

# ***The Soviet 60s: Just Before the End of the Project***

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*We dissolve in the human quantities, in your spaces the Politechnical...*  
A. Voznesensky

## I

The Soviet 1960s represent a very contradictory thesaurus of narratives. On the one hand, this was a period of the famous Thaw and of political expectations about the Soviet utopia's breakthrough. On the other hand, the 1960s prove to be a decade of harsh disillusion ending up with the Prague Spring of 1968 and entailing the recession of democratic revival and cultural development. The contradictions are evident: the flight of Gagarin to outer space (1961) and the erection of the Berlin wall (1961); emergence of international venues and festivals and the notorious censorship of the *Manege* exhibition by the government (1962); severe prosecution of "Western," "formalist" modes of expression in art and everyday life; censorship of artists, filmmakers and musicians for their "anti-Soviet" activity (e.g., the case of Daniel and Sinyavsky in 1965<sup>1</sup>) and the resurgence of avant-garde narratives and strategies in film, poetry, visual arts, and music.

It is generally considered that despite the Thaw (1957-1964), the art and culture of Soviet Russia in the 60s remained detached from the world procedures of modernization, as well as from the neo-avant-garde currents in art, not to say anything about the political resistance in Europe and the US. This is probably true if one takes into account the degree of the subversive intensity of art and politics in the Western 60s. There could have been no such thing under the governance of the Soviet party bureaucracy. On the other hand, it should be noted that the Soviet literature, art and culture reaching the West since the end of the 1950s were mainly dissident and anti-governmental, but their criticality towards the Soviet regime didn't presuppose their being avant-garde or politically subversive. On the contrary, despite being resistant to the party authority, such literature and art often happened to be conservative or even reactionary and traditionalist. In other words, the West didn't have the chance to know the modernizing tendencies ostensible often rather in the non-underground, or even the so-called "official" Soviet milieu (architecture, science, film, music, theatre, art, social engineering); this is the reason why these layers of culture remained internationally unaccepted for being "Soviet." The year 1962 –when the exhibition *Manege*<sup>2</sup> including works by various generations of Soviet artists underwent a severe censorship of Khrushchev– marked the split of culture into the official and non-official (or non-conformist) realms.

As it is known, the main cause for the party criticism was the "abuse" of modernist, abstract and formalist methods in art. This ban on formalism and abstraction remained intact despite the gradual discarding of the socialist realist canon and lasted until Perestroika. On the other hand, except for the ban on abstraction, there had been no other specific prohibitions in visual culture. Hence, all abstract art of the 60s appeared to be non-conformist and was often taken for the "great" unacknowledged art, as was the case with many exhibitions at the Norton Dodge Collection (Rutgers University Zimmerli Art Museum) consisting predominantly of Soviet underground art.

Ilya Kabakov, in his *60s, 70s... Notes on the Unofficial Life in Moscow*,<sup>3</sup> calls the art of the 60s extremely personalist – a tendency that, despite it eluded Soviet propagandist art, could not have been considered progressive in terms of international tendencies. Kabakov makes it clear that the split in the artistic intelligentsia of the 60s was beyond a division between party conformism and anti-Soviet non-conformism; i.e., part of the "non-official" artistic intelligentsia tended towards rethinking the Russian avant-garde's aesthetic methodologies. For example Lev Nusberg and his group "Dvijenie" [Movement] emerging in the 60s were relying on the constructivist ideas

<sup>1</sup> Soviet writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Juli Daniel were condemned to 7 years of imprisonment for publishing their works abroad under the pseudonyms Abram Terz and Nikolai Arzhak.

<sup>2</sup> See Juri Gerchuk, *A School for Art Scandal: Khrushchev in the Manezh on 1st December 1962* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Ilya Kabakov, *60s, 70s... Notes on the Unofficial Life in Moscow* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2008).

of Naum Gabo. Although quite detached from the official art-nomenclature, Nusberg, nevertheless, called himself a Leninist utopian and characterized his work as the aesthetic organization of the environment. Researching the potentialities of kinetism, Nusberg took interest in investigating the anthropomorphic background of mechanic movements and the mechanic traits of human behavior.

