what's to be done?

REVOLUTION IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

by Jo Anna Isaak

From the height, Moscow appeared to me a smugning unfulfill. Below, the crowds were settling in the square and pointing up at me with mocking laughter; and I became ashamed and terrified.— Praxiteis, Dari Gudovad

The Russian workers have to undergo trials immeasurably more severe; they will have to take up the fight against a monster, compared with which anti-Socialist laws in a constitutional country are but piggies.— Lenin, What's To Be Done?

Russian’s have a highly developed “Mechanical Reproduction” (Laugh culture.) The culture that produced the Bohlin’s Babalist and His World which argued that laughter and the comiclique are potent catalysts for popular explosions. Many of the artists and intellectuals who took part in the resistance of the barricades were revolutionaries in the school of Robesats and knew, in theory, how suppressive collective laughter could be. Yet there is growing concern that this “ludic” revolt has been inscribed into somebody else’s canonical text—the monolithic mechanism of mass media. In listing to Alzak’s account of the influence of the media upon these events, I was reminded of the jokes about the Soviet journalist who visited America and was amazed that all the major American TV networks reported exactly the same news—all without any comment! An important shift in the function of ideology has taken place: an obvious system of manipulation has been replaced by one of persuasive, seductive, constituitive iconification. Marginalised partners, artists, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, prostitutes, and members of the new “market,” the whole Robesatsian cast that gathered at the barricades, have been invisibly, but effectively, transforming themselves in their new, market-like TV stereotypes. As an example of how far they have been transformed from the outlook to the ill-defined.

The imagery of being worked was a common enough phenomenon in this Soviet Union. Those who want to depict the White House, the KGB, that they would be recording their actions. They also knew there was another generation: the generation of Western media. For many Soviets, holding the situation of Western media has historically functioned as a form of life insurance—the physicist Andrey Zhirkov is perhaps the most famous example of someone who stayed alive by living in the public eye. Many artists had learned to utilize the presence of Western journalists; it gave them an opportunity to be more transgressive than they could be otherwise. In 1988 during the sorcery auction in Moscow, artists had put up what, at the time, was a highly controversial exhibition at Kunsthal Moot. I was taken to it before it opened and on the organisers were sure the censors would close it down. (Inspectors come to every exhibition before it is opened to the public.) Three days later I went back. The controversial pieces were still up; they remained, according to my friends, because so many foreign journalists were in Moscow. Now, however, there is a growing sense of unease with this formerly benign and permissible genre. It has taken on the dynamics of a new system of surveillance with the power to provide internalised censure or externalised approval and legitimation. Those who were engaged in a critique of Soviet ideology understand that again they are being asked to "perform" an identity. Some are experienc- ing a form of déja vu.

The replay of the "barbicide table," as they are now referred to, can be seen in genre from fairy tales to horror movies or B-grade Westerns. In each case there is some overwhelming power in the protagonist, by virtue of having right on his side, is able to overcome. For example, this is the account given in a popular newspaper: "A small group of people around the White House witnessed the spontaneous outburst of repression which had the ability to annihilate millions, just as Stalin would have with the infamous "Dragon." (Lenin, November 1947, 1911). In reports by the correspondents of the KGB (who boosting about how easily they could have wiped out the de-lectic's had they chosen to obey orders) the description of invisible, omnipresent, omnipotent, well-trained secret killers is borrowed from Nazi horror movies. The top of the horror movie has provided the most fertile metaphors for the event, perhaps because there is a lingering sense of the uncanny in the way the forces of evil were overcome. The minister of defense, E. N. Shaposhnikov, spoke of his "feeling of the diabolical" at work during the plotting of the coup. The leaders of the coup, by the logic of the gears, are constructed as maniacs or alien forces plotting in the dark. On the day of the coup numerous hand-made placards appeared in the streets. One poster Porfirio's face is painted on the head of an animal that looks something like a ball, the caption reads: "You won't take us by fear." The Russian word for fear contains the lat-
The Worldbackwards

Regression is not origin but origin is the ideology of regression.

Theodor Adorno,
"Perennial Fashion-Jazz," Prisms

Roll away the real world, the real world, the real world.

