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Flash Art



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"Elephant"
Sculpture





Aperto St. Petersburg

Olesya Turkina

St. Petersburg has a split personality: it is known as the most European city in Russia and the most Russian city in Europe. This truism certainly applies to the city's current art scene. On the one hand, St. Petersburg has a number of pro-Western art institutions. To mention just a few, Institute Pro Arte offers courses on new media and cultural journalism — a unique educational opportunity in Russia — and organizes a yearly series of exhibitions entitled "Contemporary Art in Traditional Museums." The cultural center Pushkinskaya 10 is a former squat that artists reclaimed from the city administration. It currently houses non-commercial art galleries and other organizations, including the New Academy of Fine Arts, Gallery of Experimental Sound, Navicula Artis, and the Museum of Non-Conformist Art, as well as artists' studios. Two of Russia's largest museums

involved in contemporary art actively collaborate with Western institutions. The State Hermitage Museum has formed a long-term partnership with the Guggenheim Museum, and the State Russian Museum opened its Ludwig Museum exhibition space almost ten years ago.

On the other hand, the city, with a population of more than 5 million and a number of traditional art institutions — including the Repin Academy of Fine Arts, from which hundreds of artists graduate every year — has only around a dozen galleries and a few magazines dedicated to contemporary art.

Kabinet, one of the first St. Petersburg-based contemporary art journals, appeared in 1991. Concentrating on contemporary art, philosophy and psychoanalysis, the publication was produced by artists and critics in a limited run for a decade. Other magazines on contemporary art appeared and disappeared in St.

Petersburg during the 1990s, according to the country's fluctuating economy. The *New World of Art* magazine, which publishes materials on Russian and Western contemporary artists — though it pays considerable attention to St. Petersburg's art scene — was founded in 1998. Among notable Internet sites are *Russki Album* (www.russkialbum.ru), which focuses on St. Petersburg's contemporary art scene, and the *Contemporary Art in Russia Newsletter* (www.newsletter.net.ru). The limited number of purely professional magazines in St. Petersburg means that the local art critics (among them Maria Korosteleva, Anna Matveeva, and Olga Khoroshilova) contribute to the city's general interest magazines *100% Krasny* (100% Red) and *Afisha*, which strongly associates those publications with the visual arts. Several comparably new

DMITRY SHUBIN, *Katya* (detail), 2000. From the *Extra Body* project. Color photo, 70 x 70 cm. Courtesy the artist.

galleries, such as Marina Gisich Gallery, Gallery D-137 and the Dmitry Semenov Gallery, take part in the international art fair Art Moscow, as well as other international art events.

The state of contemporary in St. Petersburg art reflects the city's dual position, straddling both East and West, and Moscow and Russia. St. Petersburg is commonly referred to as the cultural capital of Russia. Such a definition suggests that the city that lost its status as the capital nearly a century ago has little of the infrastructure usually provided by the link between administrative and economic mechanisms, and in this sense has limited metropolitan life. There are, however, signs to the contrary. The gap between St. Petersburg's metropolitan ambi-



tions and the reality of the situation became particularly noticeable in the year 2000, when President Vladimir Putin's first presidential term signaled a shift of political attention towards St. Petersburg. The Hermitage and the Russian Museums became venues for political summits. The city's tercentenary was sumptuously celebrated in 2003. Rumors that certain ministries would be transferred to St. Petersburg caused a rise in prices for real estate and excited interest in those Western and Moscow galleries that had plans to create their own agencies in the city in order to look for new collectors and patrons. Despite all this, St. Petersburg still represents a utopian place that is waiting for inclusion on the map of contemporary art.

Artist and film director Yevgeniy Yufit, founder of the Necrorealism art movement, is one of the most heroic and enigmatic figures on the local art scene. In 1985, Yufit founded the independent experimental film studio Mzhalalafilm in Leningrad, where he made five 16mm shorts. He subsequently made six full-length 36mm films. Simultaneously, he produced a series of mono-

chrome photographs showing bird's-eye views of pathetic landscapes and 'necro-characters' expelled from everyday life by their ecstatic anticipation of death. Yufit's last film, *Killed by Lightning* (2002) was presented at Manifesta 5. Its central motif is the psychopathological conduct of a man who becomes the victim of a scientific experiment and suffers psychological trauma. Evolutionary processes constitute an important topic in Yufit's work. His new project has the working title *Bipedalism*. As in his other films, the protagonist is a middle-aged man who finds himself in a situation that introduces him into the fold of an idyllic yet brutal male brotherhood.

