
BVLGARI

CHAPTER 13

Rublevskoe Chaussée[1]

1. THROWING ROSEMARY'S BABY OUT WITH THE BATH WATER

The reference to Roman Polanski's 1968 film reflects the attitude toward alternative Russian art on the part of key Western intellectuals, who, since the emergence of this art in the late 1950s, have perceived it as "impure," highly suspicious, and the unwanted offspring of the revolutionary avant-garde (the prey) and socialist realism (the perpetrator). Now, at a time when Russian orphanages are wide open for the flood of desperate adoptive parents from all over the world, it seems that "Rosemary's baby" has finally passed its legitimation crisis, and therefore no longer requires supervision or protective custody.

The First Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art featured many exhibitions, sharing in common at least one thing—they were all physically accessible.[2] The former Lenin Museum was the main building to host the Biennale. Adjacent to the Red Square, it carries symbolic weight and underscores the condition under which global capitalism and its culture industry can finally harmonize with something that defies reification. I am referring to the "specter of Communism" in an age of regained spectrality. By returning to its initial, spectral (read: de-reified) state in the early 1990s, the communist culture industry paved the way for its capitalist counterpart to follow suit. If this was the agenda that the First Moscow Biennale curators meant to pursue, they should definitely be praised and encouraged.

As is known, societal spectacles and public events of considerable importance have often been used to manipulate people's consciousness. The pope's funeral, the royal wedding, and Terri Schiavo's ordeal are illustrations of this rule. In this respect, crossing the line between art culture and mass rituals (as occurred in Russia soon after the revolution) is more

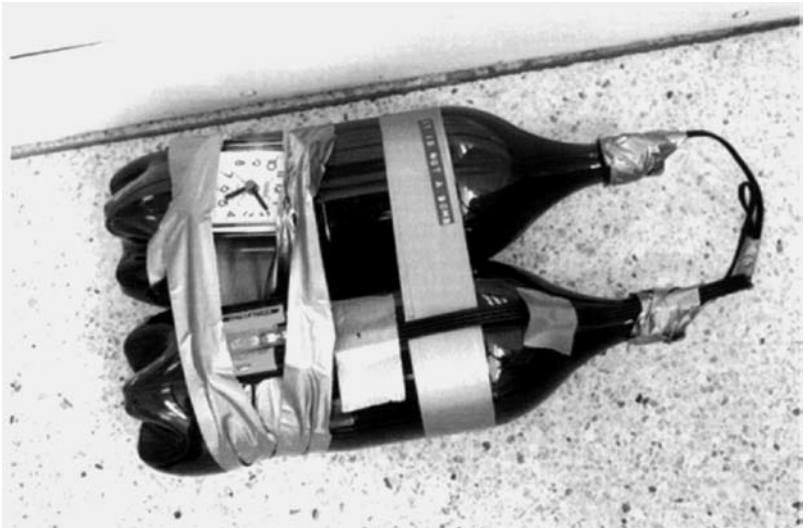
than the organizers of Biennales, Documentas, or Manifestas can afford.[3] And yet the scope of their ambitions can be measured by the size of an exemplary exhibition space designed to present an *overall picture* of contemporary art. Even if such a picture were a displayable concept, it would still require a different means of presentation. Equally, unless we alter our perception of exhibition spaces that are suitable for hosting international art events, such spaces may well be regarded as culture industry showrooms.

In the Lenin Museum my attention was captured by David Ter-Oganian's work *This Is Not a Bomb,* consisting of several suspicious objects with canned vegetables, ticking clocks, and exposed wires spread around many locations (fig. 13.1).[4] Each of these "weapons" silently undermines the label "This Is Not a Bomb," for it actually is one. The piece also undermines the Biennale's claim that the general picture of what is happening in art today can be constructed out of small and statistically unreliable samples endowed with an exaggerated sense of universality.

Santiago Sierra's *Spraying of Polyurethane over 18 People* (2002) featured eighteen young prostitutes, "mainly of Eastern European descent, placed inside an empty medieval church and sprayed with polyurethane on their genitals in two different positions—from the front and from the back."[5] The entire process was videotaped and exhibited in the Lenin Museum, along with remnants of the orgy—spermlike clouds of foam and phallic-shaped containers of polyurethane brought to Moscow from Lucca, Italy. Despite the "position" that this Western artist assigned to his Eastern European counterparts, Sierra's piece can be interpreted as yet another representation of the immaculate conception. While in Sandro Botticelli's painting we notice a strip coming out of the Archangel Gabriel's mouth (directed toward the Virgin Mary) with the text of the Annunciation written on it, in Sierra's case, the annunciation is no longer textual: it is bodily and formless ("informe," to use Bataille's terminology).[6]

Departing from the Lenin Museum, I encountered a group of aging Stalinists standing near the entrance with red banners and portraits of dead leaders (including Lenin). To my surprise, they knew nothing about the First Moscow Biennale. However, if they had, it would have been very painful for them to learn that the former Lenin Museum was now being subjected to this kind of "sacrilege." At any rate, their display of flags and political portraiture proposed no alternative to the Biennale, nor did it seize the moment to form a binary opposition, which we all tend to dwell upon.