James Joyce

Union. The equestrian monument of Alexander III has sat for over seventy years on a pile of cement blocks in the back courtyard of the Russian Museum. This statue was toppled from its pedestal in Tsaritsynskaya Square in St. Petersburg when the Revolution began and rescued by the stuff of the Russian Museum, because Alexander III founded the museum. The artist Sergei Bugayev (a.k.a. Africa) has made it his project to rescue discarded art from the Soviet period. His apartment is filled with Soviet paintings, books, china, street and metro signs, statuary, building markers, etc., which are all being petitioned. His greatest success is saving the last statue of Lenin cast by the Leningrad Plant of Art Casting. The statue had been commissioned by the city of Krasnoyarsk in 1990, but Krasnoyarsk no longer wanted it. With the help of Paul Judelson, a gallery director in New York City, Africa has had this fifteen-foot, four-ton bronze statue shipped to New York. The problem once again is where to store it. At the moment it is sitting in a warehouse in Chelsea. As I write this, another Lenin statue has just arrived in Brooklyn harbor.

Whole sections of the past are being recondituated, a manner familiar to Soviet citizens, not just because they have lived in totalitarian regimes, but because they have been so deeply marked by the paths of utopian desire. Libraries and museums devoted to Lenin and the Soviet period are being closed. Museums of streets, squares, and metro stations are being altered.

History is being revised so rapidly that schools no longer issue history textbooks; teachers use newspapers and periodicals. "The name is changed," one woman explained, "to protect the innocent." She was not referring to reform of Drugget but to numerous early American TV series now being aired on Russian television and a whole generation of Russian children will grow up with Donald Duck. Instead of the children who will be taught only the new history. Utopia requires a positive narrative. It is a question of purity—the young, the future, cannot be contaminated with old errors. Utopia is also a question of time, even during the period of "heroic communism," which was full of accounts of successes, the Soviets lived with the sense of the "not yet" of a future utopia.

Now utopia is being sought in the past, through a return to origins. November 7th, the planned celebration of the communist victory over capitalist exploitation and fascist rule, was quickly converted to a celebration remembering the city of St. Petersburg. Mayor Anatoly Sobchak promised to "return" the city to capitalism and to its former splendor as the "City of Classics," while his economic advisor expressed his concern in a strange variant of an old theme: "We cannot build capitalism in just one city."

What is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of one?

Bertolt Brecht, Threepenny Opera

"Freedom" is a grand word, but under the banner of Free Trade the most predatory wars were conducted. ... The term "freedom of criticism" contains the same inherent falsehood.

Lenin, What's To Be Done?

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I was speaking with the artist Andrei Khlobystov about the effect the affluence of the Soviet Union had on art. He told me, "We assisted totalitarianism," he said. "We can resist capitalism for a few years. I was afraid the Soviet notion of capitalism was derived from those old postcards. Even the codifiers, the capitalists, depicted as an enormous pig in a top hat, is about to devour the globe as if it were a luxurious cartoon. It is a curious commentary saying something like "Capitalism can eat anything.""

On the flight over, I was again reminded of those old postcard postcards. There, literally unable to fit his legs into the passenger seat, was a metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church. No doubt he was returning from the Moscow-Orlando-Sheep Baseball-Orlando-Moscow-Orlando procession in America; a new rapprochement has been achieved of late between the two branches. The metropolitan was exactly as Mayakovsky and Cheremnykh had depicted him. In this cartoon version, however, the fat metropolitan was pushed off the globe, skis flying. The figure in front of me looked like he was in a rush to stay, his importance underlined by his enormous gold necklaces and gold scepter. From this, the metro, clearly to be a sort of space for himself in the background conveyor, which delivered him to less luxurious places of worship. The church was empty of the usual pious sectarians of the Russian Orthodox church, but is considered to be a suitable venue for the distribution of Western aid to the needy. Other signs of religious upheaval were the young women in red jackets who glided amidst the crowds, dismissing their various needs. We favoured the food spread lavishly on banquet tables, stored in the exotic rich, and listened to "easy, crocked, and pop" as a Russian artist after another discovered bubblegum. On the night of the auction we witnessed the birth of free enterprise. None of the artists in the auction became the millionaires they thought they would be. The highest bid of Pavel Morozov's assurances from the Ministry of Culture concerning payments to be made to the artists, it took more than a year of wrangling before any of them saw a rupee. Several of the artists wereClause to be mentioned to be meeting an artist on an official. As I negotiated puddles of water in the dank basement, I saw the art from the Sotheby auction sitting on dirty floors and propped against the wall, which is the usual mode of art and not a guard or a despatcher around it.

