

**The State Center for Contemporary Art
Anna Akhmatova Museum at the Fontanniy Dom**

present

Russia: Significant Other (Russia as inspiration for the West)

Curated by Olga Kopenkina

February 8th - March 3rd, 2006.

Artists: Mark Boswell (US), Dimitri Devyatkin (US), Jim Finn (US), Jacqueline Goss (US), Susan Kelly (Ireland), Matts Leiderstam (Sweden), Carlos Motta (US/ Colombia), neuroTransmitter group (Angel Nevarez + Valerie Tevere, US), Nam June Paik (US), Ricardo Zuniga (Nicaragua/US).

In the recent past, due to a lack of knowledge, Westerners could connect to Russia only through the prism of Cold War-era stereotypes. Or they learned about Russia from books and movies, its philosophy and art, while maintaining significant physical distance from the country. However, when they went there and experienced it first hand, they got confused and deluded. This delusion was reflected in literature of writers who took trips to Russia at times of its big political and economical transformations: Marquis Astolf de Custine in 1839, Andre Gide in 1936, John Steinbeck in 1947, Walter Benjamin in 1926, Knuth Ebeling in 1996. Chantal Akerman's well-known film, "D'Est" (From the East, 1993), based on the artist's trip eastward through the former Soviet Union in the dead of winter, shows that Russia in close proximity does not prove to be a Western dream; only from a distance it seemed enchanting. And it is not only due to the travelers' lack of Russian language, but because of the distance that Russia seemed to impose on a foreign observer (Walter Benjamin in his book "Moscow Diary" calls Moscow "an unconquered fortress") given the impossibility of grasping Russia through visual means. (For example, there were restrictions on drawing and photographing on the streets in Moscow and other big cities in Soviet times.) Thus, everyone carried his or her own pre-existing image (perception) of Russia, which is always far from the reality of Russia, yet essentially true.

Meanwhile, modern discourse on Russia originated in the tradition of Russian philosophy. In the 19th c, such writers as Pyotr Chaadayev, Alexander Gertsen, Ivan Chernishevsky, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and others, pointed out the difference of Russian consciousness in the face of the Western world. They tried to find Russia's place in Europe, and later, in the Western world, and also how Russia and the West interconnect. While seeking this answer, they were implanting the image of Russia as an impossible, unspeakable "Other", the site of the world's "great utopia" in the Western consciousness, suggesting that Russia is rather the subconscious of the West than its antipode.

The core perception of Russia by the outside world today is still shaped by this country's socialist past, its great military power, its ideology, and the role it played in world politics in the past century, representing on the one hand, the alternative to Western capitalism, and on the other, the threat of a totalitarian state. And this perception has changed very little since the end of the Cold War, despite political transformations in Russia over the last fifteen years and its current economic growth.

But the reasons for such stagnation in the perception of Russia abroad can perhaps be found inside Russia itself. Indeed, during the post-Soviet era, Russia (especially "Putin's Russia") seems to have lost its gift for self-reflectivity, which for centuries was a prerogative of Russian intelligentsia, and which traditionally served as an antidote against the excess of power in the country. As Boris Groys once put it, Russian intelligentsia, which has historically represented "Western consciousness," finds itself lost in the "other," in Russia itself, without any chance to grasp the latter. Therefore, one of the ways to return the historical consciousness to Russia is to explore its role and place in Western representations, which carry desires and assumptions that have defined the West throughout its history.¹ These representations are also an evidence of continuous efforts of the Western world to establish connections with Russia – the country, which had until recently been at once one of the most hostile and the most desirable "others"; to grasp Russia (even through the separate segments of its history and its present) in its "indifferentiability," its unity, its weirdness, if you will.

