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# Flash Art

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PINO PASCALI,  
ONE SQUARE METER OF EARTH  
TWO SQUARE METERS OF EARTH, 1967.

# TO RUSSIA WITH LOVE

"OUR PAINT BRUSHES WILL BE THE STREETS AND OUR PALETTE THE

PUBLIC SQUARE" (MAYAKOVSKY)

SHAUN CALEY

One can never fully comprehend the cultural framework of a country in only eight days. At best, you're a terrorist/tourist on a voyeuristic voyage. All comparative analyses of the Soviet Union and the West become absurd, although it is difficult to resist the temptation to suggest that Russia is in a full-blown Renaissance, while the West continues in its decline, resting on effete laurels and the increasingly visible symptoms of its own spiraling decay. The Dark Ages in the U.S.S.R. produced an enormous lacuna in the place of modern (let alone post-modern) art. Whatever has been forged from the darkness of mandatory Socialist Realism is now allowed to remain, purely and arduously according to its own standards and resources. In the 1920s Stalin's interruptive measures halted the most promising and progressive avantgarde movements in history. The bleak years that followed (with a few slight glimmers beginning in the sixties and now illumined since the raising of the Iron Curtain) had preserved the Russian avantgarde intact. Never mind that in the West "avantgarde" is a comical, even nostalgic term, having lost its significance in the speed of media, consumption and saturation: the two worlds are not comparable.

The phenomenon taking place in Russia currently is that "official" and "unofficial" culture are allowed to exist in the same sphere. The proliferation of "unofficial" art has produced a pluralistic arena where generational, regional, aesthetic, metaphysical and political art movements co-exist. In the absence of an acknowledged history of modernism as well as the

post-Pop market, artists are forced to consider both the ideal and pragmatic problems of an art released from Socialist Realism, as well as the problems inherent in having missed half a century of modernist innovation. Art publications as we know them simply don't exist in Russia, nor do books on modern art, even about the Russian avantgarde. Information has infiltrated the Soviet Union through Western visitors and has been devoured by voracious Russian appetites as though they had never heard of media saturation.

The evident movements in Leningrad and Moscow are the Conceptualists, founded in the '60s (Dyshlenko); the Moscow Conceptualists, or Sots Art, the name taken from the first syllable of the Russian word for "Socialist" (Bulatov, Kabakov, Komar & Melamid, etc.); the New Metaphysical Painters (Dibsky, Ganyikovskiy); Aptart, for Apartment Art because it was exhibited in apartments rather than galleries; and the New Painters (Novikov, Bugaev, Kotelnikov, Saltikov, Potapov, etc.). There are also the regional painters, e.g., Luka Lasareishviev, a painfully naïve Georgian painter, and the Ukrainian painter/architect Vladimir Shaposhnikov. We also attended an opening at the Hermitage Club in Moscow, an alternative space that exhibited a huge variety of "unofficial" works, including Kabakov's conceptual, archetypal, hyper-real paintings; an installation of musical-mobile sculpture with bunson flames by Garrick Vinogradov; and a disappointing performance piece by a young artist in a plastic tube with a ghetto blaster and a portable tea-

pot who remained in his "hot" house throughout the length of the opening.

Because of the haphazard nature of our visits to artists' studios, I will classify by city:

**Leningrad:** Arkadii Dragomoshenko, a poet with interests in New French Philosophy (notably Derrida and Lyotard) introduced us to several artists, first taking us to Boris Koshelochov's studio/living space in a communal apartment.

Koshelochov is one of the forefathers of the New Painters (teaching Sergei Bugaev, alias: Afrika, and Oleg Kotelnikov). Koshelochov lived and exhibited in Italy during late '70s when western critics were favoring conceptual art. Later he returned to the Soviet Union, saying, "Bourgeois art is not for me." Koshelochov finds most of his material in junk-yards and has three slogans: 1) "Everyone is a painter, but only some of us know about it." 2) "We can make art with everything we find around us." 3) "Hard work and endless hard work without any reflection." Koshelochov paints only with a palette-knife creating a heavy, figurative expressionism. When he paints sometimes he falls asleep in front of the canvas and dreams, so that his paintings are informed by this unconscious reverie.

Yuri Dyshlenko is an older conceptual painter who is now creating irreel, Pop landscapes. The works are done in series, or panels, and are enlargements of smaller post-card models made from patterns, colors and shapes cut from magazines and other materials. Dyshlenko met



YURI DYSHLENKO, UNTITLED, 1987.