The Sotheby auction affected the Russian art world much the way the Salon des Refusés affected the Paris Salon of 1863. It increased the scale and distribution and into the system familiar in capitalist countries. It amounted to creating an immensely powerful weapon that the criteria for judgment and the potential to make things happen could be located somewhere other than the entrenched bureaucracy of the Ministry of Culture. Not that all of those comfortable government jobs within the Artists' Union and other branches of the arts administration were an unhealthy climate. Unions and organizations even today still have to pander to numerous Soviet directors who do little to facilitate the project at hand, but continue to enjoy the travel and expensive hotel rooms that their position still allows them to demand. Yet their role as gatekeeper was over by the summer of 1986. The financial success of the auction meant that the Artists' Union could no longer control the selection of artists for exhibitions and sales abroad, nor could they control the activities of artists at home. Artists and critics began to encourage their own exhibitions and new entrepreneurial structures developed around them. At the time of the Sotheby auction there was not a single gallery in Moscow, but bunched by the demand of a foreign market for the Russian art, a local market has since developed and now there are close to a hundred galleries. Some of these may exhibit work of dubious taste and engage in questionable business practices, but all that was true of the old Artists' Union as well. Launched Moscow held its second international art fair, called Art Mil at the grand Hotel Metropol. When I arrived numerous artists of the fair were a mixture of the old bureaucracy as well as new art dealers and critics. The show as a whole looked as dreary as any of the past official exhibitions held in that vast building. However, this was nothing compared to the real favours of the Artists' Union. Nevertheless, works sold. With new Soviet buyers buying art both for investment and for public relations, this may have been more financially successful than held in Europe or America last year. The success of this fair was especially significant because it coincided with the announcement that the Artists' Union would no longer be able to meet its payroll to artists. These were air-dried decades of support for official Soviet art.

**YMMJET**

**do not occur in polar regions.**

**Nabokov**

When I first want to the Soviet Union in 1981 I was struck by the fact that women were not "brided," to use Althusser's term, by ubiquitous images of themselves on billboards, posters, cinema marquees, shop windows, and magazines. Images of women were not used as part of the continuous propaganda. Top and bottom sex appeal and contempt that "capitalist society requires ... to stimulate buying and to authorize the pleasures of class, race, sex and so forth" (Susan Sontag, On Photography). Moreover, I was conscious that women walking in the streets of Moscow, I felt and was not looked at in the same way, not a prosaic conception of meanings as they would be on the streets of Paris, Rome, or New York. I always felt more confident, more at liberty in Moscow. When my husband and I were walking down the street late at night I was relieved that the Culture seemed de-situated. Ironically, once I learned more about how Soviet women perceived their construction within the dominant representational systems, I discovered that her response was to compare theirs to the maltreatment of women in my own. In the Soviet Union women have invariably been depicted as heroic warriors or workers—women as tractor drivers or combine driver, construction worker, steamroller operator, vegetable farmer, archeologist—all part of the myth of the legendary amazoon, (amazoon) or "masculine woman." Coming from a culture in which the image of woman signifies sexual and social alienation, I found these images of active, strong women at work refreshing, but Soviet women, conscious of the violation inherent in so over-determined an iconographic program, do not. They recognized in this stereotype of the all-friendly and resilient Soviet woman a strategy to colonize a work force. The appropriation of the female body that in Western cultures facilitated the construction of difference there contributed to the notion of the ideal collective body, to the sexual-in-difference of totalitarian architecture. Paradoxically, both representational systems serve to control women's sexuality and to guarantee manageability in the work place.