The art of Vladimir Kustov, a member of the Necrorealism movement and founder of the 'necro-method,' uses sources such as medical charts diagnosing a patient's death and photographs from medico-legal reference books. Kustov focuses on the gap between life and death, which he calls "the corridor of dying." He pays particular attention to old tombs, which he treats as a key point in the birth of civilization.

For instance, in his installation *The City of Nuclein Reveries* (shown at Rotor Gallery in 2003) he reconstructs a city cemetery. Kustov explores new forms of spatial arrangement, something he used in his installation at the Museum of Forensic Medicine of the Mechnikov Medical Academy (2001) and at the Freud's Dreams Museum (1999). Founded by art critic and psychoanalyst Victor Mazin, Freud's Dreams Museum regularly organizes exhibitions and conferences on art, psychoanalysis, and philosophy.

Being a significant element of many artists' work, psychoanalysis is particularly important for Sergei Bugaev Afrika, whose art is focused on the aestheticization of trauma. Since the late '80s, Afrika has been working with the heterogeneity of the disintegrated empire, the new disorder that prevails in the territory of the former USSR. In his installations, such as *MIR: Made in the 20th Century* (shown in the Russian Pavilion at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999), or *Dream Machine* (shown in "American Effect," at the Whitney Museum in 2003), he

attempts to deconstruct the lost home of the master ideology. The video *Stalker-3* (2002) presents an amateur documentary film of a day in the war between Russian and Chechen military troops. The shocking reality of war and the naturalism of human sacrifice are partly eroded by the amateur quality of the filming. *Stalker-3*, in contrast to its namesake, Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979), is not a metaphorical journey into the cinematic reality of a militarized zone.

Dmitry Shubin's photographic project "Death as Photography" (2001), generates meaning from seemingly banal photographs taken at the locations of murders in the mid-'90s in St. Petersburg. His *Presidential Project* (2003) represents the anonymous gaze of power. The video, shot in Moscow from a moving car, records the sites the Russian president sees every day on his way to and from the Kremlin. The president's gaze thus functions like a surveillance camera. For his photographic project "Extra Body" (2000), shown at Gallery 21 in St. Petersburg, the artist photographed teenage girls wearing dressing-gowns in their



kitchens or bedrooms, which are decorated with reproductions of works by Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Carolee Schneemann.

The urban space of St. Petersburg is a key concern of the two young artists Spy and Mikka (Alexei Spy and Nikita Cherevkov), authors of the "Search and Upgrade" project. In the most unexpected places, the artists put small, almost invisible graffiti, suggesting to "throw your TV set away" or warning that "you are being watched." They cover garbage bags in the city dumps with gold and silver paint in order to revive that which has entered a blind spot and vanished from aesthetic view.

The artists Glyuklya and Tsaplya (Natasha Pershina-Yakimanskaya and Olga Egorova) address the city by means of myth. Having started with the *Poor Lisa* performance, in the course of which they reenacted the exploits of the heroine of Tchaikovsky's most Petersburgian opera, *The Queen of Spades*, the artists created a number of performances focused on the imaginary life of things that live and die in the same way people do. One of their latest performances, *The Fabric of Found Clothes*, is a club-like clothes shop located at Pushkinskaya 10.

For the last decade, neo-academism, the art movement founded by Timur Novikov, has remained a trademark of St. Petersburg's art. Georgy Gurianov, one of the earliest members of the movement, draws on the heritage of Soviet art from the 1930s to the '50s. Following that period's romantic subjects, he chooses pilots, mariners, and sportsmen as the protagonists of his paintings and drawings. His formula of pathos, expressed in the airless images, represents heroism in our non-heroic epoch.

Ambivalence towards classical heritage is explored in the works of Egor Ostrov. This is particularly striking in his latest project, "The Depth of Starkness," a series of paintings imitating optical dot matrix effects, based on photographs of Arno Breker's sculptures. Analysis of ideal images in art history and contemporary mass media is also the basis of Olga

Tobreluts' work. In 1999, the artist created the series "Sacred Figures," first shown in the "Heaven" exhibition at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in 1999. One of the works belonging to this series, which shows Leonardo di Caprio's face implanted in a painting by Antonello da Messina, was apparently censored from publication by Thames and Hudson, creating a much-discussed case of censorship in contemporary art. By means of montage, Tobreluts brings together two types of cults initially rooted in religious worship: the cult of art history and the cult of celebrity. In 2003, the artist created a sort of cultural hallucination in her series "Emperor and Galilean," based on Henrik Ibsen's play of the same title (presented at the Henie Onstad Art Center in Oslo, 2003, and the State Russian Museum, 2004). Kerim Ragimov's paintings are based on mass media images. For his "Human Project" the artist selects images of anonymous people by barely-known photographers. He then makes paintings based on these photographs, scrupulously trying to render their composition and colors. Ragimov's latest project, "Road Off," recently shown at the Shanghai Biennale, is a series of paintings in which the artist combines two stereotypes; famous Russian paintings of the 19th century (currently used as a means of national self-identification) and Western automobiles popular among "New Russians."

