

## **INTRODUCTION: SUSAN BUCK-MORSS IN CONVERSATION WITH VICTOR TUPITSYN**

**SUSAN BUCK-MORSS** In chapter 1 ["Civitas Solis: Ghetto as Paradise"], you state that "socialist realism is not transportable." You argue that it is necessary to interpret this artistic phenomenon within the context of Soviet experience, and you provide a blackly humorous description of communal life under Stalin. When you describe the infantilism of this communalism, I could not agree with you more. I am fully convinced by what you say. But it immediately raises the question: Why is this case unique? Why only socialist realism? Why not other artistic movements—surrealism, say, or conceptualism, or even abstract expressionism? This leads to the second question: Isn't art recontextualized every place it is shown?

**VICTOR TUPITSYN** Socialist realism is not transportable because—unlike surrealism—it was more than just an art movement or a sensibility shared by a limited number of individuals. It was the representation of the Soviet identity addressed to a nationwide audience that was extremely receptive. The high level of reciprocation that existed between the communal subject and socialist realist imagery presents enough evidence to believe that socialist realism does not work without communal perception. It is an integral part of an immense system that is too difficult to fit into crates. Such "crating" is at the expense of socialist realism's identificatory dimension. You can travel the paintings to Kassel or Long Island City, but you cannot transport the optical conditions required for adequate communication with those paintings. For that you need to communalize the viewer and radically change his or her sense of visual identity. There's nothing new about recontextualization, except for our desire to museify it. In this sense we have become truly postmodern. Now, let me respond to your second question: "Isn't art recontextualized every place it is shown?"

Yes, but simply because recontextualizing is an art medium. Take, for example, Duchamp's *Fountain*, or Darwinian theory, according to which *Homo sapiens* is a recontextualized ape. As for the correlation between conditions pertaining to recontextualization of a "text" and its translatability, it is too vague to be based on Husserl's conviction that "as heterogeneous as the essential structures of several constituted languages or cultures may be, translation in principle is an always possible task."<sup>1</sup> Husserl believed in the existence of the irreducible horizon, common to all empirical contexts, and it seems to me

that the trust you put into recontextualization is based on the same kind of “inaccessible infra-ideal.” This is precisely what Derrida (in his introduction to Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*) called “consciousness of a pure and precultural *we*.”<sup>2</sup> I share his skepticism when he asks: “Are not non-communication and misunderstanding the very horizon of culture and language?”<sup>3</sup> I might as well argue that unlike socialist realist painting or any other “work of art in the age of communal perception,” a theoretical account of it cannot be exempt from “transportability.” I am absolutely convinced that because of their susceptibility to eidetic determination, interpretive strategies and intellectual reflections are perfectly convertible, even if the corresponding referents are not. Chances are that sooner or later socialist realism will become recontextualized beyond recognition. But will it be possible fully to appreciate the “true nature” of this “symbolic expenditure” without surrendering to the affective force of the communal eye?

**SBM Is the so-called “art world” territorially or temporally located? Is it sociohistorically specific?**

**VT** I certainly hope so. Also, the ways in which art worlds are temporally and territorially dislocated can be viewed as sociohistorically specific. That is why in “Civitas Solis: Ghetto as Paradise,” I shift attention from totalitarian culture to its “dangerous supplement,” the communal—communal perception, communal optics, communal (post)modernism, etc. On the other hand, art has the potential to come forth as an ersatz of time. Temporality is being museologized through our thinking of history in terms of artworks that we see (or imagine) on museum walls. We assume that if we have a sense of culture, we have a sense of time.