AFRIKA WITH RODCHENKO SQUARES.



SERGEI BORISOFF'S COLLECTION OF NEW PAINTERS. PHOTO JOSEPHINE GUATTARI.



BORIS KOSHELOCHOV, UNTITLED, 1987.

Larry Rivers some time ago and did a work with American Pop slogans in response to a piece that Rivers did with Soviet slogans. Dylshenko exhibits with the Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York.

Vladimir Shaposhnikov is an "official" architect, who paints in the Ukrainian surreal tradition and, like many Russian artists, has never exhibited nor sold his works, although he continues arduously to produce his art. Shaposhnikov utilizes the motif of the big, often monstrous, Russian earth mother, as well as an almost medieval distribution of space in his mannerist architecture.

**Moscow:** Olga Swiblova, an art critic who champions the New Metaphysical Painters, takes us to Eugene Dibsky, Igor Ganykovsky and Yamkilevsky's studios, the latter is one of the forefathers of the New Metaphysical Painters. In Swiblova's opinion the Moscow Conceptualists, like Kabakov, who portray the U.S.S.R.'s general culture by using specific Soviet archetypes and situations portrayed hyper-realistically, are not going far enough. Kabakov is a master of irony who reflects on a pre-existent mythology and thus constructs his work viewed from these past or current myths. Swiblova feels that art should move toward a future metaphysics: the poetry, irony and construction of a new mythology and utopia.

By Sots Art standards, Dibsky and Ganykovsky are working with a new, poetic construction of space. Both are interested in stories from the Old Testament becoming contemporary as well as prophetic for the future. For Swiblova, this new sensibility changes and revolutionizes the cartography of space, creating a new vision, the artist tackling space in the same way that God created the world. The ideal is to weave an intertextuality into the work which projects into the future. Dibsky, who has academic art training from the Zarakov Institute, finds that Giotto is the greatest avantgardist, but is also inspired by the usual handful of modern artists, including Julian Schnabel. Dibsky's recent use of coloration has moved toward a bright and varied palette unusual for Rus-

sia. Ganykovsky, who does not have formal training, works with archetypes of tragedy, death and the "mental space" of each person desiring transcendence. Ganykovsky's somber colors use different spaces as varying senses and sensibilities. The topology is non-linear, combining heaven and hell with collage and troubled moments of texture. The theme of Noah's Ark is recurrent in both Dibsky and Ganykovsky's works, the Flood indicating not only its biblical sense, but the deluge of Stalin, Chernobyl and apocalyptic possibilities in light of nuclear war. Dibsky exhibits at the Galerie de France in Paris, and may do so with Studio Marconi in Milan.

The *New Painters* are the youngest and perhaps most interesting Soviet movement at this time. The leader of this group, Timur Novikov, expressed in the '70s his notion of proliferation and the modern artist: "Artists must not only be painters, but they must be musicians, writers, filmmakers,

actors, dancers and so on, and these activities must not be separated from painting." This movement has coincided with the new possibilities for Soviet rock-culture in the last two years. The resulting phenomenon is not unlike that of the East Village, and has produced a certain anti-aesthetic, low-culture art as well as a younger generation the likes of which Russia has never seen. It hardly seems unusual that Afrika would list his cultural heritage as Lenin, Mayakovsky, Larionov, Malevich, Rodchenko, Warhol and Basquiat. Nor that one of the first questions Afrika would ask was, "What's this I hear about Neo-Geo? You know, we are much better than them. We've seen all of that with Russian Constructivism and Suprematism."

The New Painters have left painting in the classical sense, working with fabric for canvas; application; collage; tire hubs; "destructible paintings"—made on plastic with a two year life span; "Russian psychedelic movies"—magic marker drawings



VLADIMIR SHAPOSHNIKOV, UNTITLED, 1987.



AFRIKA, TRADITIONAL RUSSIAN FOLK WOMAN.



ILYA KABAKOV, UNTITLED, 1987.



YEVGENY DIBSKY, UNTITLED, 1987.

on clear strips of film, etc. The subject matter is often naive or erotic (that which horrifies the Soviet Union the most), sometimes using the transferal of primitive Russian archetypes into futuristic functions, reflecting Larionov's Rayonnist Movement (1910) and its primitivist pursuits. Certain Russians have referred to the New Painters as the Soviet "Wild Style." The narrative content of the works is often about the painters' daily existence, as in Novikov's painting of a rock group, and paintings about making movies. There are also paintings of rocket ships, balalaikas à la electric guitars, the Space Shuttle Challenger and Nelson Mandela.

