

Russian Feminist Art: Out Of The *Kitsch*-en

□ My talk will focus on Russian feminism, a trend with a short history dating back only to the time of Perestroyka. Although women were emancipated even before the Revolution, there remained widespread social injustice and gender discrimination, but the political pressure of the totalitarian regime left little room for radical reappraisal of the situation.

To put the brief story in retrospective, it must be said that soon after the October Revolution, Lenin proclaimed, "Every kitchenmaid must learn how to rule the Soviet State." Soviet propaganda began producing images of women involved in all aspects of Soviet life, and in fact many women assumed professional positions. But as Kolontai remarked in 1922: "In the Soviet State run by men, women were found only in subordinate positions".

In Stalin's time, Vera Mukhina portrayed in her famous sculpture *Worker and Woman Farmer* (1937) [slide 1], woman and man having matched primacy: equal power to make commitments both at home and society. Paradoxically, in 1930's thousands of blameless soviet citizens were sent by Stalin's order to GULAG. Among them was Mukhina's husband, doctor Zamkov. For many Soviet women with loved ones in prison there was a strong desire to help them in some possible way. It is easy to presume that Mukhina's manifestation in *Worker and Woman Farmer* was a favor to the Soviet government in the hope of securing the discharge of her husband from prison. And it is hard to believe that Mukhina was sincerely inspired to produce her romantic Socialist Realist image. In any case, Mukhina didn't resolve her personal drama, but ironically she

continued to use her great professional skills representing the glory of Soviet life for the rest of her career.

Elena Elagina reviews Stalin's time in her installation *Laboratory of the Grand Making*, 1996 [slide 2]. Here the object of critical assessment is Doctor Olga Lepeshinskaya, a long-time head of a Laboratory of Live Matter at the Institute of Experimental Biology (in the Academy of Medical Sciences of the USSR). The installation is a representation of a scholar's kitchen that consists of Lepeshinskaia's photo-image, surrounded by such items as medical instruments, chemistry apparatus, a mortar and meat grinder. Lepeshinskaia's gender identity is questioned since Elagina chooses to represent her with a pipe. Elagina puts a traditionally masculine object in Lepeshinskaia's image and invites the viewer to associate her with male culture. The use of the concrete references doesn't restrict the installation to a specific cultural milieu. Appropriating male-oriented subjects for a female image -- that is, the questioning of gender identity around which the installation revolves -- takes Elagina's work beyond the poetics and the politics of Soviet culture. The image of a pipe is both a well thought-out structural device and an "accidental" element in the work. It is entirely unexpected by the viewer, yet its presence immediately suggests the essential point of the entire installation. Presenting the unexpected, the ready-mades and the devices of the Soviet industry of experimental biology indicate a loss of utility and function. "The Grand Making" becomes or takes the guise of to an accidental joke, despite the massive assemblage of necessary instruments for experiments on human life.

In Khrushchev's time, as in Brezhnev's era, the totalitarian dogmas left no room for reviewing gender discrimination. The Soviet State vigorously promoted the image of the

happy fate of women under communist rule. For example, the painting *In a Hovel, at Farm* (1956) by V. Ivanov [slide3], depicting a fit couple at lunchtime, advertises that for full satisfaction from life, a woman simply needs a man. There's a Russian expression that insinuates the same idea: "With a loved man a woman has paradise in a hovel".

The couple Ludmila Skripkina and Oleg Petrenko, known as "The Peppers", represent retrospectively feminist issues with a clever irony of subservient female life. Their discourse of the feminist problematic address the mainstream polemic or use common materials. The artists employ in their works such objects as scientific tables, enamelled pots and kettles, and various sealed bottles that evoke commonly encountered references to the social environment. These objects of the everyday create somewhat transparent referents. A good example of the Peppers' feminist discourse is their installation *Data Concerning Discharge as Related to the Degree of Vaginal Cleanliness According to Hermin*, 1989 [slide4] (Ronald Feldman Gallery, NYC, 1991) which gives a highly ironic view of the backwardness of Soviet sex and Soviet gynaecology.

The Gorbachev era changed very few of the country's cultural attitudes. The feminist issue became a great challenge for women artists because, notwithstanding Perestroika, Soviet society remained patriarchal.

A group of artists including Elgina, Masha Konstantinova and Larisa Rezun-Zvezdochetova combated this perception by using banal household objects – such as casseroles, suitcases, and tapestries -- to produce feminist art. Their works lay waste to the notion of the uniqueness of masculine superiority. They have also used historical and modern images of culture, science, and politics to demythologise the Soviet utopia of a

happy family, one in which women are fated to a subordinate role in male-dominated social and professional life.

□ Many women still continued the collaborations typical of female artists of the Russian Avant-Garde, working together with male artists. Sometimes these teams like the Peppers were quite ideologically successful. Other teams, like Konstantin Zvezdochetov and Larisa Resun Zvezdochetova, separated as a result of disagreements on women's issues.

At end of the 1980's and early 90's, Larisa Rezun- Zvezdochetova produced some kitschy stylized objects that referred to communal living, and which were double-coded and similar to artistic renderings of objects in the pop art of the 60's. On the one hand, the objects are elevated to the status of period objects; but on the other hand, they lose their uniqueness and aesthetic quality. The ambivalent characteristic of Zvezdochetova's works -- her graphic series *Women and Children* (1994) [slide 5] with dense decor or historic applique -- reflects the chasm between the Soviet myth of happiness and the reality of life. Finally, in the mid 1990's, she moved to Amsterdam and partly focused on the representation of a female plastic surgery. We'll come back to her works later.