**SBM How best to explain the “communal vision” of Soviet art? In fact, I think you convey it excellently through your humorous criticism of daily life. It seems to me that you accomplish linguistically what the sots artists [Erik Bulatov, Komar & Melamid, etc.]<sup>4</sup> did visually. Your criticism not only condemns the Soviet experience, but makes us almost long for it—like memories of a bad childhood which, however miserable, keeps us grateful.**

**VT** In the USSR, where “collective monologue” and “collective seeing” became reciprocal ways of life, one could easily translate images or even brush strokes into words. In the communal world,<sup>5</sup> this horizon of seeing is linked to the phenomenon of cathartic merging with an identificatory icon, i.e., it is not visuality, but psychedelia. I am talking about *perestroika zrenia* (optical restructuring) of immense proportions. It was an A-bomb of communal vision<sup>6</sup> that exploded in Russia in the 1930s. Given the scale of this “explosion” (and the impact it made on the Soviet cultural mentality), there are hardly any nonnuclear ways to recontextualize this “Hiroshima.”

Massive or petite, recontextualization pins its hopes on (a) a change of identity, and (b) an ideology to justify it. In this sense ideology is a byproduct of recontextualization.

Frankly, the idea of criticizing daily life or condemning the Soviet experience has never been high on my agenda. I’d rather be blamed for sympathizing with the Soviet (post)revolutionary avant-garde or socialist modernism (“sots modernism,” in my terminology). I am referring to the specific texts “Civitas Solis: Ghetto as Paradise,” and “Icons

of Iconoclasm” [chapter 4], which also expose the duality between socialist realism and the communal world as well as some other issues—such as, for example, anti-alienation treatments administered to communal subjects to resolve their identificatory dramas.

**SBM You want us to believe that in Soviet life “reality was annulled.” One lived in a myth. But where is it different? At Disneyland?**

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**VT** Disneyland is, indeed, a *Civitas Solis* (American-style). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Walt Disney was an informer ...

**SBM What do you think of the work of younger scholars like Christina Kiaer who have written on Arvatov, Rodchenko, and early theories of the “socialist commodity”?**

**VT** Christina’s interpretation of the constructivist *veshch* (thing) is limited to the NEP period,<sup>7</sup> the time when capitalist objects were reintroduced within the socialist context. She also discusses the reverse situation—Rodchenko’s construction of his Workers’ Club interior in Paris (1925). In this respect, one can talk about an object in its transition (and its division)—a dichotomized object still hesitant to quit its horizontal axis but already exploring the vertical one.

The notion of “socialist commodity” has nothing to do with the items of everyday use—kitchenware, furniture, clothing, etc. Such items were habitually dismal; they lacked any sense of pleasure, any hope for prestige or comfort. The ways in which the communal psyche connected itself to communal objecthood were completely defetishized. In 1922, Aleksei Gan theorized the so-called *obshchestvennaia veshch* (public thing)—an indexical sign-object from the inventory of photographic, sculptural, or architectural agitprop.<sup>8</sup> During the NEP years, posters for Western movies as well as billboards that advertised cookies, cigarettes, or household goods used images of attractive women. In such instances, when the consumer’s gaze moved from the erotic image to the political one, it still retained (by dint of inertia) its libidinal intensity. As a result, what occurred was a transfer of libidinal interest from one iconographic context to another. In this manner, a consumer optic facilitated the eroticization of political imagery. The communal Eros was redirected to the sphere of public (socialist) objecthood.

You once mentioned an analysis of socialist realism that you found insightful in emphasizing that regardless of the propaganda content, the utopian effect of these artworks was sensual: the paintings are full of light, warmth, and an atmosphere of bodily pleasure. In certain cases repression is, indeed, a prerequisite of bodily pleasure. Since 1934, following [Andrei] Zhdanov and [Karl] Radek’s campaign against sexuality in arts and literature, the only acceptable kind of physical pleasure—acceptable for totalitarian imagery—has been the pleasure of transcending sexuality, an androgynous “bodily” pleasure, so to speak. The problem with androgyny, however, is that its physique and its senses are entirely constituted.

Terms like “warmth” and “sensuality” may well be used to characterize the energy discharged by the communal psyche as it pulls itself through the symbolic network of seeing. Sometimes, when we touch a wire, we notice how warm (or even hot) it is. But the next moment, we realize that what we are holding in our hands is connected to a refrigerator ... which produces the ice.