My next destination, the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture, was under reconstruction. Its naked interior, dressed up for the occasion by Christian Boltanski, reinforced my respect for this artist, whose addiction



13.1
David Ter-Oganian, *This Is Not a Bomb*, 2005.

to tautology (especially in the last decade) has been overwhelming.[7] His installation's title was *Odessa Ghosts* (2005); it consisted of countless frozen overcoats suspended from the ceiling in such a way that the whole space looked and even felt haunted. This impression was exacerbated by the dreary light of bulbs descending from the top to the first and second floors. Stripped bare, the museum had only temporary passages, made out of wood and laid on the second (but barely existing) floor, thus enabling the viewer to observe the installation from the top floor. Half an hour later, and already outside, I felt the urge to repress what I had seen in the Shchusev Museum. Nothing seemed more alarming than art's ability to make the ordinary look like Auschwitz or Gulag.

Bill Viola's video work *The Greeting* is a slow-moving animation of the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary in Jacopo Pontormo's mannerist painting.[8] Its placement in the "sanctuary" of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts proved to be as smart as Boltanski's choice to "haunt" the Shchusev Museum. Luckily, Viola showed his work parallel to an ambitious exhibition of religious art (religious in a figurative sense as well as literally), held in the same building. Titled "Russia and Italy through the Ages: From Giotto to Malevich," it reflected the influence of those Russian scholars who choose to interpret Malevich as a mystic.[9] In this context, Viola's secular optic served as an alternative to the clerical vision that has gained momentum in recent years all over the world, including the United States.[10] In Russia, where the religious right attempts to institute control over art and literature, it has partially succeeded in blocking frivolous (read: unsanctioned) interpretations of the Holy Scripture.

Anatolii Osmolovskii's show, titled "The Way Political Positions Turn into Form," introduced several series of abstract works from 2004. All of them are formally undersigned *Untitled,* because, in the opinion of the artist (quoted in the press release), "this very word usually accompanies truly avant-garde work." At the same time, however, Osmolovskii refers to a series of black sculptures as "Bugs," pink ones as "Pieces," grey ones as "Finger Nails," and yellow ones as "Details." The artist believes that "any artworks, regardless of how silent and formal they may be, will always be loaded with some political content." Curiously, Osmolovskii's "Bugs," "Pieces," and "Finger Nails" bear resemblance to Paul McCarthy's objects, made from silicon and painted brown, most notably, *Penis and Vagina* (1998–2000). Their different "political" content brings to mind Nicolas Cage and John Travolta in the 1997 film *Face/Off,* where contents (the characters' personalities) become as interchangeable as their appearances. René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* and Duchamp's *Fountain* have long warned us against a lifetime enslavement of one stereotype to another,

of a semantic cliché enslaving a visual one. The difficulty, however, is that treating these clichés as free agents makes them incessantly available for political manipulation. Whether this sinister economy of the sign will ever help critically engaged artists like Osmolovskii get their message through is yet to be seen.

It was very cold in Moscow. Given the Biennale's physical dispersal, getting from one place co-hosting the show to another was quite a miserable experience. That is why, as a detour from the temperature, I took refuge in the State Tret'iakov Gallery (on the Krymskaia embankment) on the third day of my stay in the city. The exhibition I intended to see was "Accomplices: Collective and Interactive Work in Russian Art of the 1960s–2000s." It featured an already familiar repertoire of aesthetic activities—most of it had already been exhibited under the same roof, even though the title was different. As in earlier presentations of this material, the conceptual and performance artists looked better than the others. Their advantage is that they can easily duplicate their "factography"—make reprints from original negatives, copy texts, and sell the "additions" to the museum.[11] As for the rest of the participants working in more traditional media, their share in the State Tret'iakov Gallery collection of ex-unofficial art consists, for the most part, of leftovers. The best works were sold in the 1970s and 1980s to foreigners, American or Western European diplomats and reporters who were determined to bring back exotic souvenirs from the "Evil Empire." Perhaps they will one day be willing to resell them to some Russian oligarchs interested in retrieving the best examples of domestic art in order to donate them to museums (preferably, new ones). In fact, the entire history of art can be viewed through the prism of the generosity that results from a guilty conscience.

