

BOMB

Fall 1986

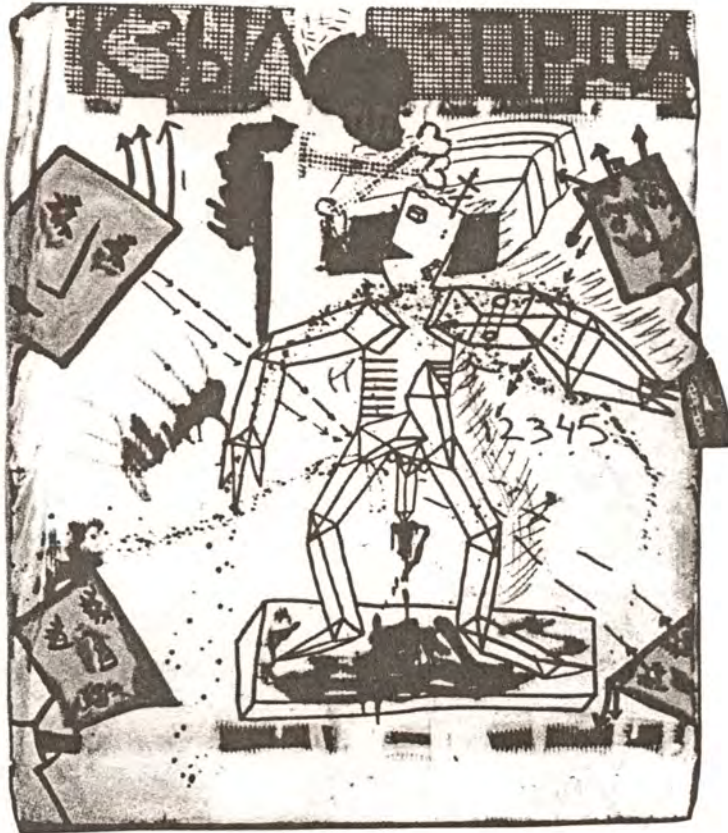
\$5.00

Angela Carter
Gary Indiana

Spalding Gray
Joan Mitchell

A Quarterly on New Art, Writing, Theater and Film.





SERGEI BUGAYEV, (*Afrika*), *Untitled*, circa 1984.

Viktor Krivulin

Translated by: Michael Molner

from POEMS ON MAPS

cash wrangles round a kiosk
abruptly an outburst of abuse
is carried from afar
from the life going on all around
its natural circle
broken open—but the precious
sundown on street scenes
throws onto almost every face a silvery cold
reflection of silver

lemony-bitter strip of sunset.
what's limonov publishing at present
in the west where life is somewhat bitter
for the poet? at present what's he writing
to his friends—touching their tenderest or
most painfully sensitive chords?

above the rhetorical questions
above the allegory of Fortune

Left, from the group Zero, most likely OLEG KOTELNIKOV, circa 1984.
 Right, and preceding page Boris Simelev Leningrad B/W Photographs © 1985.



Yet another two years passed before Lyn Hejinian and Jacqueline Ochs returned. During that time Lyn had made inroads with the Soviet government, applying to translate non-official writing for publication in the West. It is this work—the unofficial poetry, photography, painting and theatre of Leningrad, compiled as their circle of contacts widened during this second trip that is represented on the following pages.

"Unofficial is a very difficult work for us to understand and I want to be clear—in any case this is the way I came to understand it. To be official in the Soviet Union in any art field, you have to go through a specific training in a particular university and receive a degree in that field. My feeling about the people we met, the unofficial artists, was that they were people who had not taken the correct road, either because of lack of opportunity or because they needed other influences. What we were getting a sense of was that this was not a political stand in opposition to the Soviet government, but an aesthetic and cultural circumstance. Many of these people want and may have the opportunity to be awarded official status. They also want to make the work they want to make. One clear difference is that an 'amateur' or unofficial artist cannot make a living from their own art. They are not commissioned to do work nor are they published, whereas official artists are and do. In the Soviet Union everyone must work. So these artists hold menial jobs or have two different professions. For instance, after much time our friend Sergei Kuryokhin has been granted official status as a concert pianist. Unofficially he is an extremely talented conductor, composer, rock and jazz musician. His unofficial orchestra, Popular Mechanics, is permitted to perform jazz and rock two to three times a year. Half of the musicians in this group hold official status in choral groups and orchestras. Others are gardeners, nightwatchmen, office workers, etc.