**SBM** In the solar myth that you describe, there were two extremes: on the one hand a kind of hubris of human technology: the thematics of the opera *Victory over the Sun*, where the sun was actually captured by humans. But on the other hand, the early Soviet era experimented with solar energy, and had a kind of ecological unconscious that was never allowed to challenge the dominance of the Stalinist superego (why do you use the French term, *sur-moi?*), but existed nonetheless. Does [Andrei] Tarkovsky's movie *Solaris* speak to this thematics?

**VT** I doubt very much that Stanisław Lem, whose book inspired Tarkovsky's movie, was interested in pursuing any kind of heliocentric or helioclastic agenda. Lem was clearly fascinated with surrealism: his *Solaris* is a huge psychomimetic enterprise, a brain capable of materializing unconscious representations—fears, desires, images of dead lovers, etc.

**SBM** Let me make a small critique. I am not so sure concepts like Deleuze's "oral mother" or Lacan's "family complex" are any more easily "transportable" than socialist realism. Do you feel that evoking these theorists helps translate the Soviet experience into a Western one? Or do you have other motives?

**VT** Affirmative concepts like "mother" and "family" are likely to be reaffirmed by equally positive experiences, unless you're an orphan. During the time of perestroika, there was a pop music group called Laskovyi Mai. The fact that this group consisted of orphans made all of Russia fall in love with them. Among their most appealing songs was "Diadia Misha" (Uncle Misha). In it, the performer insisted he was Mikhail Gorbachev's nephew. This innocent lie prompted the KGB to challenge and subsequently dismiss the alleged family ties. As for the orphan, a team of therapists was assigned to help him translate his experience from one realm to the next. I might need the same treatment. Otherwise, I will keep "evoking these theorists" ...

And yet there are people who tell me that the "truth" would have been much better served if I—in my writings about Russia—had referred exclusively to local sources and local (not Western) theorists. This creates an impression that the books of certain authors (particularly French and German) are privately owned by a group of self-appointed guardians of academic wisdom, the connoisseurs of Occidental thought.

My texts are written in English and printed outside of Russia. Also, as they are being addressed to an audience with its own allegories of reading, I have to evoke these allegories in order to invoke the corresponding reactions. The goal is to maximize receptiveness. Needless to say, I overdo it: too many proper names, too many references, too many theories. They all interfere with one another like tenants in an overcrowded Moscow apartment. The whole scenario fits the definition of the communal (not the "ideal") speech situation. Noise results. However deafening, this noise enables me to reactivate (within my own textual limitations) sedimental memories of the communal environment I am writing about.

**SBM** Maybe it is because I was trained as a theorist that I find "theory" so problematic. I don't trust it.

**VT** As with everything else, these issues are not without a prehistory. In the 1960s and 1970s, I was under the spell of *Znaika* (Knows-It-All), a familiar character of Soviet children's

literature. As I write in chapter 7 (“Pushmi-pullyu: St. Petersburg-and-Moscow”), the mission of *Znaika* was taken by the party-state ideocracy, while the label of *Neznaika* (Know-Nothing) was pinned on the adversarial artistic intelligentsia. All *Neznaikas* (and I was one of them) had to fake or veil their identity and to embrace the Knowledge. Not for the sake of “unveiling the truth,” but as an adequation with reality. Such adequation attests to the fact that Knowledge—besides being an instrument of repression—is a protective agency ...

As in any repressive enterprise, Knowledge results in fear. Fear of not being able to answer fully and correctly when taking an exam or arguing with someone more knowledgeable. Fear that haunts us regardless of age, achievements, etc. That is why I am still trying to read—out of fear and panic, of course—the texts of all the theorists under the sun and refer to them in my own writings.