The interest in avant-garde futurology and synthetic artistic practices, and in the inter-relation of the mechanical and the natural was ostensible in works by Viacheslav Koleichuk –another member of the “Dvijenie” group (who later founded his own creative project “Mir”) as well as in works by Fransisko Infante. Infante invented in the 60s photographic projects combining geometric objects and natural landscapes, and he called them artifacts. But, unlike Nusberg and Koleichuk, his motivation was completely devoid of any utopian background or projections of constructivist design. Interestingly, the above-mentioned practices (often abstract in form) were not censured –unlike the more conservative painting of non-conformists like Julo Sooster, Eduard Shteinberg, Oscar Rabin and Vladimir Nemukhin– probably because they intersected to a considerable extent with the format of architectural design, scientific experimentation and cybernetics. The abstractionist artists appearing by the late 50s and later –Yuri Zlotnikov, Oleg Prokofiev, or Boris Turetsky– were probably not persecuted because of the same reasons. Many abstract paintings by Zlotnikov were meta-artistic and interdisciplinary researches on the psychophysiology of signal systems, study of mechanisms and the procedures of perception, and were often based on his knowledge of mathematics and cybernetics. In this case abstraction served as research on the objective languages of communication and the study of the material features of the environment. Despite all that experimentation, it is still a question whether the above-mentioned groups were the avant-garde movements of the 60s in their own right, and not just replications of the forms and ideas of the 20s (e.g., Kabakov characterizes these groups as the delayed utopianism).



Lidia Masterkova, *Composition*, 1967

As for the dissident non-conformist groups of the 60s, such as for instance the Lianosov group (Eduard Shteinberg, Oscar Rabin, Evgeni Kropivnitskiy, his son Lev Kropivnitski, Vladimir Nemukhin, Lidia Masterkova, Genrich Saggir, Igor Holin and others), they indulged in an escapist aesthetics which they called anti-aesthetics, and appeared as the complete reverse of the socialist and communist recreation project of the 60s. The Lianosov group members were the first to launch the tradition of utmost hermetic commonality as the means of artistic communication and production.<sup>4</sup> They deliberately rejected reflection on any issues related to social life or political debate, reduced artistic issues to personal metaphysics and viewed reality as a whirlpool of dispersed epiphanic phenomena –the stance that was called “concretism” and influenced to a certain extent Moscow conceptualism. Juri Zlotnikov called such a stance “a metaphysical salon of the underground.”

Although there is a big difference between the two tendencies of the “unofficial” art –the dissident and the neo-avant-garde undergrounds– what they had in common was a certain indifference towards reality, which for the Soviet intelligentsia in its frequent elitist attitudes represented nothing but a simulacrum of the ideological discourse. Hence such a preoccupation either with esoteric and metaphysical matters or scientific abstractions...

It was only later in the 1970s that conceptualist art-experiences (in works by Eric Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov, Andrei Monastyrsky, Dmitry Prigov) produced an analytical review of and a critical reflection on Soviet ideology. Unlike the Western art space of the 60s –in which the notion of contemporary art had already become the embodiment of contemporaneity– the 60s in Soviet *visual arts* cannot be considered as the realm of a wide-ranging reflection on

<sup>4</sup> On the non-conformist Soviet art of 50s - 80s see Karl Eimermacher, *From Uniformity Towards Diversity* (Ruhr: M., Lotman Institute of Russian and Soviet Culture, 2004).



Oscar Rabin, *Bani /Baths/ (Smell L'eau de Cologne 'Moscow')*, 1966

modernity. Contemporary art practices –taken as the continuity of the subversive and radical art-strategies– emerged in the visual art space only with the first attempts of the Moscow conceptualists to subversively question the languages of cultural production and “socialist” propaganda. Such a semiological analysis of the reality enabled an escape from the quasi-modernist symbolism of the 60s and a deconstruction of the rigid rhetorical carcass of the worn-out images of utopia. At the same time, (as was the case with Kabakov) the conceptualists produced the inner heterotopias, the “other” spaces –the worlds which were too absurd and poetic to be digested either by the state apparati, or the pathetic aspirations of the fine arts, still so relevant for the art generation of the 60s.

## II

Meanwhile, the question is why, when it comes to tracing avant-garde strategies, it is only contemporary art that is mainly regarded as its subject and center. In its genesis, avant-garde cannot solely be reduced to renovation of artistic or even cultural means, but aims to reconsider life and politics in general. Therefore what was politically important for the avant-garde could as well be sought in life-styles and self-organized collectivities.

If we consider avant-garde as a certain innovative artistic methodology (i.e., if we view it from the point of view of contemporary art history) Moscow conceptualism of the 70s is more avant-garde than the previous 60s. But, reconsidering avant-garde in terms of the spirit of life production and open spaces for social intersection, in terms of the emergence of free creative time as common good, make the 60s demonstrate a stronger and broader effort for bringing an avant-garde spirit into political and artistic activities even in comparison with the conceptualism of the 70s.