In the Central House of Artists (adjacent to the State Tret'iakov Gallery), I happened upon two more exhibitions—"Human Project" and "Russia-2." There, I found several artworks (an installation, a sculpture, and a mural) dealing with the issue of terrorism and the Chechen War: Oleg Kulik's *Madonna* (2004), Vasilii Tsagolov's *Fountain* (2004), and Aleksei Kallima's *Metamorphoses* (2005). Executed in the style of Hirst, these pieces catch your eye right away but then, in a matter of minutes, leave you feeling ashamed for being such a "good customer" and compliant recipient of such predatory optics. The duo of Aleksandr Vinogradov and Vladimir Dubossarskii aroused even less enthusiasm, even though their oversized paintings—paintings in form, cartoons in content—have become a source of amusement for some museum curators in the West. From the Krymskaia embankment I went to the newly opened National Center for Contemporary Arts, the best exhibition space in Russia—at


BVLGARI

13.2
Left: Bulgari billboard; right: AES+F group's *Last Riot*, 2005.

least for "current developments" in visual culture. I could not miss the chance to see Mikhail Roginskii's posthumous exhibition "My Other Self," consisting of painterly works I had first enjoyed twenty years earlier in the artist's studio in Paris.

The next day I attended three shows at the Multimedia Complex for Actual Arts: "Last Riot" (2005), authored by the group AES+F; Mikhal' Rovner's *Order,* a 2003 minimalist paraphrase of Nishat Shirin's video work; and Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs mingled with mannerist etchings of the old masters[12]—a banal idea, regardless of how little Russians know about Mapplethorpe and his aesthetics. To label it "mannerist" was beyond the point. First of all, mixing deferred and spatially dislocated contexts is counterproductive unless you do horoscopes or make fortune cookies. Secondly, Mapplethorpe's politics of the signifier has been fully explored and written about. In my view, putting his oeuvre alongside work by artists and photographers of the 1930s would be a far more challenging project.[13]

I was not moved by the five-meter-long canvas covered with jet-printed imagery that was produced by AES+F;[14] it seemed to me a decadent reappropriation of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. But the artists' text is a different matter, because it accommodates the notion of the free agent, mentioned earlier in relation to Osmolovskii. AES+F write, "The virtual world, generated by the real world of the past twentieth century, is a test-tube organism, expanding, leaving its borders, and grasping for new zones that absorb its founders and mutate into something absolutely new. In this new world, real wars look like a game on americasarmy.com, and prison tortures resemble the sadistic exercises of the modern valkyries. The heroes of the new epos have only one identity, the identity of the rebel of the last riot. The last riot is where all are fighting against all, and against themselves; where there is no longer any difference between victim and aggressor, male and female. This world celebrates the end of ideology, history, and ethic."[15]

This text's ability to touch base with nearly everything makes it applicable to a variety of unrelated images, including the ones I saw across the street from the Lenin Museum, on an immense advertising board with "modern valkyries" wearing Bulgari jewels (fig. 13.2). (If this was not a riot, then what is?)

To conclude, I will soften my critique of the Biennale as reckless recontextualization—not because it is untrue, but because art itself is the most powerful (and equally reckless) recontextualizing metaphor. Even if the curators of international exhibitions are guilty of tearing art away

from its sources and placing it, at least for the duration of the show, in an orphanage (like the Lenin Museum), they unconsciously imitate artists. The analogy can be extended (albeit regressively) to the law of sign formation: repression of the signified, neglect of contextual referents, and so forth. This law manifests itself indiscriminately, sparing neither artistic nor curatorial work. Artists act as curators, and curators as artists, in relation to their respective projects. The work of curatorial art utilizes contributions of group show participants the same way artists use raw materials. From the artists' standpoint, the entire group show (including the curator's concept, the wall text, and so forth) is an extended frame around their own pieces, and the bigger the exhibition, the more baroque it may seem as a frame. The point, however, is that our understanding of the endless game of recontextualization as a distinctive trait of human experience should not be used as an ideological alibi. The suspicion that *Homo sapiens* is a recontextualized ape does not exempt us from loving our neighbors.[16]

2. RUSSIA?

Any exhibition at the Guggenheim is structured a priori by its architecture, which is conducive from the beginning to a mix of languages, contexts, and aesthetic and political aspirations. In this respect, the exhibition "Russia! Nine Hundred Years of Masterpieces and Master Collections" is no exception—particularly since it covers a vast historical range, from the Middle Ages to our own time.[17] The exhibition could be more properly called "Russia through the Eyes of the New Russians"—in the sense that the imposition on the West of the (post-) Soviet historical vision, the vision of the nouveaux riches and the profiteers from the "shadow economy," fits well with the predatory leveling of contextual, temporal, or other distinctions by turning them into different regimes of spectacle.