Most likely, I will never be able to pull off the image of *Znaika*. Nor would I be willing to deny my conspiratorial identity—*Neznaika*. *Neznaika*'s body of knowledge is a showcase of part-objects. No wonder that the references are vague and the quotes are nominal. For *Neznaika*, these props are all he needs to appear on stage as *Znaika*. This is like Dionysus wearing the mask of Apollo in Greek tragedy. Such a cover-up, combined with Freudian “self-splitting in repression,” has resulted in a comic attitude to Knowledge as such, manifested in the tendency to emphasize its decorative (baroque) and exterior features—proper names, pompous quotes and epigraphs, worn-out phrases of famous thinkers, and so forth.

At times, to know nothing is an advantage, because keeping distance from Knowledge allows us to fantasize about it, unknowingly to misread it and partially to replace it with “allegories of [our] own lived experience”—as you put it in your book about Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werke*.<sup>9</sup> As for the distance from Knowledge, it gives way to a Brechtian (rather than Aristotelian) “companionship” between *Neznaika* and *Znaika*. At the same time, the place of the author-as-producer of Knowledge remains vacant and can be filled by anyone or anything. In Russia, for example, it can be filled by many people at once, since authorship in that country is still a communal property. That is why the game of acknowledging, quoting, and referencing is not as ritualized there as it is here.

In *Neznaika*'s case, residing on the margins of Thought is in harmony with the circular model of learning: the more we know, the longer the length of the circle that separates Knowledge from the Unknown. *Neznaika*'s desire to learn more (sometimes, even more than *Znaika*) and to stretch the circle of Knowledge has to do with the fact that the expansion of this circle is rife with the expansion of its margins. Likewise, some people buy additional acres of land in order to be better protected (or isolated) from their neighbors. But it would be too far-fetched to assume that margin-widening enables *Neznaika* to contemplate his “true self”: the process of such widening deframes his identity to the extent that it becomes too vague even to use the term “identity.” To conclude, I will point out that *Neznaika* is doomed to always present himself as *Znaika*. Every time he takes the stage as a custodian of Knowledge, he feels terrible afterward, regardless of the outcome (success or failure). That is what I feel when I am presented (in some publications) as a theorist or a philosopher.

**SBM** I want to move to your text “Negativity Mon Amour” (chapter 11), which is in fact my favorite (although “Batman and the Joker: the Thermidor of the Bodily” [chapter 8] is also terrific). You begin with a visual montage, the wall of the American embassy in Moscow, splattered with paint in protest against the NATO bombing of Serbia, spring 1999, juxtaposed to the Greenberg-approved, paint-splattered canvases of abstract expressionism. The humorous shock of this montage is your way of contextualizing art socially. This method is itself theory—better than theory, it is critical practice. The effect is not merely to urge respect for cultural “difference” in some vaguely liberal, relativistic way. Rather, yours is a practice of resistance against the homogenization of any culture. You are equally at home (or should I say, equally alienated) in both “cultures,” Moscow (or St. Petersburg) and New York. That is what makes your perspective so valuable, both inside and outside, both lived experience and critical reflection. There is none of the anthropologist’s sentimental glorification of the “other.” Your observations show humorous affection for the Soviet-Russian culture of your birth, through the lens of a New Yorker’s urbane tolerance.

To give another example: in chapter 9, “The Body-without-a-Name,” you compare Clinton’s presidency as “a mess” with Yeltsin as “the entirely sick leader.” That’s great because it does not set up any moralistic, good-bad binaries. And then you make the entirely astute observation that this is just what makes people identify with these leaders, it accounts for their popularity. I love that. Where others would see difference, you find similarities. But in other contexts, where others would argue for universals, you fight against the hegemonic and homogenizing project of globalization. That’s negative dialectics and one does not have to even mention the name of Theodor Adorno to make this point.