Irina Nakhova and Konstantinova, who attempt to postulate women's identity as a separate category, initiated the turning point in the discussion of gender's subjectivity. In her *Sleep peacefully* (1989) [slide 6], Konstantinova borrowed the words "Sleep peacefully my dear friend" from Stalin's oath for Lenin's funeral, and made the image of a Red Star in fabric, thus suggesting the domestication and diminishment of the traditional heroic sign.

Maria Serebriakova and Aidan Salakhova, like Zvezdochetova in the 1980's and 90's, represented everyday objects, as in Serebriakova's *Untitled*, 1989 [slide7] and

Aidan's *Untitled (Chair)*, 1990. Serebriakova shows a large suitcase with the handles inside the suitcase; Aidan's chair [slide 8] has a strange, phallic-like object sticking out from the seat. Their uselessness as objects subverts the masculine ideology of utilitarian production and, at the same time, demythologizes the Soviet utopia of the comfortable household.

Elena Elagina does something similar in her mixed-media installation *PRE-wonderful*, 1990 [slide 9]. Here, two red casseroles on the famous shelf of Haim Stainbach demystify the "wonderful" creativity amidst the kitchen's routine. The viewer could find here an allusion to the Russian isolated, patriarchal contemporary culture, which left little room for expression of women's identity.

Olga Chernysheva's art expresses a more radical revision of masculinity. Her depiction of cake, as in her early work "Fete Compere", 1989, [slide 10] can be interpreted as revealing the complete fiasco of the uniqueness of masculine subjectivity. Chernysheva's cake negates the idea of the uniqueness of art production and draws parallels between art and the mass manufacturing of goods. Here the artist is equated with a pastry cook and her sphere of creativity is shifted to the "kitchen of art".

Women artists' interest in kitchen themes was undoubtedly motivated by the traditional male role of kitchen chef. However, it is a well-known fact that the Russian kitchen is often a favorite gathering place, perhaps because of its natural function. Compared to older women such as Valentina Kropivnitskaia and Lidia Masterkova, who stayed in the shadow of their male colleagues, the younger women artists initiated a drive to reverse their "expulsion" from the masculine hierarchy of codes. This eventually led them to a greater freedom of action and the achievement of a kind of "pleasure principle".

In the mid 1990's, when the Russian art market completely collapsed, a lot of Russian artists moved to the West. Among them was Larisa Rezun-Zvezdochetova, who settled in Amsterdam. Her new works focused on a transformation of female images. The artist believes that women became victims of advertising imagery and of the popularity of plastic surgery, and were encouraged to change their unique appearances. In the graphic paper series, *Women Portraits*, 1997-98, [slides 11; 12] she uses mass-media images inserted into kitschy backgrounds. The paradox here is that, on the one hand, a female portrait satisfies the cultural aesthetic of society, by representing the model's ideal beauty; on the other hand, the multiplied image loses vitality and the power needed for social sophistication. As a result, the spectator sees no more than a languid mask, which has lost the mark of personal authenticity. As Roland Barthes pointed out, behind the made-up face we can divine death.

In the installation *Queen* (1997), Irina Nakhova [slide 13] represents a discourse of male-dominated culture. Nakhova fragments a likeness of female culture through the transfigured sculpture of a lady. Made from wood, the female body is dressed in silks, which conceal the details of her figure. When a viewer moves close to the sculpture, the clothing inflates with air and the figure transforms into a phallic column. According to Nakhova, this transformation should inform a viewer that from a distance, female culture looks mysterious, but considered more closely, it appears more strong and elaborate.

The work of developing new cultural signifiers became more important for women artists such as Tania Antoshina, who inverted the brutal personages in the Moscow art scene—such as Alexander Brenner [slide 14] or Oleg Kulic—into ceramic dolls. Representing actual male artists as images of mass culture, Antoshina determined

that women artists could make their own choice of cultural juxtapositions. She also said, "Traditional art produced a huge collection of displays of the naked woman's body. I call it "The Museum of Man." We see in that "museum" a man as a spiritual creative human, while woman remains in the role of visual object, signifying something passive, natural, dark, sexual and physical".

In her webcast installation "The Women Museum," the viewer sees a clock. Each number on the clock-face is a virtual door to a work from the collection of the Museum. One can click a number and view the work. This ironically suggests that each time a piece is clicked, "it's time to challenge the traditional point of view" In each image the viewer sees a new gender issue. This artistic effort demonstrates the conversion or a gender transfer of famous subjects. We can see it with Picasso's "Girl on Sphere", which is included in Antoshina's representation *Boy on Sphere* (1997)[slide15] and with Manet's image "Olympia" transfigured to Olympus, 1997 [slide16], and so on. As one male critic asked: "Doesn't Antoshina mean the male becomes the passive object of delectation?" We can understand his discomfort with this kind of representation. But I believe: the question is: how we feel about ourselves? It is look like that Antoshina's visual substitution or verbal manifestations imply a revision of the forms of legitimate cultural bodies, in which the female image has been established as the object of masculine sadism, or as Erich Fromm called this form of socialization, "sadistic authority."

Antoshina's webcast project of "The Woman's Museum" looks like a promising development for the near future, when the feminist issue will finally come out of virtual reality and enter the real world. Russian women artists have appealed to the Mayor's Office in Moscow for the establishment of a Center of Women's Art.

Anyway, this short talk shows that there has been some improvement in the condition of women—especially for the generations of the 1980's and 1990's. It also shows how art produced by Russian women reflects their powerful determination to get out of the *kitsch-en*.

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