Perhaps among all the aspects of the post-Soviet world, the Communist utopia remains one of the most privileged that has defined the Western subconscious. The West was able to absorb the Communist utopia in its "Leninist" version, and today, the elements of this utopia are reworked and

¹ «Russia has at different times been demonized or divinized by Western opinion less because of her role in Europe than because of the fears and frustrations, or the hopes and aspirations, generated within European Society by its own domestic problems.» (Martin Malia, «Russia Under Western Eyes»)

planted into the fabric of both mainstream political discourses (especially in Western Europe) and popular culture here. In the 1990s and 2000s, the departure of the functioning communist utopia that is the Soviet Union gave way to nostalgia -- a nostalgia that does not discriminate. It is experienced not only by the post-Soviet subjects from Eastern Europe, but also by Westerners. As the East occupied a privileged place in the collective conscience of the West, the departure of the Second World was felt by Westerners rather strongly.

Moreover, today "Russia" seems to extend far beyond the country's national borders. It exists in the West, as if finally manifesting the success of the Soviet Union's propaganda machine in winning the hearts and minds of Western intelligentsia. In the 2000s, the word "Russia" became an empty container, which can be successfully mobilized by different subjectivities. One can argue that even today, Russia becomes an imagined community, a community of people in Russia, the West, and elsewhere, that has an emotional, personal, political, subconscious, or otherwise a connection to Russia, to what it represented and/or still represents.

Works in exhibition *Russia: Significant Other* address the political utopias, myths and traditions, which bound Russia and the West in different times of the history. They do not necessarily address the reality of Russia, or its history, but they introduce the models of connecting with Russia as the Other -- through their own personal experiences, stories and investigations.

In the 1978 film *Media-Shuttle: New York-Moscow*, by **Dimitri Devyatkin** and **Nam June Paik** introduced an alternative way to reduce the distance imposed by the Cold War and connect two ideologically opposite cultures with the help of media technology and an exchange of artists' works, freed from ideology, while maintaining the physical distance from each other.

In contrary, the old ideologies and collectivist utopia become the point of departure in works created for *Russia: Significant Other*. Individual adaptation of the communist myth is demonstrated in **Mark Boswell's** film *The Job*, in which the artist attempts to personify Lenin, fantasizing that the leader of the Russian revolution travels to the USA to experience capitalism, as he seeks to apply a capitalist model to the Russian economy. **Ricardo Zuniga**, in his work *Patria o Libertad*, addresses the history of his family, whose members belonged to Nicaragua's Sandinista movement, and similarly to Boswell, reverses a particular part of history -- the USSR's arms

support for the Sandinista government in Nicaragua – in his project of bringing a Kalashnikov 47 machine gun back to Russia, but in this case, as an artifact.

From the other hand, artists continue archivization of the communist experience by intervening, disrupting an existing archive. This finds its expression in a peculiar transformation of the archived TV record by the performance of the Colombian anthem in **Carlos Motta's** work based on his experience as a listener in childhood, and **Ricardo Zuniga's** video-game *Always Go Left* uses the language of the old Soviet propaganda posters, transforming it into the aesthetics of computer animation. **Jim Finn's** «home» style short video films combine the language of Russian and Latin American revolutionary songs with parts of archival television programs, movies, and commercials.

In work *RI* of **neuroTransmitter**, 'utopia' is materialized, as it is elaborated in artists' statement, "through the representation and occupation of the radio spectrum. *RI* breaks from the historic totalitarian model of the Soviet controlled radio-as-propaganda by enacting a radio transmission of their own within the museum space.

Jacqueline Goss' video *How to Fix the World*, while going back to the period of the Soviet government's fight with illiteracy in Uzbekistan in the 1930s, revives the communist idea of raising the "new man" in the masses. Communist belief in "masses" and educational spirit is propelled in **Susan Kelly's** project *What Is To Be Done?* in which Lenin's "tactical" questions are addressed to the exhibition's audience. Collecting the people's responses, Kelly creates a massive compendium of texts, which traveling from place to place, reveal the collective consciousness in relation to the events and developments of contemporary world and politics.

Matts Leiderstam's work *Provenance*, investigates the destiny of a Claude Lorraine landscape painting once nesting in a Russian private collection as well as a painting in the Royal Collection, Drottingholm, Stockholm, made by Benjamin Paterssen, lesser-known Swedish artist, who lived and worked in St. Petersburg, 1787-1810, reflects on the status of Russia in the history of European art, in the period when Russia was in the process of building its statehood, combining national idea with cultural Europeanization.

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