This brings me back to our earlier discussion of theory. Of course, I accept your *Neznaika* explanation, and its specifically Russian meaning. First-year students of Russian in my college went around the dormitories singing, to the tune of “Frère Jacques”: “Ya ne znaiu, ya ne znaiu, nichevo, nichevo, nichevo ne znaiu, nichevo ne znaiu, horosho, horosho” (I don’t know, I don’t know, anything, anything, absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing, which is fine, which is fine). That reveals something about the Russian soul, maybe the figure of the “holy fool” belongs here too. But your own cultural space is one of hybridity, not Russianness, and it is the vital ground for your spirit of freedom. Your topic is the art world. That is a global space. But the political hope of this space is precisely the hybridity that you yourself embody. To put it sociologically: global capitalism produces the “art world,” which constantly tries to escape being absorbed into the culture industry that capitalism knows best. (You say as much in “The Body-without-a-Name.”) But Western theory is also in danger of being absorbed into the culture industry, nowhere more so than when the big names are dropped in texts like so many authority markers. “Reification” is what Lukács called it. Cultural figures become fetishized, and sometimes I want to criticize you for that. But then it seems like you are up to something else. Let me give a specific example. In “Negativity Mon Amour,” you let us see what is going on in Boris Mikhailov’s photographs of post-Soviet citizens, that his “negative optics” depict the abject not as a critique of the beautiful in art, but in order to evoke the affirmative images of socialist realism. That sets up very interesting resonances with, say, Diane Arbus in this country (as you yourself note in

chapter 5 ["The Sun without a Muzzle"]). But just when we might be thinking along these lines, you as a writer dodge behind the figure of Lacan or Bataille, Barthes and Benjamin. You become invisible, and so does the point. You come out again and give us what we need, however, with a critique of the uncritically affirmative nature of identity politics (or identity art) that parallels Mikhailov's critique of socialist realism's affirmativity, and you apply it to intellectuals today. Even today's negatively critical intellectuals, you say—rightly, I think—are all the same, craving from the sidelines the very mass culture that they attack. Their alliances, you write, can be compared to NATO jets, "whose purpose is to seek more and more places where they can drop their discursive bombs and subsequently return to their prior (moralizing or melancholically detached) image." That's great. But are not your own critical forays also bomb-dropping, exploding Western theory with its own concepts? Is not your own intellectual role that of an evasive "deframer" of identity? Evasiveness—or "goblinry," as you describe the folktales figure of Leshyi in "Pushmi-pullyu: St. Petersburg-and-Moscow"?

Similarities emerge in unusual places in your texts, and the similar suddenly looks different. Or, the marginal suddenly looks central. The method is montage, juxtaposing pieces of the past and present, East and West. The tactic is anarchistic, which suits me fine. But there are still difficult issues, where simply to mimic the strategy of negativity seems insufficient. How, for example, would you address these multiple layers of cultural negativity: the performance artist Avdei Ter-Oganian, whom you discuss in "Negativity Mon Amour," offered visitors to Manezh Square a chance to chop a copy of a Russian Orthodox icon to pieces with an axe. You compare this "testing of the boundaries" of official culture to Andres Serrano's piece *Piss Christ*. We can add now Chris Ofili's painting of the Madonna with elephant dung that evoked such threat of censorship in the "Sensations" show at the Brooklyn Museum. But what about the graffiti-spirited seventy-two-year-old man who dared to defy the museum's sanctity and spray the Madonna with white paint? Was he a "deframer" of identity? And what of the museum's staff who ran in immediately to "clean up" the painting and restore it to its original state which had the art world seal of approval? Who stopped the play of meaning, the contextual deferral? What is at stake here? Where is *la différence*?

**VT** Neither of us underestimates the danger of fetishistic reification. But I am equally afraid of being hypocritical about it. One cannot call for protecting theoretical thoughts from inflation (or "sacred" from "profane") without admitting that all widely published Western thinkers are active players in the culture industry. I agree that dodging behind the figures of Lacan, Bataille, Barthes, or Benjamin makes me invisible as a writer. In this sense, the author does disappear. But definitely not the point. I simply see no connection here. To make such a connection—either in my case or beyond—one needs to be more resourceful in demonstrating that pointlessness and nobodiness are one and the same thing. The fact that X criticizes Y directly rather than on behalf of Z does not necessarily spare X's criticism from being groundless. At the same time, anonymous or undisclosed "sources" are perfectly capable of hinting at vital issues as vocally as those individuals who think that they are identical to their names. To tell you the truth, I wonder if any author can ever be cured from misrecognizing him- or herself for someone else. If you sense such a potential in my texts, the problem then lies in my literary skills, not elsewhere. Given my background as writer and poet, there are certain ways in which I perceive