In this context, one may recall Fellini's film *Satyricon,* which many of my compatriots—especially in the 1970s—regarded as the outer limits of genius. What shocked me upon a recent viewing of this film was not so much the theatricality of kitsch, as the underlying vision of history: history is depicted as total theater, where temporality is attributed to the "imperfection" of our vision, and where the movement of time is perceived as a result of instant changes in costumes or sets. But if everything is spectacle, the protest against spectacularized politics, or reconciliation with power, becomes just as much of a spectacle. Is indifference the only thing that can preserve the status of the nonspectacle? In other words, once again we have "vertical" time, a proto-totalitarian aesthetic, the coextensivity of past and future.

The alienation of spectacle time from the perceptual does not in any way contradict the imperial politics of representation adopted by the Guggenheim. The museum website says, "The Guggenheim isn't just a museum—it's an international empire." This imperial twist of the Guggenheim spiral gives us an idea of the trajectory followed by the American culture industry. While viewing the exhibition, I could not rid myself of the feeling that it was organized on the principle of a roller coaster, which is based on a rapidly moving gaze that clings, not to the objects speeding by, but to the possibility of staying on top of the spiral that serves as the observation point, the way it happens on roller-coaster rides at amusement parks.

If one compares this Russian exhibition to the previous one, "The Great Utopia" in 1992, the distinctions between them are by no means limited to the fact that in 1992 the Guggenheim paid for everything, while today the Russian side bears most of the financial burden. While "The Great Utopia" limited itself to a more or less homogeneous horizon of avant-garde aesthetics, the 2005 exposition offers the audience a heterogeneous picture of the Russian cultural heritage in all its totality, a sort of "crash course" for the uninitiated culture-snatcher. The quality of the articles in the catalogue has changed accordingly. The curators of "Russia!" are no longer experts but functionaries, and this "powerful and rotting stench" (to quote the Russian poet Aleksandr Blok) of bureaucratic mediocrity is reflected not only in the expositionary discourse but in the texts as well. I should note that my attitude toward cultural functionaries and apparatchiks—whether they are representatives of the unsinkable American *nomenklatura* or of the corrupt Russian elite—is fundamentally different from that of a number of American intellectuals. For example, in his review "Back to the Future: The New Malevich,"[18] Yve-Alain Bois respectfully quotes the managerial gems of Petrova, deputy director of the State Russian Museum, as if this Brezhnev-era fossil could formulate anything other than clichés. As for Bois, his lack of critical negativity toward Petrova as well as a number of other individuals makes me wonder why he needs this alliance.

Contemporary art is represented in "Russia!" by a small number of works. In the original project, there were even fewer: only Kabakov and Komar and Melamid (all three are U.S. citizens). However, as a result of the lobbying of the exhibition organizers, backstage fighting, and the use of government connections, this list was expanded to more than twenty artists. The fact that half of them are émigrés is unimportant: many of them travel regularly to Russia, exhibit artworks there, and sell their production to influential new Russians; their presence in the post-Soviet culture

industry is becoming more and more visible. What remains spectral is their critical stance—a concept extremely unpopular with most Russian artists.

Deserving of mention, too, are certain promotional phrases, both in the catalogue and in the press release—such as "masterpieces of socialist realism." The meaning of this phrase is mystifying, considering the contamination of the authorial by the authoritarian. The Stalin slogan—"national in form, socialist in content"—meant that the patent on form was held by the entire nation, and the patent on content by the socialist system (i.e., by party functionaries). The artist was reduced to the role of an inspired follower of instructions from above. From this perspective, socialist realism is a parody of icon painting, the difference being that in icon painting, the role of coauthors was given to Church and God.

Nonetheless, the most depressing aspect of "Russia!" is the exhibition's tendency toward defragmentation, that is, toward leveling the aesthetic and sociocultural distinctions that, in the 1970s and 1980s, separated official artists (those loyal to the regime) from the unofficial or alternative art world. The attempt by the Russian side to create some sort of unified (artistic and, simultaneously, historical) image of Russian culture, including its contemporary art, is pure ideology that can be seen as "false consciousness" and false self-reflection. Starting in 1980, exhibitions of Soviet and, later, post-Soviet art in the West have been oriented toward some homogeneous context, whether the "unofficial" painting of the 1960s, "Moscow communal conceptualism," sots art, apt art, etc.[19] In those instances, the fragmentation was based on a desire to "clutch at the straw" of context, which seemed at the time to offer salvation from the superficial, touristic, spectacularized perception of art. That is precisely the perception that has triumphed at the Guggenheim, and in this sense, the "Russia!" exhibition is nothing but yet another pseudo-historical Thermidor.