Recently in St. Petersburg I was upon a poster in which a bikini-clad woman was announcing a standard pin-up pose was juxtaposed with an image of a computer. At first I missed the relation because the pin-up was not pin-up... But the moment I realized the pin-up was the visual gimmick to call attention to the computer, but the caption read, "Shopping—It is the Style of Life for the Contemporary Woman." This was a self-improvement poster addressing women. Although the whole of the computer was unclear, it could simply have been the signifier of all that was progressive, like the tractor in Soviet posters of the thirties. Now the emphasis was on the appearance of the woman. In Western capitalist contexts, however, this poster was no less about women and work than were the Socialist Realist posters popular during the Stalinist manufac- turities in the emerging enterprising sector and in Western businesses, the call to these women to occupy predominantly low-paying, decorative jobs in the service "industry," as a group of women workers at a Moscow unemployment in the waka, the education, training, and professional skills of women will likely be envied first— the moment of writing it is estimated that eighty percent of the unemployed are women. The unblinking message of this poster aimed at women is: "Either make yourself look like this, or you'll be out of luck."

Posters of pin-up girls are still a rarity, even in the streets of St. Petersburg, which has always been the most Westernized of the Soviet cities. While Western ads and movies are bringing with them increasingly explicit representations of the female body, pornography is not yet part of the everyday experience of this culture. Historically, Russian art has not shared the Western tradition of the nude, except, oddly enough, during the period of Socialist Realism. This winter an exhibition of Socialist Realism at the Tretyakov Gallery displayed more nudity than is to be found in the entire collection of Russian art in the museum. Although Andrei Zibicides, as minister of culture under Stalin, had campaigned against the depiction of scenes of nude women, Western nudity appeared to be officially encouraged. Under a seemingly perverse strategy, desire was aroused in order to be appropriat- ed. There were many images of female sexuality; bare-breasted women,-breast-feeding mothers were very popular, as were nude female Founding nations or battle scenes that enabled the artist to depict the nude in numerous postures.
Petersburg has attempted to address tensions of representation and the suppression of gender. The curatorial team of Olesya Turikova and Viktoria Martynova have organized this exhibition, titled "Women in Art," which was a retrospective with a section dedicated to feminist art. The exhibition is remarkable similar to the mechanisms of ideological alignment used on us today—twenty pounds lighter, and this girl could be an ad for Dior water.

Although Russian artists have for the most part been much more reticent in the depiction of sexuality than Western artists, a thriving gay and lesbian community in St. Petersburg has effectively used art to combat homophobia and to promote public discussion on the issue. The awareness of homophobia in the city emerged from the 1990s on, and it created an issue of homophobia in modern Russian society. The theoretical underpinnings of these exhibitions came from the West, and on the participants themselves note, it is not easy to organize an exhibition about gay art in Russia. According to the exhibition, the life of gay and lesbian individuals is naturally in the margins. However, the same time is a time of great opportunities for gay and lesbian artists, and it is not easy to produce them. The audience is not ready for such exhibitions, and the organizers are trying to make them understood. The exhibition "Women in Art" was a retrospective with a section dedicated to feminist art. The exhibition is remarkable similar to the mechanisms of ideological alignment used on us today—twenty pounds lighter, and this girl could be an ad for Dior water.

The art of our time It is only over there they think That living means you have to eat

Dmitry Prigov

As the old order of art production, distribution, exhibition, and critical reception collapses, those with the requisite energy, commitment, and enthusiasm are finding that for the first time their projects can be realized. Ironically, the closest historical comparison is to the activities of the avant-garde just after the Revolution. When Lissitzky went to Lenin for funds to publish a book, he replied that in those difficult times, artists would have to live on the energy produced by their own enthusiasm. Today, as in 1918, enthusiasm seems to be very rich fare. Currently, there are almost no government funds to support artistic activity, yet plots, paper, and building materials are gathered, exhibition sites are rehabilitated, and volunteers are abundant. Making a joke of their stratified circumstances and the anxiety over food shortages, artists put on an exhibition of the Marat Guelman Gallery which included a huge table loaded with foods. The organizers had transported from Odessa: at the opening the audience was invited to eat the art. As official art institutions flounder, independent curators and critics have been quick to take advantage of the situation. The opportunity for chaos has created. At the Dom Chudo art space, the 1990s in the New York, Yelena Selina and Yelena Romanova were able to organize an exhibition of contemporary art, which unlike most previous exhibitions sponsored by that institution in that it was political, provocative, and at times very witty. Once again the recurring motif was food. Yelena Estrina raised the sausage to its appropriate place in the Russian collective consciousness—to the level of "The Icon of Our Time." The private involvement of the donated human body to this exhibition and consequently something suspect about the content of the sausages...