The St. Petersburg myth is strongly associated with Dostoevsky. In the photo project "Dostoevsky in Baden-Baden," Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, who moved from St. Petersburg to Moscow several years ago, imitates the novelist, assuming the role of Dostoevsky at a casino in Baden-Baden, Germany — a reference to the protagonist of Dostoevsky's novel *The Gambler*. Indeed, the situation of the contemporary artist in St. Petersburg might be compared with the character of the gambler, who is ready to win or lose everything he is passionate about.

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Above: OLGA TOBRELUITS, *Leonardo*, 1999. Canvas print, from the series "Sacred Figures," 160 x 80 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Opposite, above from left: VLADISLAV MAMYSHEV-MONROE, *Dostoevsky in Baden-Baden*, 60 x 90 cm. Courtesy Gallery D137, St. Petersburg; YEVGENIY YUFIT, *Killed by Lightning*, 2002. Feature film, 63 min. Courtesy the artist; EGOR OSTROV, *Sculpture 2*, 135 x 95 cm. Courtesy Gallery D137, St. Petersburg; below from left: GEORGY GURIANOV, *Liberal*, 150 x 90 cm. Courtesy Gallery D137, St. Petersburg; EVGENY MOCHOREV, *Denis and a round window*, 1999. From the series "Teenagers of St. Petersburg," Courtesy Marina Gisich Gallery, St. Petersburg; KERIM RAGIMOV, *Buddists, Human Project, Portrait #19*, 2001. Oil on canvas, 144 x 234 cm. Courtesy Marina Gitisch Gallery, St. Petersburg.

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Computer generated images in St. Petersburg neoacademism

Ekaterina Andreeva

The mythology of St. Petersburg, one of the classical and at the same time dead sites of the European culture, influenced the nature of local art. As early as in 19th century the myth of the city was stricken by a sickly split, connected with the craving to European beauty and understanding of the lifeless artificiality, "deliberateness" of this beauty in our northern nation.

Neoacademism is a natural form of consciousness for the local artists. It is historically inevitable, as the idea of using the Times Square indicator panel in New York. That is why one should not try to find the traces of noble affinity with works of the great empire period in it. Though, to some extent neoacademism is really connected with the old art,

with formerly adopted attitude toward the art, to be exact. I mean that experience which is called love to the art or to the beautiful. It is apotheosis of neither art-science, art-ideology, nor art-experiment; I mean the renovation of love tension between life and art, longing for the beauty which caresses the eye. (Nonetheless this beauty does not correspond to the academic canons and satisfies absolutely commonplace tastes at times.) This quality, was derided by the modernists at the beginning of our century, is as autoerotic as all the nature of love and art is. It determines both charm and inadequacy of neoacademism. The object of interest now is not an expressive gesture or an ingenious project but fantasy, close to the very figure of an artist (the only and imperfect object) or directed to some favourite hero, with whom an artist equates himself. This fantasy cannot be fed on formerly powerful tradition which now exists as a ghost of a living voice in a dead space of ruins. That is why, it is doomed like Echo to an endless roll call with many reflections - its own ones and some one else's. Neoacademism around 1990 is as separated from all that staff that had been comprised in the corpus of Antiquity as the beauty in its temporary existence from the sublime in its metaphysical being was. The intention of renovating the lost love tension between life and art expressed by neoacademism makes it possible to identify it as one more unconscious attempt to gain the eternal identity.

Timur Novikov - leader and founder of the neoacademism in St. Petersburg consciously had chosen photography as the main and, we could say, ritual mean of representation in this art. His first works in the neoacademism were photomontages devoted to the history of Oscar Wilde and combined of the rephotographed 19th century originals: Wilde's photoportraits, antique works of art. Art always considered to be a way of transfiguration, transcending an image to the other reality. Photography unlike painting transcends its images without altering them in symbolical representation, it operates with the help of light transfigurative force, to use the expression of Roland Barthes, it is a kind of resurrection. That is why it is not just a coincidence that photography supposed to be unique message, adequate to the wandering of soul and flesh in

search for identity by the end of our century.