The spectacularist tendencies usually mentioned with regard to the Young British Artists (Hirst, the Chapman brothers, etc.) were represented in the exhibition by the works of Kulik and Dubossarskii and Vinogradov. Their ability to shock (and simultaneously entertain) the viewer is not in doubt. The problem lies elsewhere: in Russia, spectacularist art entertains mostly the new bourgeoisie, which grew rich during the period when national resources could be plundered with impunity. The pseudo-negativity of *art-as-spectacle* is yet another charge leveled against such work. When opponents of spectacle culture speak of it as a totalitarian or "proto-totalitarian" phenomenon, this attests to the fact that stand-up comedy is unable to compensate for the paucity of negativity and, in particular, the paucity of critical reflection. In any case, the identification of the artist with a dog (Kulik), or Stalin with Malevich (Groys),[20] and so on is a

result of the "spectacularization" of our consciousness (particularly since, thanks to the mass media, spectacle and kitsch now metastasize on an unprecedented scale).

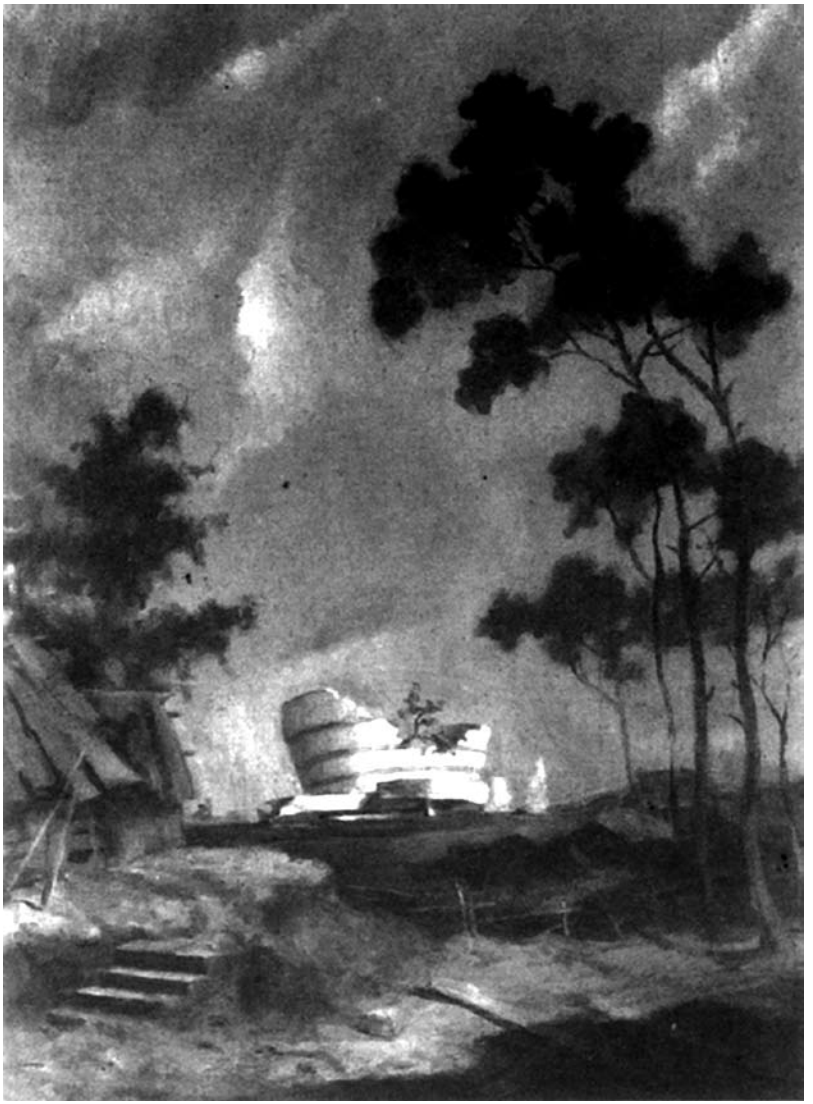
If we think of the past as a utopia, then history has to appeal to something unattainable, something that is denied the possibility of appearing to us the way it really was. It is obvious that the desire for complete knowledge makes historical discourse more and more adequate to the *object* of study—the past. The paradox is that at the moment when it becomes most adequate to this utopian object, history itself becomes utopia. However, there are different kinds of wishful thinking. One such possibility ("institutional") was realized by the organizers of *Russia!* while another ("contractual") was carried out by the artist Vadim Zakharov in his installation *The History of Russian Art from the Avant-Garde to the Moscow Conceptual School* (2003). In both cases, history—despite manipulation and arbitrariness—"enters directly into the heart of utopia, into the heart of nowhere."[21]