critical texts—my own or authored by others. For me, every name that you have just mentioned is the name of a “character” in a play I “wrote.” Sometimes, I hide behind such a character, use him or her as a screen. By throwing someone else’s name in my place, I engage in subterfuge, hoping that I will be able to prolong my own de-reified critical activity. In other words, I take a step back, leaving the heroes of my narratives in the foreground. This does not mean that I take no responsibility for what they do or think. Just the opposite: no matter what Uncle Vanya says or how the other characters react to it, the play of meaning (in the final analysis) will still be attributed to Chekhov.

When the Big Names (the names of authority makers, etc.) are constantly referred to, it not only attests or contributes to affirmation, but is also rife with subversion. The lineup of names (comparable in fate to the *Titanic* and *Lusitania*) in my texts spurs on our efforts to figure out “who will be the next to sink?” There is yet another explanation—the “bail-hunting” analogy. Since the meaning of what I write is deferred and thus unavailable to me, I instinctively search for it in the texts of others. In the course of chasing a renegade meaning, lots of addresses, phone numbers, clues, and tips come to play. Including the names.

It is hardly debatable that name-oriented practices are the worst possible manifestations of logocentrism. “I love logocentrism,” admits Derrida in an interview.<sup>10</sup> But why? And what is that chthonic faculty which the pleasure of logocentrism is based on? There are things attributable to the anal drive or characterized as anal erotic. These can be detected in the early childhood when infants take pleasure from deferring the moment of defecation, i.e., from having the sensation of rectal presence. The color of a young child’s feces is yellow or yellowish. Later, in a mature age, these gilded memories of childhood contribute to our fascination with gold. That is how some people become bankers and coin collectors. Intellectuals are knowledge collectors; instead of collecting precious metals, they collect precious thoughts. For them, anal pleasures are extended to names and titles printed on the cover of books. This twist of the Symbolic function partially explains why we constantly make references to “paradigmatic individuals,” eroticize and fetishize them. Big Names are big chunks of pleasure in one’s ass.

The longer we play Scrooge, the more generous we are at the time of defecation. I am talking about compulsive spending and dissemination of assets—be it a pension fund or a repository of ideas, names, etc. Also, the soil becomes more fertile after we finally let this stuff go. In rural Europe, it is not unusual to see a peasant riding a horse with a bag attached to its ass. As a centauric author (half poet, half critic), I might still rely on my instincts and continue to fertilize the field of writing—unless you give me a really good reason not to.

As for the second part of your question, I am convinced that our efforts to facilitate art’s interaction with life are either aimed at deframing or caused by it. As applied by the intellectuals, deframing appears to be negatively defined. It is true that certain acts of “deframing” are performed on behalf or in the name of some other (familiar) frames. In such acts, negativity is a “hired gun,” an accomplice of the affirmative. What is really at stake here is the politics of deframing vis-à-vis the deframing of politics.

**SBM When are similarities in artistic practice not a response to common objective conditions, but merely imitation? For example, Oleg Kulik and Aleksandr Brener’s**

**simulations of sexual intercourse with animals or biting a passerby seem to allow for an easy comparison with Vito Acconci's work, like *Seedbed*, where the artist masturbated underneath the gallery floor.**

**VT** We usually emphasize similarities in artistic practice when there is nothing else to talk about. Simulation of sexual intercourse with animals and masturbation "beneath the bar" might look alike here and there, before and after, but to highlight this kind of likeness without paying attention to social dynamics and historic circumstances would be an example of "wishful seeing." Repetition is hardly a "perfect match," unless it is seen through the lens of desire. You cannot enter the same river twice, not only because it changes but also because you do too. This makes sameness or simulacrum doubly coincidental. In order to register them as cultural phenomena, one needs to artificially alter the context, to disregard its fluidity, its Protean nature. The observation that is being made here is applicable to both questions in which you juxtapose cutouts from two distant realities. It is fun to be a quilt maker, but I'd rather be more informed about the circumstances, especially in the case of the graffiti-spirited seventy-two-year-old man whose motives are totally unknown to me.

