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To Wear or Not to Wear¹

Genrikh Fedorovich Khudyakov (b. 1930, Cheliabinsk) explores both verbal and visual disciplines. After graduation from the Department of Philology at Leningrad State University in 1959, Khudyakov emerged as a highly experimental poet who, writing under the pseudonym "Autograph", tested the limits of "meaning" and enunciation. He continues to use verse as a creative stream of consciousness, a "salubrious gymnastics",² which he often distributes amidst hand-made miscellanies – one reason why, with his linguistic expertise, Khudyakov turned to the sophisticated poetry of Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva and, with his knowledge of English, not just spoken, but also syntactical and grammatical, to the poetry of Emily Dickinson. No doubt, Dickinson's subtle connection of the minutiae of everyday life with the divine firmament appeals to Khudyakov who, through his application of material fragments, builds not only an impressive poetical inventory, but also an entire Cosmic Grotto of artistic ready-to-wears.

Arriving in New York in 1974, at the zenith of flower children, punk and psychedelic art, Khudyakov focused attention on "clothes", especially

¹ The paraphrase of the famous line from Hamlet's soliloquy in *Hamlet*, i.e. "To be, or not to be", (Act III, Scene 1), is not accidental. One of Khudyakov's major literary productions is the play, *Laertid* (1972), which he based on Shakespeare's play, shifting the time of action to the 20th century with ready references to the palindromic Tel[e]ma[kh] from the *Odyssey*. *Laertid* was first published in *Gnozis*, New York, 1979, No. 5-6, pp. 89-140.

² The phrase "gimnastika lechebnaia" is from the last stanza of Khudyakov's untitled poem, "Trud tvorcheskii...." (1961).

blazers, as carriers of esthetic expression. Here were “softwears”, resplendent mosaics of textiles, strips, buttons, pins, even chewing-gum wrappers and can labels composed as ambulatory collages, irrespective of their ultimate destination. A major stimulus to Khudyakov’s colored vestments and fabrics was the nocturnal skyline of New York City which he saw, flabbergasted, from the top of the Empire State Building shortly after immigration, which is to say that his luminous jackets, neck-ties, pants, and banners may be read as vertical transmissions of the horizontal Manhattan cityscape at night -- as well as homages to the T-shirt and the shopping-bag. Like the city after twilight, much of Khudyakov’s designer clothing is also fluorescent, shining in the dark, thanks to his liberal use of acrylic. Back then the contrast between this swinging citadel of Capitalism and Communist Moscow was vivid, indeed: Brezhnev’s Moscow was dark and silent where traffic was spare, streetlights were wan, television was black and white, dress was sober, and the low lamps of communal apartments were weakened further by the gigantic *abazhury* casting their eerie sodium glow over the meager furniture, the checkered table-cloth and the rationed sugar. No commercial neon, no car lights, buildings in disrepair, monuments of cold granite to the high and mighty, the cult of secrecy and disinformation, the vast emptiness of the boulevards and construction sites, the staidness of the Party machine – all these conditions created the manifest impression of a wasteland and a Dark Ages. In emigrating to

America, therefore, Khudyakov passed from shadow to light and expressed this luminous discovery in blazing blazers, waistcoats, trousers, shoes, and wall-hangings which undermined – and continue to undermine -- all academic rules about color combinations and complementary hues. Moreover, he returns to his compositions over long intervals of time, sometimes as much as thirty years. The results are glamorous in their dissonance and jarring in their syncopation.

But even if Khudyakov seemed to be placing American illumination above Soviet obscurity, he was not a political renegade, but an artistic dissident who was totally indifferent to the pillars of power, whether Eastern or Western.³ With his sartorial icons, he confronted and challenged the sobriety of Soviet society with its dismal masses and anonymous clothing: his dazzling kaleidoscope of red and yellow fabrics, eccentric and chic, could only elicit opposition and censure within the greyness of Brezhnev's Russia. Certainly, Khudyakov's suits constituted an anti-uniform which questioned the legality of the omnipresent *militsiia*, the Red Army, the factory worker and the KGB, and, on this level, inevitably, was considered to be dissident and disruptive, the moreso since he was represented in numerous émigré publications such as *Apollon-77*, *A-Ya*, *Gnozis*, and *U Goluboi laguny*. Even so, today Khudyakov is remembered more for the brilliantly colored ensembles which he designed, created and wore, than for his radical poetry.

