant-garde, since many of you lay claim to this. Nothing of the sort happens with the Moscow "Nome." Here the problem of searching for "roots" seems all the more topical.

SB: For me personally the link with the Russian avant-garde manifests itself in the person of Larionov. He's the first avant-gardist who (among other things) occupied himself with fashion as well as—in the 1910s—artistic cooking.

ES: What was he doing?

TN: Dinners. Soup from wine, little bread figures of animals and birds, ornamental plants, and so on. He even had a manifesto called "Rayonist Cooking."

SB: In the West they know absolutely nothing about this.

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MT: Well, and what can you say about Rodchenko, Sergei? It seems to me that you and he have some complex relationships.

TN: I think that because of you, Sergei, the prices for Rodchenko went up.

VT: In the raising of prices there is something priapically pornographic.

SB: Yeah, for Rodchenko the prices are stiff.

MT: I wanted to ask you why you decided to use fabric for your works?

TN: From purely utilitarian purposes. Everything's from Larionov, who in many ways took his start from folk arts in which you don't find painting on canvas. Folk art is generally textiles.

MT: It doesn't bother you that works from fabric have a feeling of being very feminine? It undermines the ideology of "machismo," peculiar to, for example, the neo-expressionists. Generally speaking, priapism is characteristic for the heroic avant-garde.

TN: For me the "detumescence" of the avant-garde is very important.

ES: And just how does this "detumescence" take place?

TN: I'll explain it sequentially. A new prisoner, an important guy like maybe a former magazine publisher, walks into his jail cell. Suddenly, a couple of crooks approach him, take his pants down, fuck

him and make him suck their dicks. Well, this, for example, is "detumescence."

VT: A Bakhtinian situation. Carnavalesque reconciliation of the opposites. Dialogical speech communicated through the means of fucking.

MT: Could we stop eroticizing our ancestors? The way Sergei and Timur talk about Larionov and Rodchenko makes me feel that the history of the avant-garde is just another monument to male authority.

TN: Well, let's say I make a painting. For me it is simultaneously both a curtain and a very serious work. It can be both a tablecloth and the highest form of art.

MT: Timur fortunately, is evidently unaccustomed to the stereotypes of "male chauvinism" that are so omnipotent in Western socio-cultural practices, where nobody from the patriarchal "creators" would work with similar material.

TN: The fact is that the works done on fabric are light and easy to carry around. I just stick them in my bag whereas I see my colleagues groaning under the weight of canvases and frames.

VT: Here's a question of that sort. It's not critical. On the contrary, it's more a departure from these critiques that exist in the heterosexual Moscovite "Nome" apropos of the art of the homosexual Leningrad "Nome." There is a certain



TIMUR NORIKOV, WOMAN WITH A ROPE, 1988. ACRYLIC AND APPLIQUÉ ON TEXTILE.



AFRIKA, RODCHENKO, 1988. OIL ON CANVAS.

"common" notion that here in Leningrad, as opposed to the Moscow neo-conceptualists, art is meatier, more indissoluble more naive, less articulated, less reflective. Is this true or not? And if it is, then it's a paradox, since in the West marginal practices such as feminism and homosexuality are attended by a high level of discourse and theoretical study. Apparently, to be an alternative artist and at the same time a homosexual in the USSR, that is to experience double "otherness," is twice as difficult. It's a kind of multiple alienation constituting a psychedelic ghetto inhabited by hysterical narratives which makes it very problematic to transgress to discursive levels. Incidentally, Mikhail Ryklin and Sergei Anufriev have written rather interesting theoretical texts on this theme. Moreover, Ryhklín connects that ghetto which I just mentioned to a so-called "communal corporeality" (so characteristic of the Russian cultural tradition), where verbal practices dominate to the detriment of others (including even theoretical ones).

TN: Moscow intellectuals sometimes forget that in art the main thing is not to be too smart. Besides which, for the past few years intellectualism has been a mask which many people are prepared to put on at the first convenient opportunity. Especially the new generation of artists.

SB: In Moscow the whole tradition is constant, alive, visible, but in Leningrad the traditions are consonant with Fyodorov's³ initiatives, the idea of "resurrection of the fathers." Larinov, Rodchenko and others have already been dead a long time, gone over the horizon, invisible, extending their spiritual antennae to us from the beyond. It's precisely in this that I see the

parallelism with Fyodorov—the relations with the Russian avant-garde as with a prematurely deceased father who was tortured, poisoned, destroyed. But as far as our "addiction" to ancestors is concerned I'm afraid that from the point of view of Americans, we'd probably be qualified as "fatherfuckers."

MT: Which brings us back to Yufit's necrorealism

VT: Did the possibility of travel to the West influence you in terms of a re-evaluation of the local cultural tradition? Did the new vision which you acquire seeing what goes on there, transform your attitude to what takes place here?

SB: After being abroad I saw the local tradition as a special relationship to space. It all used to be interpreted as something

close-up, small, tight. This, apparently, stems from the fact that real space is so vast that it can't be grasped by consciousness. After the trip, space expanded, and the spatial balance was destroyed. The expansion was then followed by an abrupt diminution, and now I don't have "space running a few steps ahead" or perspective. That is, I experienced disillusion from the fact that the West had lost its inaccessibility and ceased to be perspective. The world united, which on the whole I perceive negatively.

TN: Before traveling to the West, Russian artists generally had an attitude towards art as something sacred, important and lofty. That's all gone now. Upon their return, practically all the artists who have traveled to the West have begun to make money.

SB: Unfortunately, all this to me is the most tragic thing, observing Soviet artists in the West. I noticed that there wasn't joy on their faces, but depression, the imprint of severe and difficult work, I guess.

VT: How has this been reflected in their works?

SB: In the works themselves? They've lost their basic dignity—a topicality, an inner, as it were, necessity by the author to create them. These works have stopped being interesting.

All photographs courtesy Paul Judelson.

Margarita Tupitsyn is presently a curatorial consultant for the Guggenheim Museum. Victor Tupitsyn is a poet and theoretician living in New York. David Ross is Director of the I.C.A. in Boston where Elizabeth Sussman serves as Deputy Director.

- 1) Yevgeni Yufit, an underground Leningrad filmmaker, practicing so-called "necrorealism."
- 2) Nomes, regions in ancient Egypt where, according to the legend, parts of Osiris's body are buried.
- 3) Nicolai Fyodorov—XIX century Russian philosopher (died in 1903).



TIMUR AND AFRIKA IN AFRIKA'S STUDIO, LENINGRAD, 1989. PHOTO BORISOV.