**SBM You are like a goblin, in leading your reader into the forest of theory, threatening her with abandonment if she cannot jump as fast as you do.**

**VT** And you are like a Snow White, whose situation is not that bad, because the forest of theory is full of kindly dwarfs.

**SBM Your "pushmi-pullyu" diagrams are a parody of Lacan. You love Freudian concepts and sexual analogies. But where is visual art in this discussion? If literally mediated pain is bearable, if it cannot be judged in the same way as real bodily pain, then what of artistic representations? You seem to be saying that their task is to create a sensory "real" that can be experienced in the gap between literary culture and actually lived life, and that this is done more successfully by the "bodily" optics of St Petersburg's artists, with their "aesthetics of blind spots," than by the intellect-driven "aesthetics of transparency" of Moscow's conceptual artists. Now, that makes me nervous. It reminds me of Michel Foucault's praise of capitalism, the "invisible hand" which resists governmentality, he writes approvingly, because it cannot be seen. But systems of power are no less oppressive when they are invisible. Not all power is manifest, just as not all desire is manifest. Latent power loves an aesthetics of blind spots. Might not the reverse be true, that the artists who revel in blind spots thrive on latent power?**

**VT** Your comment is very much to the point. Sometimes (which is basically what happened in "Pushmi-Pullyu") I try to adopt my opponent's position in order to understand what it is based on. The world would be too banal if all "blind spots," without exception, were hotbeds of latent power. We have no right to accuse every such microcosm, a priori, of secretly hatching the egg of power. Perhaps such "spots" are nothing more than temporary shelters from the boundless power of text. Besides, there is no need to mix up different kinds of resistance. Resistance to the governmentality of Text is not always rife with the will to dominate. At the same time, testing "blind spots" for symptoms of "power-centrism" is one of the tasks of the critical function. In the fabric of Brezhnev-era Soviet

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society, there were, despite the totality of ideological control, various rips and folds in which “nonidentity” was either freed from the power of “identity” or maintained certain illusions of freedom. It is also unclear to what extent power is identical to itself. That is why I prefer the concept of “powercentrism” to that of “power.” These are equally dangerous: even if the nests of power have no eggs, the birds are still hatching. Hatching is an unalienable part of any political ritual, its ornithological dimension, so to speak.

**SBM Tupitsyn at his typical best: “After the October Revolution, Russian women were liberated to the degree that they were required to serve not only their husbands, but also the government” [chapter 6]. From your discussion of contemporary women artists in Russia, it seems that they are being liberated within the art world only to serve the art world better (“The men got together and conceived an idea. Then the girls came and fulfilled it”). Is there any evidence of libidinal freedom—I mean real bodily pleasure and not just nakedness—in their work, or that of the male Russian artists?**

**VT** No, I do not think so. But on the other hand, libido contains—within it—another term, *ibid*, which is intrinsic to desire. Speaking of “undressed” (naked) libido, i.e., libido with no beginning (*l*) and no end (*o*), I’ve seen it quite repeatedly, especially in scholarly publications. I wish I knew what *l* and *o* really stand for. Laius and Oedipus, Laertes and Odysseus, Law and Order? Your guess is as good as mine.