On our first trip the musicians introduced us to the poets. When we returned, the poets brought us to the artists, who in turn, introduced us to the Anti-theatre group. From the moment we arrived, most of our time was spent walking the streets of Leningrad everywhere. Lyn and I by ourselves and with different people, asking to meet people, seeing homes, happening upon old bridges and architecture. Leningrad is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. There is no getting enough of it and walking is the national pastime. One of these walks in particular was very special to me. The painters Timur and Afrika, along with Rodion, a theatre director, met me by chance outside the Hermitage and we went without speaking, because none of us spoke the other's language, through the city pointing at things we noticed. During the summer, there is no night, it is a land of the midnight sun. The sun is at a bizarre angle, always low in the sky like dusk; and the light is filled with a transparent mist. This walk gave me an idea of how they see the beauty of their city; the light, patterns and textures that influence their work.

Timur is one of the circle of painters introduced to us by the poet Arkadii who admires and respects their work. One of the group lives in a communal apartment that has been abandoned by two other families. Either the apartment is slated for renovation or the government doesn't yet realize it's empty. The artists have adopted the empty rooms, a rare commodity, and they are used as studio and gallery space. On the other hand, Timur lives in a room in a communal apartment completely cluttered and filled with paintings, drawings and art tools. Paintings are removed from the bed/couch when he sleeps or has guests.

A constant source of surprise to us was the amount of information these artists receive about what is going on in the West. There is a network which they have access to—and it's international. They make friends with people from various countries, however haphazardly, and hand magazines and books from one person to another. They talk about Basquiat and Haring and are likely to be more interested in the Rova Quartet than in Prince.

LENINGRAD

Self-educated and extremely well-read in their own literature and poetry, they acknowledge a Rayonist influence, a Russian group contemporary with Malevich. What is exciting is that there are natural gestural and symbolic similarities between their work and contemporary Western painting. They are looking at Western art with a critical eye and incorporating relevant aspects of it into their work.

The painters brought us to the Anti-theatre group. There is really a wonderful crossing over of disciplines—sharing is a result of the conditions they work in. It is so difficult to do anything—find theatre space, buy the paint, gather thirty musicians together—there is very little money available and so everyone is very generous when it comes to helping. Friends, everyone, participate in everybody else's discipline when called upon to do so—which broadens their horizons too. The Anti-theatre group has a loft in downtown Leningrad and were allowed to produce performances. It has been closed since we were there and I don't know if it has been granted permission to reopen. The group consists of professional actors, theatre directors, artists, writers, musicians... some of the performers and musicians work in the official theatre. In many cases official actors are frustrated and want to work with the group because there is a greater amount of artistic freedom. There is a crossover but the official artists have to be a lot more careful about their association with strictly unofficial artists and how public that is. There seems to be no problem with city officials until the audiences get too large or shows become spectacles as a result of word-of-mouth publicization. At these times, the officials have a tendency to close down performances. Several months later they allow the groups to begin activities again.

The writer's club, Club 81, which Arkadii introduced us to had about 30 to 40 members and represented a fairly large cross-section of unofficial writers—poets, novelists and critics. Members of this club gravitated towards the Language School of poetry with which Lyn is associated. We had met some of its members on our first trip and it was like chemistry—a chemical explosion. These people worked with Lyn, quite ardently, in translating her poetry into Russian. This is not to say all the writers in the group agree. Krivulin and Dragomoshchenko are extremely different writers and not very communicative with each other at this point. Krivulin's work, in certain respects, belongs to the Slavic mystic tradition whereas Dragomoshchenko feels closer to Russia's avant-garde tradition. A very wonderful passion towards their art exists among the Russians and very often friends become embroiled in incredible battles about aesthetics and will stop talking to each other for months at a time. Groups are very tightly knit in Russia, people become comfortable with each other. While there is a network, a word of mouth, very often groups don't intermingle—they become protective. Many Americans find this in Russia. They will attempt to get one group of people—and this isn't even on an aesthetic level—together with another in the same city. You know how you say, 'You must meet so and so.' The Russian's are a little hesitant to do so because trust is the key to these groups and if that trust breaks down, people very often stop communicating and sharing.

One of the last nights we were there, Lyn was asked to speak to Club 81 members on Structural Poetry. Our friend, Alex Kan, an English literature teacher and Jazz entrepreneur, who had instigated everything by writing the original letter, had the great misfortune of being chosen to translate Lyn's lecture simultaneously. This was a very intricate talk and I was having trouble following it in English. But there he was translating for a devoted audience, who were hanging on every word. At the end of the lecture Lyn read one of her poems and a translation was read by Arkadii Dragomoshchenko. A musician sitting in front of me, who speaks no English, turned and said in Russian to a friend, 'I understood the English better than the Russian.' It was pretty funny. It also made me wonder what everyone else in the audience had grasped. Most of our time was spent like this—just trying to understand one another.

I'd say that one of the most important things they wanted us to understand was this—they do not consider their work a vehicle for politics. They are Russian, and although they would like to travel, they do not want to leave their country. They love Russia, its people, the land, its history, its problems. This is the source of their inspiration.

Jacki Ochs, as told to *Bomb*, September, 1986.