

The Museological Unconscious

VICTOR TUPITSYN

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Communal (Post)Modernism in Russia

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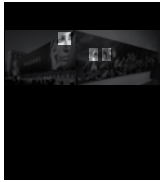
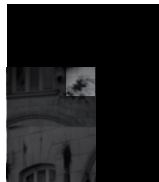
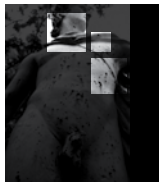
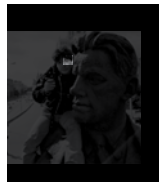
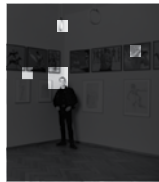
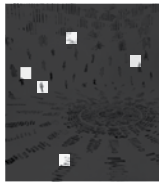
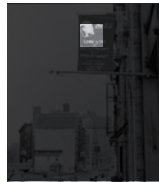
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To Margarita



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PREFACE

This book presents the history of contemporary Russian art as a communal paradigm—a model that grants the opportunity to discuss and analyze seemingly disconnected and incompatible events as effected by a number of communal phenomena, such as communal living, communal perception, and communal speech practices. Because of this “communalizing” approach, many artists and art movements are brought together for the first time, as if they were the tenants of one large communal apartment.

This common approach to a variety of issues is based on the theory that the optical unconscious of the Soviet people was structured like communal speech. Admittedly, all texts in this publication have been guided by a look-alike principle—the analogy between communal speech and communal vision is linked to the imperative of seeing through the eyes or on behalf of the “collective other.” Everything that appealed to the communal eye in post–World War II Russia is critically scrutinized in *The Museological Unconscious*, including the reproductions of up to one hundred artworks from both Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The reference to “communal postmodernism” in the title of the book reflects the fact that instead of fully abandoning their frustrating heritage, the alternative Russian artists of the post-Stalin era have turned their “vices” into “virtues,” thereby creating a new postmodern language.

Whereas chapter 1 lays the ground for a coherent theoretical treatment of a variety of issues discussed in the subsequent chapters of this book, chapter 2 surveys the history of the alternative (unofficial) Russian art. Here, the conceptual matrix developed in chapter 1 comes to play on the level of recollecting, sorting out, and interpreting a vast historical material that stretches from the late 1950s to the present. In chapter 10, the conditions of seeing, discussed in the first chapter, are subjected to a different

approach, focused on the phenomenon of compulsive museification, through which the “museological unconscious” manifests itself.

The rest of the book deals with specific issues (e.g., feminism, body politics) or artistic phenomena (e.g., sots art, apt art). Predictably, the final chapters are dedicated to the latest stage of the post-Soviet cultural metamorphoses—the art of the new millennium. One may hope, however, that some of the interpretive and critical strategies spelled out in *The Museological Unconscious* will transcend the specificity of its “domestic context” and prove to be useful for socially engaged artists and intellectuals from all over the world (including Eastern Europe and Third World countries). All photographic images belong to Victor and Margarita Tupitsyn’s archive. Every effort has been made to contact the rights holders, but in the event that I have missed any, I welcome hearing from those artists.

I have been writing about contemporary Russian art since 1975, the year of my emigration to the United States. In 1976 I defended my Ph.D. thesis at SUNY Stony Brook, and in 1988, thanks to glasnost and perestroika, was able to spend a sabbatical year in Moscow, thereby renewing my access to its alternative art milieu, with which I had kept up an intense epistolary contact. Since then trips to Moscow and St. Petersburg have been regular, and I have frequently contributed to the artistic life of these cities as a writer and critical observer. The arguments outlined in this book originate from that period. Much of that writing was instigated by the sustained support of a number of magazine editors that include Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith of *Parallax*; Chantal Pontbriand, Jim Drobnik, and Eduardo Ralickas of *Parachute*; Rasheed Araeen and Jean Fisher of *Third Text*; Pierre Restany of *D’Ars*; Tim Griffin of *Artforum*; Aleksandr Ivanov of *Ad Marginem*; Nikolai Sheptulin of *Mesto pechaty*; Viktor Mazin and Olesia Tourkina of *Kabinet*; Viktor Misiano of *Kb/Zh*; Arsenii Meshcheriakov of *WAM*; and Irina Prokhorova of *NLO*. I would also like to thank the artists for sharing their insights with me in more than forty interviews and conversations, printed in a number of museum catalogues and in two books published in Moscow in 1997 and 2006. Special thanks to Susan Buck-Morss for discussing several chapters of this book with me in the introductory piece. I am grateful to Roger Conover for being receptive to *The Museological Unconscious*, and to my daughter Masha, the author of *Beauty Talk & Monsters*, for her incisive editorial interventions. Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to Margarita Tupitsyn, with whom I have been privileged to engage in brainstorming “seminars” on a daily basis.

Victor Tupitsyn