**SBM In your text on photography [chapter 5], you adopt Lyotard’s distinction between Kant’s “sublime” and Freud’s “sublimated.” Certainly there were “official” Soviet photographers who captured this sublimeness in their work. It is staged almost exclusively in public space. In contrast, “alternative” Russian photography, as a “factography of resistance,” troubles the boundary between public and private, collective and individual. The result is demythification. How does sublimation in the Freudian sense play a role in the process?**

**VT** In my text on photography, “The Sun without a Muzzle,” I wrote about the prospects for unearthing private memory, and the corresponding factographic archive, from under the mass of officially sanctioned information about what the past was “really” like. I was fully aware of the hopelessness of such a phenomenological rescue; yet, in contrast to mathematics, for instance, where a hopeless approach to solving a problem has no value, in the humanities (where truth is not as rigidly determined) aberrancy of the navigational tools sometimes turns out to be an advantage. Aberrant and unjustified methods have something to do with what you defined as the creation of the “sensory real.” When organized-crime murders are committed in Russia, the bodies are rarely found because they are buried in cemeteries, under the old graves. How do you like this version of the Archeology of Knowledge, this model of the Archive: the present buried beneath the past? Curiously, when I began the story, I thought it had to do with the distinction between the sublime and the sublimated. Now I see that the episode I have described refers to something else. Here, you’ve got a typical example of the aberrancy mentioned previously.

**SBM I think the problem with Lacanian and Freudian theory within your texts is this: one can be either a humorist or a psychoanalyst, not both simultaneously. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, one of his earliest texts, Freud exposes the unconscious, demonstrating its existence precisely in the gap between manifest and latent**

**content which is invaded by the surprised spasm of laughter. But as soon as he fills that gap with theory, the humor disappears. One cannot have it both ways. It strikes me that there is too little observation of the fact that as the theory of psychoanalysis has ascended to astounding heights within contemporary intellectual discourse, the practice of psychoanalysis has been in decline. And yet the practice is everything. The theory of the dream's interpretation is nothing without the dream. Liberatory libidinal power lies in the latter, not the former, which is secondary process thought, and tries to pin things down.**

**Your own writing seems to become increasingly libidinal. It appears to document the historical opening up of a new space for your own commentary. You begin writing about the late Soviet artists for a Western audience and end by describing this new space, encouraging us to join the artists as pioneers in inhabiting it. Would that be too optimistic a reading? Is your own vision more catastrophic?**

**VT** I am always tickled by statements like “one can’t combine the facetious level with the theoretical.” I don’t know how to respond to these taboos and prohibitions. It is precisely such prohibitions that make one want to break them. One feels a need for anarchy, for the carnivalization of the theoretical text. Žižek, who is a Lacanian, cracks jokes all the time. And it works. I think that interpretations of our old dreams, as well as the dreams of others, play a significant role in the formation of our subsequent dreams. These interpretive “clips” (etiological representations) can be inscribed, in a variety of ways, within the liberatory dreams that we portray as purely empirical, “devoid of all theory” and so forth. I am not sure that with time my texts become more and more libidinal. In a sense, the economy of writing is libidinal economy. The problem is that in the works of some authors, the libido is deliberately repressed to prevent opaqueness (related to the proliferation of ecstatic “blind spots”) and to enhance the transparency of the argument. In my view, the outwardly modest and extremely de-ecstaticized texts of Descartes, Kant, or Husserl possess far greater libidinal tension than, say, the texts of Nietzsche, Bataille, or Barthes. The sublime terror which academic thinkers inflict on their own writings appears to be libidinally mediated. In Husserl’s work, for instance, the act of undressing the truth looks like a gynecological checkup. Barthes, on the other hand, is less interested in undressing than in dressing up. For him, truth is a drag queen to be ecstatically draped in the veil of writing. That is what he means by “pleasure of the text.” It is possible that the libidinality of my own writing is a form of camouflage, an attempted denial of the age-related testosterone drop on the nether horizons of writing. Some writers are undoubtedly influenced by this, in that their vision becomes “more catastrophic.” Others, on the contrary, feel relief—such as the famous Stalin-era crooner Leonid Utesov. When he became completely impotent in old age, he uttered a much-repeated line addressing, as it were, his flaccid organ: “Finally I’ll get a chance to live for myself.”

Susan Buck-Morss in Conversation  
with Victor Tupitsyn