The technique of photomontage is associated with the representation of reality as the heterogeneous space of visual and/or semantic shifts. Which means the interference, intrusion into the eternity of photo image and into the eternal mimetic world of the old art both. The neoacademistic idea to represent photography as a message of eternal beauty required a special homogeneous illusion, visual eternity of the other nature. It was in 1993 when the first computer animation studio was established in St. Petersburg and Timur Novikov suggested Olga Tobreluts to work over a cycle of computer generated photographs there. From the point of view of the subject this first cycle called "Empire Reflections" was not a new word in neoacademism. It belonged to the stylish self/portraiture in historical mood which has become popular since 1991, when Juris Lesnik, pioneer of computer technologies, piloted it in his video "Exotic of Classicism".

Lesnik shooted Vladislav Mamyshev (Monroe) as a Muse of the Palace Bridge. Olga Tobreluts performed as a muse in the same mode of representation. But it was the connection between the figures and the background which looked astonishingly new and unpredictable - all this fantastic quasihistorical landscapes and interiors, which were implemented due to the digital alteration of the originals.

While technological and industrial development secure a factual recording of society, cultural history gives us examples of the effect of false memory, of the creation of life-

like dubles. When European progressiveness reached its pinnacle, the most fashionable philosopher of the 1910s, Oswald Spengler, supplied this very diagnosis of the state of European culture. He described the ability of culture to give birth to things that are life like but are absolutely original. He looked for a time in history that reflected the 20th century and he chose the times of Hellenism. He identified two elements - historical scepticism and manipulation of dubious historical authenticity/ identity that really proved to be crucial for the cultural consciousness of the last ten years of our century. And on the basis of this we can say with a fair amount of certainty, that they amounted to something of an intellectual sum of the 20th century. Both epochs demonstrate the obvious crisis of the idea of the unraveling of historical time, when a historic picture disintegrates into many separate narratives. Our century repeatedly announced the wiping out the problem

of history in general. And in this sense, the modern situation is reminiscent of ancient times when, according to Spengler's theory, the historical line, receding into the past, quickly merged with mythology, and did not convey a sense of the expanse nor the slowness of historical



time. The modern picture of time is non-linear and mosaic-like. Time destructively absorbs different speeds of existence and the possibility of switching between them.

The scattered perception of time and historical orientation tainted with scepticism defined to a certain extent the choice of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* as the subject for the next computer graphic project in St. Petersburg. The power

of computer in this project entirely confirmed Spengler's hypothesis that, in the period of civilization technology aspires to magic, society strives toward maximum technological expertise and precision, to create life-like doubles and substitutes for reality. Technology usurps the power of art and ingeniously imitates the artist's skills, the creative process and the naturalness of nature. Technological life-like doubles entangle and exceed the boundaries of reality. They create the illusion of the reversibility of historical time and begin to work like the most powerful agent of producing false memory. The computer primordially condemned to be an artificial aid to memory, reveals the possibility of not only preserving knowledge but of distorting it, transforming the landscape of memory beyond recognition. In computer images the simplest operation of mirror reflections and changes of lighting instantaneously create new spaces and inner passages in new falsified stories, which likewise are instantly assimilated and swallowed up by the machine of memory. History is deprived of its authenticity, the shifting of historical speeds and haphazard effects allow a super-modern plane to appear in a 19th century sky over the ancient temple of Hercules and, at the same time, deprive the heroes of the possibility to reach the end, to control the fate and end their wan-

dering - condemning them to wander in the labyrinth of historic-cultural likenesses.

As it is very well known, Walter Benjamin proclaimed that contemporary photography lacked aura. But he founded this magic aura in the 19th century photos due to the long exposition, conservation of light in the photo print. The light, which is reflected of the model face or landscape. The problem of light defines the discourses of digital photography as well. Digital image is combined of pixels and that's why it is distanced of its original: the light of original is mathematically decoded. Discourse of light begins in the digital photography from scanning of originals, from transfiguration of the images taking place with the help of artificial light. To quote Roland Barthes, this light never emanates from the human figure and never struggle with the forces of night to preserve the image on the silver plate. As Bernard Stiegler expresses it, using Paul Virilio's metaphor, "this light emerging from night no longer comes from a day become night, as do the photons emanating from Baudelaire's face. It comes rather from Hades, the kingdom of the dead, the underground: it is an electric light released by the subterranean matter of the earth's belly (coal, crude oil, uranium, all what P. Virilio calls a false daylight). It is an electronic, that is to say, a de-composed light." (Images and

