CHAPTER 7

Pushmi-pullyu: St. Petersburg-and-Moscow

Men get most of their animals by sneaking up behind them while they are not looking. But you could not do this with the pushmi-pullyu—because no matter which way you come toward him, he was always facing you. And besides, only one half of him slept at a time.[1]
Hugh Lofting, *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*

1.

A comprehensive examination of St. Petersburg art has been long overdue. The capital of Russia before the October Revolution, St. Petersburg (formerly Leningrad) had been famous since Petrovian times for its pro-Western (read: secular) sociocultural attitudes and sensibilities. In 1918 the government of Soviet Russia moved to Moscow, and soon after Lenin's death in 1924 the name of the "Northern Venice" was changed to Leningrad. The country governed by one-party rule and a single ideology could not sustain the prospect of two (competing) cultural centers; thus, Leningrad's art gradually acquired a supplementary status and remained for many years in the shadow of Moscow. Even with perestroika, alternative Soviet artists who started exhibiting in the West were in most cases from Moscow rather than from Leningrad. To compensate, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, in cooperation with art historians and critics involved in the production of the magazine *Kabinet,* organized an exhibition in which St. Petersburg artists of various orientations participated: from visionary psychology and pop linguistics (the "charades" of Sergei Bugaev [known as Afrika]) to playful decadence and "beauty-centrism" (the members of Timur Novikov's "Academy") (fig. 7.1). This 1997 exhibition was conceived as an opportunity to look at oneself from the outside, and also as a way of becoming acquainted with what had been brought over in the ark of communal "salvation."[2] Since the ark is (generally) an unimaginable concept, the description of its form and content can be evaded by focusing on the fragments, rather than the totality, of the "communal vessel." One may even compare the fragments that characterize visual thinking in St. Petersburg with their counterparts in Moscow, especially when representatives of these two cities are paired—for example, Bugaev (Afrika) and Sergei Anufriev in the late 1980s to early 1990s. Since both artists participated in

7.1
Installation View, "Kabinet" (Georgii Gur'ianov near his works), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1997.

the *Kabinet* exhibition, it is worth saying a few words about their earlier collaborations.

The centerpiece of Afrika's exhibition at the Queens Museum (New York, 1991) was the "intrigue" surrounding the desacralization of the holy object of socialist realism: Vera Mukhina's sculpture *The Worker and the Female Collective Farmer* (1937). The act of desacralization went as follows: armed with a stepladder, Afrika, accompanied by Anufriev and photographer Sergei Borisov, made his way to the pedestal of this mastodon of a sculpture (fig. 7.2). Having pried open the metal door (read: hymen) leading into the collective farmer's vaginal passage, the deflowerers took turns climbing inside and then, after having their photographs taken, retreated, carrying away the door, which they had wrested off its hinges.[3] A reader of Derrida will most likely hasten to characterize this priapic feat as phallogocentric. Besides, it is hard to sidestep (at a purely theoretical level, too) the question of why, in an act of copulation with a sacred object of both sexes, the collective farmer's vagina was chosen over the worker's anus. Was it simply because the latter had no door? Or because, as we know, there was not a single male among the sculptors who assisted Mukhina? Mukhina herself, incidentally, fully meets the definition of the "phallic woman" who enters an incestuous union with the "father," in this case the sadistic superego of Stalinism. The offspring of such "artistic incest" are androgynes,[4] a priori indifferent to "the politics of (their) defloration." Thus, because of the androgynist unity of *The Worker and the Female Collective Farmer,* copulation with one of them equally affects the other.

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At the Queens Museum exhibition, the ill-fated "door," now a part of Foucault's pendulum, was swinging back and forth against the backdrop of an altar space, typical of Afrika's installations, which comprised photographs of the postrevolutionary era, a diagram of a caesarean section, and other images. Placed at the center was a monumental canvas depicting a Gaussian curve. *The Worker and the Female Collective Farmer,* I would like to remind the reader, was produced for the Paris World's Fair of 1937. The fragments, made of rustproof steel, were transported from the USSR to the French capital, where assembly was completed. The Soviet Pavilion was designed by Boris Iofan, that of Germany by Albert Speer. The two buildings stood facing each other as if foreshadowing events of the coming war.

At the end of Paris World's Fair, Mukhina's sculpture (which had been awarded the Grand Prix) was dismantled and returned home, where, unlike Humpty Dumpty, it was put together again and placed at the entrance to the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV, later VDNKh).[5] Since the dismantling in Paris also affected the above-mentioned "vaginal door" (the rustproof hymen), the act of Afrika and Anufriev should not be

7.2
Afrika (Sergei Bugaev) and Sergei Anufriev entering Vera Mukhina's sculpture *The Worker and the Female Collective Farmer*, Moscow, July 1990.

regarded as an "original" penetration, attributable to the priapism of modernists, but as yet another paradigm of postmodernist mimesis, of going around in circles, of repetition. This interpretation should also apply to Afrika's abduction of Mukhina's "vaginal door" beyond the Soviet borders (fig. 7.3). The door's epiphany in the West is no more than a mimetic act: it had been there before (in 1937); and it had even received a grand prize . . .

2.