Reserved, if not, gruff, but with an unrelentingly sardonic humour, Khudyakov lives as a vitrine of his own variegated art, a taciturn vehicle of loud vestments and, with his noble stature and high forehead, he enters upon the world stage or, more often than not, retreats to the "Cosmic Grotto" of his apartment and studio.

In some sense, Khudyakov marks the culmination of a dress parade which distinguished much of 20th century Russian Modernism. There was Sergei Diaghilev with his artificial, besilvered forelock and immutable suits from Saville Row, Konstantin Somov with yellow suede shoes, David Burliuk, Vasili Kamensky, and Vladimir Maiakovsky with their fancy waistcoats, extravagant neck-ties and top hats, Sonia Delaunay's Simultanist robes, fashion accessories and *intérieures* with their loud stripes of red and blue, even the Constructivists such as Liubov' Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova with the colorful geometric patterns of their workaday clothes. True, the rapid development from an ornamental to an architectonic conception of fabric and dress design was stimulated by the activities of many avant-garde artists involved directly or indirectly in applied art before the Revolution. In 1912-13, for example, Natal'ia Goncharova made patterns for embroideries and over forty designs for ladies' dresses, some of which incorporated abstract motifs. In 1915-16, Ol'ga Rozanova, one of the most original adepts of the abstract system of

³ See interview with Khudyakov conducted by Viktor Tupitsyn in *A-Ya*, Paris, 1982,

Suprematism, applied her dynamic combinations of color planes to textile design. In 1916 the painter Kseniia Boguslavskaia, wife of Ivan Puni and, with him, co-organizer of the legendary exhibitions "Streetcar V" (Petrograd, 1915) and "0.10" (Petrograd, 1915-16), contributed an entire range of designs for embroideries, cushions and handbags to two exhibitions of the Association of Independents (Petrograd) and the World of Art (Petrograd). The culmination to this pre-Revolutionary involvement of the avant-garde in the design of textiles, clothe, and related accoutrements, was the series of three specialist exhibitions in Moscow, i.e. "The Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art" (1915), "The Exhibition of Industrial Art" (1915-16) (both at the Lemercier Gallery, Moscow) and the "Second Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art" (1917) (at the Mikhailova Salon, Moscow). Among the contributions by Exter, Malevich, Popova, Evgeniia Pribylskaia, Puni, Rozanova, Nadezhda Uda'ltsova and Georgii Yakulov were designs for drapes, cushions, carpets, dresses, handbags and belts. Of course, these items were oriented towards a bourgeois, affluent and leisured class, and, while sometimes inspired by peasant motifs (as in the case of some of Rozanova's dresses), they were not intended for the mass market.

All this is to say that, although the artists of the avant-garde rarely designed vestments for their own use, they did anticipate Khudyakov's basic premise that the clothed body function simultaneously as a private work of

art and as a public exhibition space. Khudyakov, therefore, can be regarded as the culmination to this sartorial lineage, although, certainly, his gorgeous "coats of many colors"⁴ go beyond these precedents. After all, he covers virtually the entire body with glad rags and moving quilts and does so almost exclusively for esthetic effect, using vigorous, jazzy motifs which, when applied to a piece of clothing, i.e. placed in the condition of movement, lose none of their effectiveness: even though the wearer may be standing or sitting, the designs continue to "move".