Before returning to the Guggenheim spiral, I will mention Robert Smithson's project *Floating Island* realized by the Whitney Museum at the same time.[22] But what does Smithson have to do with the Guggenheim's architecture? After all, it's perfectly obvious that his *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is a two-dimensional configuration, while Frank Lloyd Wright's building is a three-dimensional one. The connection, however, is precisely that the *Spiral Jetty* can be interpreted as a trace left by the Guggenheim at the moment of its collapse. In my own mind this has already happened; therefore, I would like to refer the reader to Komar and Melamid's work *Scenes from the Future: Guggenheim Museum* (1974): it depicts the ruins of the Guggenheim Museum, a reality that was once difficult to believe (fig. 13.3).

3. THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

Erik Bulatov's 2006 retrospective at the State Tret'iakov Gallery in Moscow was organized and paid for by Vladimir Semenikhin, who, unlike other, less fortunate Russian oligarchs, managed to rechannel his ambitions away from politics into a much safer place—art.[23] His protégé, Bulatov (already discussed in chapters 2 and 4), belongs to the first generation of Soviet "alternative" artists who emerged in the late 1950s, at the time of Khrushchev's thaw. The most interesting (if not the only interesting) part of this artist's oeuvre is the body of works produced in the period from 1972 to 1991 (see figs. 2.10, 4.3).

In 1981, in an essay titled "Two Railwaymen," Kabakov reveals the circumstances under which the railroad crossing sign "Dangerous," a warning against looming trains, defined Bulatov's poster-style approach to the



13.3
Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, *Scenes from the Future: Guggenheim Museum*, 1974.

medium of painting. In paintings such as *Caution* (1973) and *Not to Be Leaned On* (1987), the way Bulatov incorporates within pictorial space the performative language of commands and warnings echoes the didactics of railroad posters: beware of high platforms, do not walk on the tracks, do not jump from the footboard, don't ride on the roof, etc.

In Bulatov's portrait of Brezhnev, the alternative artist recreated in his own home a poster that was hanging in a public place (see fig. 4.3). A socialist realist icon was displaced from the sphere of affirmative perception to that of alienated optics. Having wound up in the studio of an "alienated" artist, Brezhnev's portrait thus became a work of alienated art. And, in some sense, as I commented in chapter 4, Brezhnev was also alienated from himself.

What Bulatov's retrospective brings to light is that the imperial ulterior of this artist's career has always been mediated by the discourse of power, and it comes as no surprise that, in the post-Soviet era, all previously submerged codes and signs of authority have finally come to the surface.[24] However exaggerated, the confrontation between Bulatov's negatively charged painting of the 1970s or 1980s and the affirmative art of socialist realists invokes the two royal brothers in Alexandre Dumas's *The Man in the Iron Mask:* the ruler and his less fortunate contender, who in spite of everything aims at reversing his luck. Another example is Sergei Mikhalkov's national anthem: Stalinist in form and content, it was retouched in 2000 by its elderly author to meet the demands and conditions of the post-Soviet spectacle. The same is true of the overall situation in Putin's Russia, where today's cultural and political establishment coexists (quite harmoniously) with the old one under the banner of renewed imperial aspirations.[25]

But when Bulatov relocated to New York in 1991 (and, a year later, to Paris), he entered a state of tranquility—that is, an imaginary bubble with zero-degree alienation. The loss of negativity as a state of mind[26]—advocated by a number of critically engaged artists of his generation—was a side effect of Bulatov's fascination with Western spectacle. As this artist admitted in an interview at the time, he watched it "with the superficial eyes and naïve enthusiasm of a tourist," so that his work assumed a kind of "beyond-good-and-evil" dimension.[27] For the next seven years, his paintings were eligible for look-alike contests with promotional posters, sightseeing ads, and other "life-celebrating" items, and the artist was virtually forgotten by his admirers, Russian and Western alike.