What is least interesting about the New Painters is decidedly their paintings. Afrika says, after Larionov, "that from the eye come many points like rays of sun, and

the forms which rise from the intersection of the rays reflected by different objects and interests will be chosen by the artists." Fortunately the New Painters, in conjunction with Sergei Kuryokhin's experimental music group, Popular Mechanics, are musicians as well. Without formal training they participate in the performances side by side with professional musicians. Afrika often plays the samovar, while Novikov has constructed an instrument from a table frame with irons hanging at different levels so that, once the instrument is started, it plays itself for hours. In one performance, Kuryokhin, who has official status as a concert pianist, utilized computerized deconstructions of a poet reading Pushkin's poetry, James Brown's "Get Funky" and rap-scratching mixed with lyrical passages he had written as soundtracks for Soviet films. Some of the New Painters also participate in various rock groups who, although influenced by the West, still sound distinctively Russian, as though no matter how hard they tried, they could never reproduce the cheesy, bubble-gum pop of Madonna and Michael Jackson.

Sergei Sokorov, an official film director, has recently completed *Acca* (pronounced "Assa"), a film named after the password that unites these movements, i.e. New Painters, Popular Mechanics and the Mayakovsky Club. The film stars Afrika and others from the movement, and is based, or so it seemed, on their own particular history. The New Painters have also worked in collaboration with the underground filmmaker Yufit from Leningrad.

The New Painters and Popular Mechanics function more or less as the pop stars of the Soviet Union. Their connection to the West exists purely through curiosity and a hunger for information. Afrika, like Komar & Melamid, ate his Warhol's Campbell's Soup, saying, "I think it's very good soup, but it's just like our tomato paste. Before Warhol died I wanted to send him our meat with tomato paste." Afrika did, however, send Warhol his manifesto for an artist's project in outer space. It was sent to Warhol three weeks

before his death, and "someone told me that he read it and really thought that it was a good idea." When asked the content of the manifesto, Afrika replied, "I can't tell you because that would close your mind and deprive you of your own fantasies for artists in space."

Olga Swiblova has said that the biggest problem for art in the Soviet Union is one of aesthetics versus editors, the bureaucracy and especially the public. Since the '60s, unofficial Soviet artists have tried to revolutionize the aesthetic thinking of the Russian masses, with little support or success. What is evident is that an avant-garde, even if marginal, has flourished. It is difficult not to be swept up in their optimism, particularly with the New Painters who, as the youngest of these movements, have rejected with hubris the oppression of the generations before them. In Russia the absence of cynicism would indicate revival and new possibilities for an international cultural movement. Where else in the world would one hear a young art critic, André Khlobystyne, flushed with vodka, holding forth on how "the new art at the end of the 20th Century will be accessible to everyone and received by all classes."

Most astonishing is the fact that Russia has managed to preserve its national spirit—a mystical atmosphere somewhere between Dostoyevsky and Tarkovsky. Perhaps the Occident can only shamefully offer for comparison the site of the miracle in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. It is difficult—whether strolling through Gorky Park at midnight, or sitting in the post-modern, dimly-lit apartment of the mystical, violent, avant-garde musician, Alexei Teygen, with his pile of self-constructed musical instruments and synthesizers sprawled over his floor while we gaze out at the big red stars of the Kremlin—not to be a little wistful about the faith.

Shaun Coley is a writer from New York. She is a regular contributor to "Flash Art."

All photographs by Josephine Guattari.

"The fact that I am an artist is for me the most important thing in art. As yet as far as life is concerned, this fact is not necessarily relevant."

"For me it is convenient to consider art from a position of art and life from my own personal convictions which relate to nobody. Art has its laws. And my task is either to follow them or not. It's not important to me where art develops, but how it develops. When art in general is at stake it does not matter whether it's pursued in America, Paris, or in Russia. The visual images in my works are divided into 'butting,' 'poking' and 'picking.' For example, 'buttings' are objects for either horizontal or vertical butting, can be childish, feminine or masculine and for people or things."

"In co-authorship with V. Skersis we realized 'Workshops in Self-defense Against Things' (1981). In the training manual one can find 'What are you going to do if an infuriated television set attacks you? Sit and cover your head with your hands or run away? That's wrong. You must thrust with a fork at the misbehaving object. That will make it come to its senses.'"

Vadim Zakharov  
(Translated from the Russian by Todd Bludeau)