

Aaron Richmond: Draft 1, *Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art*

Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art

The James Gallery + e-flux

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By Aaron Richmond

When the 2013 Moscow Biennale staged a conversation between Ilya Kabakov and John Baldessari, there was a residual gravitas that accompanied their situation. Here sitting beside one another were two pivotal figures in the conceptual turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century art, each one straining to understand the other through an oversized handheld telephone. This drama of simultaneous translation fit the magnitude of their expressed differences – differences first in the cultures that produced them as artists. Kabakov's Soviet collectivist origins were held in starkest contrast to Baldessari's sober reflections on the competitive individualism of the American artist.

For younger generations, these terms are no doubt complicated - both by capitalist transitions in the post-Soviet East, and by accommodations for social art practices within the institutions of the West. And yet, something of an oversized telephone might still be needed to recall certain gaps that persist in our imagination and understanding. What were the radical futures envisioned by the communist project? And into what historical conditions have such projects subsequently awoken? On these and other questions, the current exhibition, "Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art," makes for timely reception.

Curated by Boris Groys, the exhibition is a collaboration between The James Gallery at the CUNY Graduate Center and *e-flux* – a publishing platform and collaborative institute founded by the artist Anton Vidokle in 1998. Distributed over two sites are a collection of works by seven artists and collectives, some based in Russia, and others in New York and internationally.

According to Groys, these artists address a context in which their own history is either repressed by a conservative project to invent Russian identity without its so-called "soviet-leftovers," or derided by an international discourse in which ideas about

communism are interchangeable with Stalinist-era authoritarianism and mass-bureaucratization. The artists use various means to address this situation, and while thoroughly un-dramatized, there is an overarching commitment to the contemporary socio-political reality as a field of performance and play.

In a video by the collective Chto Velat (*What is to be Done?*), eleven young Russians assemble together in a lucid, but only quasi-formalist interior. When the group first appears, they are each attuned to their own screens and social networks, the contents of which appear in three vertically stacked squares on the left hand side of the screen. Divided by Brechtian captions, the next episode is introduced as one “In which the film participants measure the coordinates of their location in time and space and declare their presence.” Looking into the camera, one says: “I am one year before the first expedition to Mars and 2000 kilometers away from my mother, who works in another country.” Such historical and biographical details continue to overlap as the participants present themselves through a combination of direct statements and mimed gestures. Both assembling and disassembling, twelve moments are distilled from their precarious formation as a political collective

In a statement about this project, Chto Velat writes “We used to think that collectivity is necessary in order to be strong, but now we realize it is necessary simply to maintain one’s sanity.” This distinction may be important in understanding why this project, informed as it is, has the pathos of theatre made by children. As though orphaned by their state, the participants perform a condition that is deeply vulnerable.

Other moments in the exhibition put forward similar actions to accompany extreme circumstances. And interestingly, these extremities are defined not only within the spheres of political action, but also within registers that range from the environmental to the socio-erotic.

In works by Anton Ginzburg, for example, the Aral Sea Basin becomes an allegorical desert landscape from which to reproduce the extreme conditions of the post-Soviet experience. Located between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the Aral Sea was once one of the world’s largest inland sea-lakes; through failed Soviet-era irrigation efforts, in recent

years it has been reduced to a tenth of its size. In his film, “Walking the Sea” (2013), Ginzburg presents himself as an artist modeled after Courbet’s 1854 “La Rencontre (Bonjour Monsieur Courbet)” – but in lieu of the supplies of a realist painter, he carries on his back a triangulated mirror structure which reflects the ruins and relics of environmental catastrophe. A dervish water pouch hangs from his side, one of several subtle intimations of a subterranean reservoir out of which locals believe the Aral Sea will some day re-emerge. In Ginzburg’s film, these complexities in wardrobe add up to something more interesting than cultural appropriations. They signify the artist as a carrier of contradictory capacities - or rather, as the witness to these capacities as they structure a historical experience. The film does not simply document environmental degradation, but also reveals the most palpable failures and aspirations of the political context.

Finally, one installation provides the most lasting cues for the show in its broadest critical ambitions. At e-flux, one enters a room and sees works attributed to Vladimir Putin, here presented as the reigning artist-hero of the Russian Federation. There is a video from his meticulous inauguration, and photographs that document, amongst other things, his well-known encounters with various forms of wildlife.

Meanwhile, from the next room one can hear a looped recording of Pussy Riot’s performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Between fits of electronic music, the music fades to the voices of five women singing: “Mother of God, Drive Putin Away.”

While there is a deliberate irony in the presentation of Vladimir Putin as a contemporary artist, there is less than you might think in the intonations of a Punk Prayer. Like other artists in the exhibition, the critical gesture in Pussy Riot is not enacted over and above the historical situation, but through a deep immersion in its most essential contradictions. Like Ginzburg’s Sea Basin, the cathedral is treated not only as a site of immense corruption and perversity, but also of promises and functions long miscarried.

This difference – the ability to situate artistic actions at the centre of historical extremes - can be heard as much as it can be felt. Or to borrow a final set of terms from the artist and critic Keti Chukhrov, there is an “intonational aspiration” that seems to be at the heart of much of this work. The work is audible to us, but it seems to have emerged from conditions in which speech is most precarious. For those who strain to hear it, this will have much to say, not only about life in contemporary Russia, but about America too. And to our critical cultures that trade too easily in ideas and images, or to other varieties of casualness that keep the market flowing, it is not yet clear whether it is the idea of communism itself, or some other residue of its commitments, that continues to innerve us in our secular conceits.