Although some may perceive traces of excessive Capitalist advertising in Khudyakov's clothing, he wears it not to imitate or stimulate consumerist taste, but to offer a kinetic artifact, one devoid of political or social commentary. In some sense, the elements of height, weight and color of the supporting mechanism, the human body, are also secondary to the visual effect just as the frame surrounding a painting, generally speaking, is also secondary to the pictorial value of the actual work of art. True, Khudyakov himself is measured and stern in physique and seems strangely out of place when placed in a busy Manhattan street, in a discotheque, or gathering of party-goers, which is to say that brusqueness of gesture or velocity of gait are foreign to this sartorial monument. On the contrary, Khudyakov impresses the viewer not only with the glittering patchwork of his jackets

⁴ A reference to the country folk song, "A Coat of Many Colors", which American singer Dolly Parton launched in 1971. The phrase also refers to Genesis 37:3: "Now

and trousers, but also with an emotional aloofness, distance, and severity, as if the clothes were wearing the artist and not vice versa, subordinating, undermining and, eventually, removing the human psyche. Of course, Khudyakov is much more than a tailor's dummy or model, for, like an engineer, he invents and designs the clothes, measures the pieces, stitches and sews, adds buttons and sequins and then launches his corporeal mobiles into public space to create a "cerebral tempest", as one critic has asserted.⁵

For Khudyakov the body is a territorial surface dotted with hills and dales, lightness and darkness, proximity and distance which invite artistic intervention. He modifies and disguises that territory through a magic spectrum just as Pavel Tchelitchew might turn a physique into a landscape or a natural topography into a supine body, and raises the fundamental question as to whether we should perceive Khudyakov's living mannequins as human beings or as works of art. Of course, Khudyakov himself refuses to resolve that dilemma, offering the viewer freedom of choice and, thereby, eliciting instability and unease, even bewilderment – which is why Khudyakov's art is not for everyone. After all, many would argue that a work of art should be comprehensible, narrative and accessible and that an

Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours."

⁵ M. Gutkin: "Poslednii mozgovoi shturm Genrikha Khudiakova" (2015). Gutkin was reviewing the exhibition "Henry Khudyakov" at the Black and White Gallery, Brooklyn, New York, in March-May, 2015: Go to <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/khudyakov.../2701495.html>

inscrutable artifact is a contradiction in terms, one reason why Khudyakov, alien to the Soviet cultural establishment, chose to emigrate to an apparently more receptive and pluralist society– not that he has enjoyed an unqualified success in his newfound homeland which, after all, also prefers illusion to allusion.

Even if he attended art school and began his first career as a poet in Russia before moving to America, Khudyakov is one of the very few members of the Russian artistic emigration to ignore national nostalgia and to avoid overt references to Russian and Soviet history and culture. He has invented and applied a universal vocabulary. For all his personal reserve and almost reclusive status, Khudyakov belongs to a global network of artists, especially to WOW (World of Wearable Art), the society of clothing artists which designer Dame Suzie founded in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1987. For over thirty years artists associated with WOW have conceptualized, constructed and exhibited extravagant specimens of wearable art, often of the most exotic proportions.⁶ True, WOW is oriented primarily towards the female carrier, emphasizing curves and erogenous zones and often placing the artifact within a glamorous fashion show or group performance and, therefore, within a social milieu – whereas Khudyakov's clothing is supremely individual, existential and, ultimately, anti-social. Essentially, he designs clothes for himself, trying perhaps desperately to emit messages

about subjectivity and interiority which, for better or for worse and for all their glitter, remain undeciphered. In this sense, Khudyakov is steadfast and valiant, admitting of no compromise or adaptation to pressures of the market, consumer taste or critical response. Like Erasmus, he might repeat that "vestis virum facit",⁷ like Shakespeare that "apparel doth oft proclaim the man",⁸ and Mark Twain that "clothes make a man. Naked people have little or no influence on society."⁹

⁶ See, for example, the exhibition "WOW" at the Erarta Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, October, 2018- February, 2019.

⁷ Erasmus: *Adagia*, 3.1.60.

⁸ W. Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2.

⁹ Ascribed to Mark Twain. See M. Johnson: *More Maxims of Mark*, New York, 1927, p. 6. Publisher not indicated.