Therefore, it may be productive to rethink the Soviet 60s as a potentiality which is not reduced to the linearism of art history. To witness the atmosphere of change and the promotion of the ideas of socialist modernization, we have to take the aspects of the Soviet 60s not connected directly to contemporary art. Despite ideological domination, these features were evident: the rise of lower social layers, the changes in urban spaces and the modes of inhabiting them (e.g., in the 60s peasants were granted passports and the freedom to migrate to cities and receive higher education), urbanization of rural areas, and the emergence of neo-Marxist themes in philosophy, literature and cinema that almost disappeared in Stalinist cultural politics.

Interestingly, in the post-Stalinist Soviet 60s, mass propaganda often overlapped with the democratic processes. The paradox of such an overlapping was the following: in many cases the official ideology with its social program proved to be more democratic than the “anti-totalitarian” strife of many underground artistic circles, of the dissident intelligentsia which manifested its detachment from people of “non-prestigious” professions, workers and farmers, thus demonstrating an elitist attitude towards the proletarian social layers.

This means that despite the mainstream party ideology, the “new,” “fresh” currents even within the so-called “official” culture interpreted the hitherto forgotten avant-garde project as the expansion of the October Revolution and its legacy rather than a formalist methodology. This was the case with the films of Marlen Hutsiev and his melancholy for the communist utopia in *July Rain* (1966), or *The Gates of Ilych*, (1964); with Genadi Shpalikov and his screenplay on Mayakovsky, who was also the scriptwriter for Khutsiev’s above-mentioned films; with Larisa Shepitko and her film *Wings* (1966), where she manages to combine a poetic attitude towards

machines and technical achievements with the commemoration of World War 2 heroism and criticism of the emerging interest in consumer society.<sup>5</sup>

Devoid of control, for a very short period of time in Soviet history the social space of the 60s acquired features that were probably even demanded and fought for by the revolutionary generation of the Western 60s: the acceptance of all social layers into universities, criticism of the hierarchy in cultural spheres, attacks on the bourgeoisie appropriating the common good values of art, science, and public sphere. In other words, the party's hostility to certain aesthetic features, considered abstract or formalist, could have been combined with the living spaces of social equality and non-segregation. On the other hand, wasn't Greenbergian and Adornian modernist purism (adored by the Soviet artistic elitist intelligentsia), as well as consumer culture's spectacular attractiveness (adored by the Soviet "stilyagas"<sup>6</sup> and forbidden in Soviet universities) criticized by the generation launching situationist or feminist practices in the West of the 60s?

The paradox of Soviet socialism, which is definitely a mutant socialism, is the following: it arose from an immature capitalist system and all those freedoms that had to be attained within the developed bourgeois society –individual rights, civil society, high standards of living and consuming– were missing in it. But strangely, lacking the technical and economic maturity indispensable for socialism, Soviet socialism developed certain features amounting to communism's mature humanist aspirations –manifested in open education, high estimation of science and culture and free creative time as one of the main common goods. The society that in the Stalinist period retained the non-class parameters due to the economic and political control, devoid of the authoritarian interference since the late 50s combined until, maybe, the late 60s both: the non-class dimension and the relative freedom from the harsh proletarian labor of the previous two decades. The non-class society in this case was not a forced condition but a real disposition in the society –not yet having the gentrified layers and still being based on the proletarian negligence to life standards, commodities, fashion and quality consumer values.

Returning back to the above-mentioned films by Marlen Khutsiev and Larisa Shepitko, they are just a few cases reverberating the main social and cultural conflict emerging in the Soviet 60s and dividing the society by the beginning of the 70s. The conflict was: how to preserve fidelity to the radical social change that the October Revolution accomplished, and at the same time not identify Stalinism with the socialist project; how to refer to the project of proletarian heroism and its historic legacy, its positioning of the communism's avant-garde in the conditions of the transition to late industrial or post-industrial society; how to make culture an open space for the majority with still a considerable amount of peasantry on the one hand and the emerging depoliticized learned and cultural elites on the other; and how to remain democratic within the closed borders and the Cold War regime.