Since 1999, Bulatov has been inserting lines of poetry by his friend Vsevolod Nekrasov into the same illusionist space he used decades before. His painterly techniques have long been adjusted to poster-style execution,

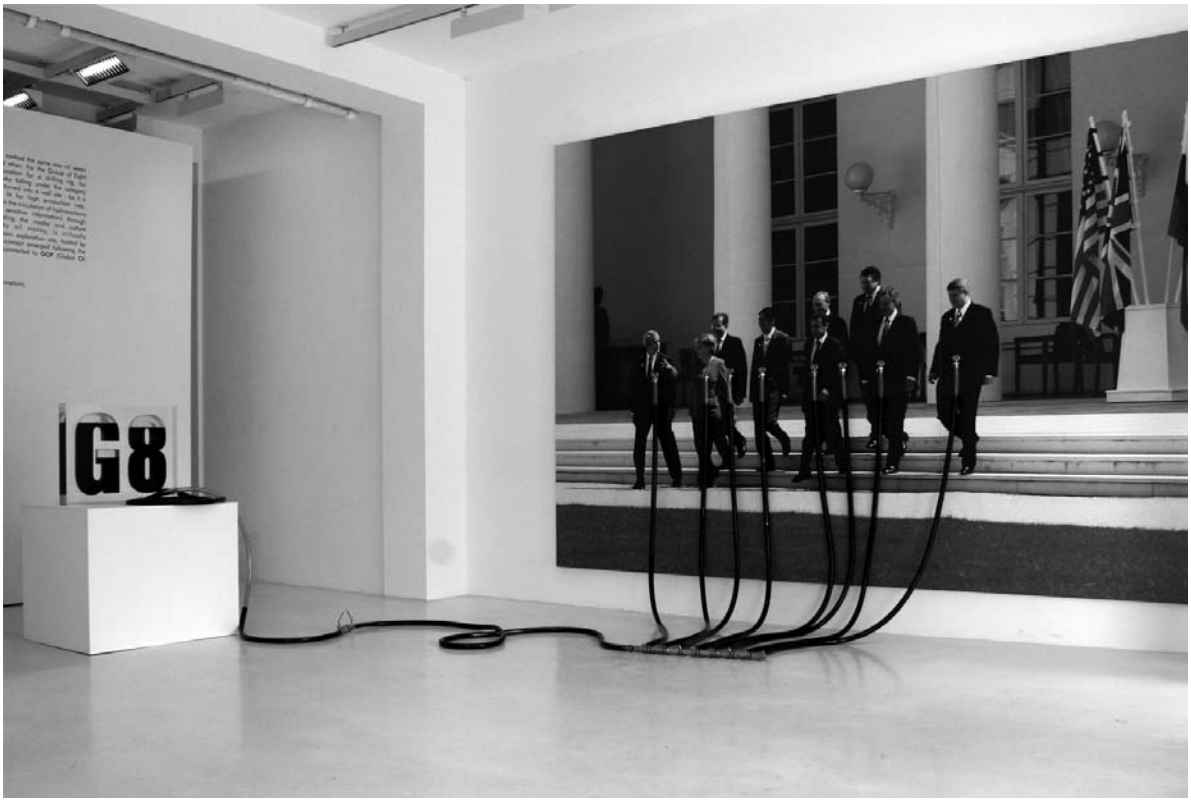
and he spends time (up to several months!) primarily on preliminary sketches, while the actual process of painting usually takes only a few hours. Even with the familiar countrysides, urban landscapes, and cloudy skies, the results resemble constructivist book designs, with the texts narrowing at angles; but Bulatov's use of diagonals in such "timeless" compositions as *The Way the Clouds Move—the Way Things Are Going* (2001) has little to do with what the constructivists can be credited with: a compromise between two (di-) contests (agons)—utopian and historically specific. Regardless, this series partially fulfills its author's desire to move away ("the way the clouds move") from the social in order to stake out a more "universal" place for his melancholically detached paintings. The problem, however, is that the point of destination has turned out to be Bulatov's own mind, or rather, the "theater of the mind," to use Mallarmé's phrase. Perhaps nothing is more theatrical than our chronic dependence on binary oppositions, considering that the ubiquitous "play [read: mise en scène] of differences" is a modus operandi of "spectacle culture" and the "condition of spectacle."