Marlen Khutsiev, in both of his classical films from the mid 60s –*July Rain* and *The Gates of Ilych*– reproduces the non-ideological spaces of everyday life, contingent crowds and the flaneurship of a new post-Stalin generation. At the same time, he observes how the dimension of everyday serenity gradually becomes a stance of complacency –which is ethically and politically loose and undemanding in terms of the further promotion of the communist project. This was, to a considerable extent, a double bind, a dilemma of the Soviet 60s: whether the socialist ideals can endeavor in simple everyday life without struggle or heroic sacrifice.<sup>7</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> of May labor and solidarity demonstration becomes, in *The Gates of Ilych*, a site where personal melancholy and private life are transcended, a site where the individual story and the

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://youtu.be/IDMdg3xOWp0>.

<sup>6</sup> A subculture that emerged in the USSR at the end of 50s and followed a Western way of life, demonstrating a deliberate anti-political attitude towards life and a negative attitude towards Soviet ethics. *Stilyagas* talked quasi-English slang, indulged in entertainment (music, dance) and wore grotesque outfits in contrast with the Soviet way of life, its minimalism and uniformity in style.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTV574EldIU&feature=related>.

collectivities overlap, or rather the individual event can only emerge from the collectivity: love, friendship and social aspirations for the future take place at one and the same space. Such multiplicity of people is different both from Antonio Negri's and Paolo Virno's multitudes. For Virno, the commons and multitudes do not have to constitute any gathering, or a space of common joy. The main thing is the relation between individuals motivated by concrete productionist goals. This is only natural for the post-Fordist capitalist society where the multitudes have to subvert the spaces of capitalist production. In this case "the common" is understood as the general intellect shared by means of immaterial labor. Such common general intellect, when it is not general for all or shared equally, should be subtracted in the act of exodus by multitudes. In this case "the common" is understood as a civil potentiality and is not necessarily *experienced* as such. The collectivity of *The Gates of Ilych* is different. It is not based on concrete relational proceedings and is not even productive. The day to celebrate the labor solidarity is a day-off – a free non-working time. "The common," "the general" here is an experience that exceeds the concrete utilitarian trajectories and goals of exchange and amounts to sensing together the space of non-exploitation and equality in the already achieved non-capitalist society (no matter whether it was a really achieved stance or not). Free egalitarian labor is in sensing together the excess of that very time that is free from labor. Such free time has a progressive purport only in the presence of others or as a time spent for the general good. As soon as it is experienced in private solitude or for personal utilitarian aims, it generates melancholy and doubt about it being lost for nothing.

This is why the social narrative of the 60s brings forth the clash between two protagonists: one is a collectivist, a heroic participant of World War 2, or maybe even remembers the revolutionary past, usually not so well educated but politically precise; the other is a young individualist, already fascinated by entertainment, well informed and educated, slightly bohemian and fed up with the fidelity to the ethical super-ego and communism as its satellite. Both Shepitko and Khutsiev solve this dilemma through introducing into the narrative a character combining a revolutionary romanticism and a participatory attitude towards life and labor. Like the former pilot and the World War 2 heroine who becomes a school director in Shepitko's *Wings*; or like the young student and worker who, in *The Gates of Ilych*, scandalously leaves his girlfriend's bohemian party, just because the guests mock the lifestyles of peasantry and workers. In the narratives of the 70s, such a character is still highly anticipated, but is already seen by the majority as an idiot or as an exception to the rule.

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In his article "On the General"<sup>8</sup> written at the end of 60s, the Soviet philosopher Evald Ilienkov develops a Marxist interpretation of this notion. He claims that the General is neither a metaphysical idea suspended over reality or imposed on it, nor a category of the positivist logic that considers the general as an abstract invariant. It is something that being common to all is at the same time present in each of all. In other words, the General is only unraveled via objective reality, the material phenomena and their occurrences. But only those occurrences attain the General whose specific feature, whose eventuality is in becoming the General. This parable of dialectics tends to show that what is common to all (or even the universal) is neither distribution or expansion, nor speculative abstraction. It is, first of all, experienced and sensed, and evolves from the material world, and not vice versa. Moreover, it has to be confirmed by living through it. Therefore, whatever seems to be an ideal is generated by life and doesn't contradict it as in case of Christianity. While the Soviet 60s still preserve such a continuity between universalist aspirations and lifestyle ("continuity between the thoughts and deeds" as the protagonist of *The Gates of Ilych* puts it), the early 70s already reveal the irretrievable rupture. Referring to the General occurs to be just reduced to language, detached from life and deeds – the rupture that gradually brings the end of the Soviet socialism project.

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<sup>8</sup> Evald Ilienkov, "On the General," *Philosophy and Culture*, (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Politicheskoi Literaturi, 1991), 320-339.