4. SUDDEN GUST OF "DARKNESS"

In May 2006, I traveled to Moscow to attend my book presentation at the local art fair called Art Moskva. This fair turned out to be more modest in size than the International Fair for Contemporary Art (FIAC) or the Cologne Art Fair, but nearly as bad in terms of quality. And yet there were some interesting works—particularly those by Andrei Molodkin, a Russian artist who splits his time between Moscow, New York, and Paris. He is best known for his three-dimensional pieces consisting of oil barrels and pipes connected to transparent acrylic boxes: each has a hollow sculpture or phrase inside—half-filled with crude Chechen or Iraqi oil. The phrases (for example, "Support our troops," "Democracy," "Human rights") are subversive, provided that, in the "court" of art, official demagoguery cannot "take the Fifth" in order to be exempt from testifying against itself (fig. 13.4). Although the images tend to be deconstructive, they nonetheless skillfully combine anarchy with order, or defiance of the status quo with aesthetic standards, thereby turning the opposites into connected vessels.

On the one hand, oil is the most ancient of resources; on the other hand, there is nothing more in demand by modernity than oil. It is an "ideal model" for art, which aspires to something *always already* existing and yet at the same time is modern. The sign of our times is the "demographic explosion" of vacant forms easily filled with equally vacant content, including any ideology or any discourse, and provided that an empty form is a prop for mimesis. In Molodkin's work, the empty form is "a

13.4
Andrei Molodkin, *Democracy,* 2005.



13.5
Andrei Molodkin, *G8*, 2007.

hollow matrix that you can fill with oil." For him, "culture is an emptiness we have to fill and affirm with economics."[28] Hence, it comes as no surprise that, in order to reaffirm the value of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square,* Molodkin chooses to pump oil into "*it.*"

Molodkin's recent series, *Cold War II,* consists of photographs he took while working on a project in Russia's oil-producing northern region. The artist refers to oil as the newly reinvented "apple of discord," rife with competition (and possibly confrontation) between the West and the East. Another series, titled *G8* (2007), is about people "being soaked the same way oil seeps through a pipe, regardless of where or when" (fig. 13.5).[29] For the Group of Eight (G8), each of us is the perfect location for a drilling rig, for everyone can drill or be drilled, thereby falling under the category of supply and demand. Anyone can be turned into a well site—be it a hand-dug hole or a rich reservoir—fit for a high production rate. Hence, *G8* acts as a pump jack, safeguarding the circulation of hydrocarbons and their "byproducts" through various communicating vessels, including the media and culture industry. Their rhetoric, tainted by oil money, is critically challenged by the artist.

Today, politically engaged art is highly unpopular in Russia. This is particularly true of the "unauthorized" fusion of art and politics—unauthorized by those for whom visual culture is a variety of oil, which can be used as a political weapon only if they themselves choose to use it that way. Because all the national resources were privatized during Yeltsin's reign, and then redistributed by his successor, art has finally earned the attention of the nouveaux riches as the only resource left unclaimed. Oil tycoons and other wealthy Russians, who felt "underwhelmed" by their lack of access to political power or the media,[30] began to rechannel their "sweet crude" fantasies into the "art of controlling art," that is, into sponsoring, collecting, and imposing their tastes on both individuals and institutions. By positing the sublime as the sublimated, sized up for any "*objet a,*" they compensate (albeit symbolically) for being cut off from it.[31]

Among the outcomes are successful Russian sales at Sotheby's, Christie's, and Phillips; each of these auction houses has become a psychodrome for competing buyers who raise prices on insignificant artworks at the expense of good ones in order to impose (money-wise) their vision of "who is who" in contemporary Russian art. Some of them have already housed their acquisitions in the newly established private museums and foundations. Predictably, these institutions are run by the collectors themselves.

The influx of big money, combined with access to the nouveau riche lifestyle, has made the art world "glamorous" to the extent that, while

entertaining wealthy art lovers on Rublevskoe Chaussée, one can also enlist their support and commitment. What these liaisons usually result in is personified by Iuliia Mil'ner, an immature artist whose participation in the 2007 Venice Biennale was secured by her husband—a sponsor of the Russian pavilion.[32] Thus, alongside the new political and financial class, there have emerged a new official art capable of satisfying its customer.[33]

In January 28, 2007, Moscow's Vinzavod (formerly a wine factory) hosted the "I Believe" Project, which aimed at the resumption of communal activities and communal participation.[34] In his installation *Darkness,* Andrei Monastyrsky mounted a typewritten text on the wall, opposite the entrance. The space in between was large enough to ensure that the viewer could not possibly read the text without standing in close proximity to it. But any attempt to approach the wall made the lights automatically go off, thus plunging viewers into a sudden darkness and prohibiting them from reading the text.[35] Having heard about this dilemma prior to my visit to Vinzavod, I brought a pair of binoculars with me and managed to decipher the "crypt" without approaching it. Weeks later, I admitted my guilt to Monastyrsky and promised not to reveal the content of the text. So, I will conclude this last chapter by keeping my promise.