To those familiar with Russian folktales, Leshyi is something like a wood goblin, for his function is "to lead the way and lead astray but never arrive anywhere." Many Russian folk heroes and historical figures fit this definition. An example is Ivan Susanin, a peasant who agreed to become a guide for the Polish army as it advanced toward Moscow in the Time of Troubles (the early seventeenth century). Susanin led the Poles to a dark, snowy forest from which "no way out could be found." Moses possessed the same abilities: under the "pretext" of the Jew's exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, he "led out" the Pharaoh, his horsemen and chariots to the bottom of the Red Sea. Curiously, Moses continued to be a Leshyi to his own people until his very death. From this vantage point, goblinry is a form of activity directed at the nonrealization of any *idée fixe*, nonattainment of any final frontier, nonreturn from any flight. Goblinry is equally prone to provoke and to delay the moment of culmination. The sort of "culmination" meant here (and the one suggested by this entire book) would be a "final" balance between communality and individuation. In this sense, goblinry constitutes a seismological set of devices capturing the symptoms that promise either the future hegemony of communality or a boom of individuation. Meanwhile, the goblinesque sensibility thrives on deferral and anticipation.

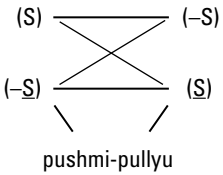
In Soviet children's literature there were two familiar characters—*Znaika* (Knows-It-All) and *Neznaika* (Know-Nothing).[6] Before perestroika, the mission of *Znaika* was taken on by the party-state ideocracy, while the label of *Neznaika* was pinned on the adversarial artistic intelligentsia. Let (S) denote *Znaika*'s claims of "knowing what to know." It follows that all those uninitiated into "truth" are those (–S) "not knowing what to know," (S̲) "not knowing what not to know," or (–S̲) "knowing what not to know." The last type, naturally, falls into the category of goblinry, while the (S̲) model of knowledge turns out to be embodied in the character of *Neznaika*. Meanwhile, the communal subject can be associated with (–S), those "not knowing what to know."

In contemporary Muscovite art, the notion of goblinry usually comes to mind in relation to Ilya Kabakov and Andrei Monastyrsky, whereas in

7.3
Afrika, *Donalddestruction,* installation view (the door of Vera Mukhina's sculpture *The Worker and the Female Collective Farmer* used as a pendulum).

St. Petersburg it has always brought to mind Afrika (and still does).[7] All of them, because they "know what not to know," are mediating figures in the interaction between *Neznaika* and *Znaika*. At times, these artists act as double agents, simultaneously representing those who seem "not to know what to know"—that is, the communal body—as well as the forces engaged in its decommunalization. Moreover, decommunalization, in this case, is performed by injecting the negative "not,"[8] which transforms one "*not* knowing what to know" in the sense that he or she becomes one "*not* not knowing what *not* to know," or (since double not = ○), one "knowing what not to know" (the wood goblin). With regard to item (S), the uncompromising "not" transforms one "knowing what to know" into one "*not* knowing what *not* to know," that is, into "Know-Nothing." On the other hand, the double negative (not not = ○) brings it all back to square one.

As for both dramatis personae, the secret of the mutual harmony between *Neznaika* (Know-Nothing) and the wood goblin is that they are not reduced to one another on the paths of pure negation alone, in other words by means of injecting the "not" into (S̲) or (–S̲). The "epistemogram" presented below illustrates the interrelations between "contraries" (S and –S) and "subcontraries" (–S̲ and S̲), constituting the semantic rectangle:



Contraries: (S) = "knowing what to know," (–S) = "not knowing what to know,"
Subcontraries: (S̲) = "not knowing what not to know," (–S̲) = "knowing what not to know."

In one way or another, the union of *Neznaika* with the wood goblin (–S̲ combined with S̲) is the Moscow–St. Petersburg version of Hugh Lofting's pushmi-pullyu (played by Afrika and Anufriev). This, in the context of our epistemogram, serves as a "neutral term," whereas the "complex term" (S combined with –S) may be recognized as Mukhina's *The Worker and the Female Collective Farmer.*[9]

3.

Remember how Orpheus finally lost Eurydice: he looked at her shadow despite the warning he had received from Persephone. However, bearing this lesson in mind does not always help. For example, it is rare to

find contemporary Russian art examined without mentioning the 1930s. Accepting this cliché (this pattern of reference) and simultaneously aiming at its deconstruction, one may recall a telephone conversation between Stalin and Pasternak regarding whether Osip Mandel'shtam was "our man or not our man," as Stalin put it. Pasternak responded by pointing out that "Mandel'shtam represents St. Petersburg literary tradition, whereas I belong to the Moscow School." This answer did not—at least in a direct way—give preference to either of the two schools, nor did it attempt to label them as "our men" or not. But indirectly, especially in the context of the Great Terror, this nominalist play of identities ("a" belongs to A, "b" belongs to B) so innocently performed by Pasternak could be interpreted as an affirmative gesture in regard to Stalin's politics of identity, fraught with repressive measures against those who are "not our men." One can even suggest that the negativity of the symbolic function intrinsic to metaphor in general and to poetry in particular is what a tyrant shares with a man of letters engaged in "violence" in relation to linguistic material.

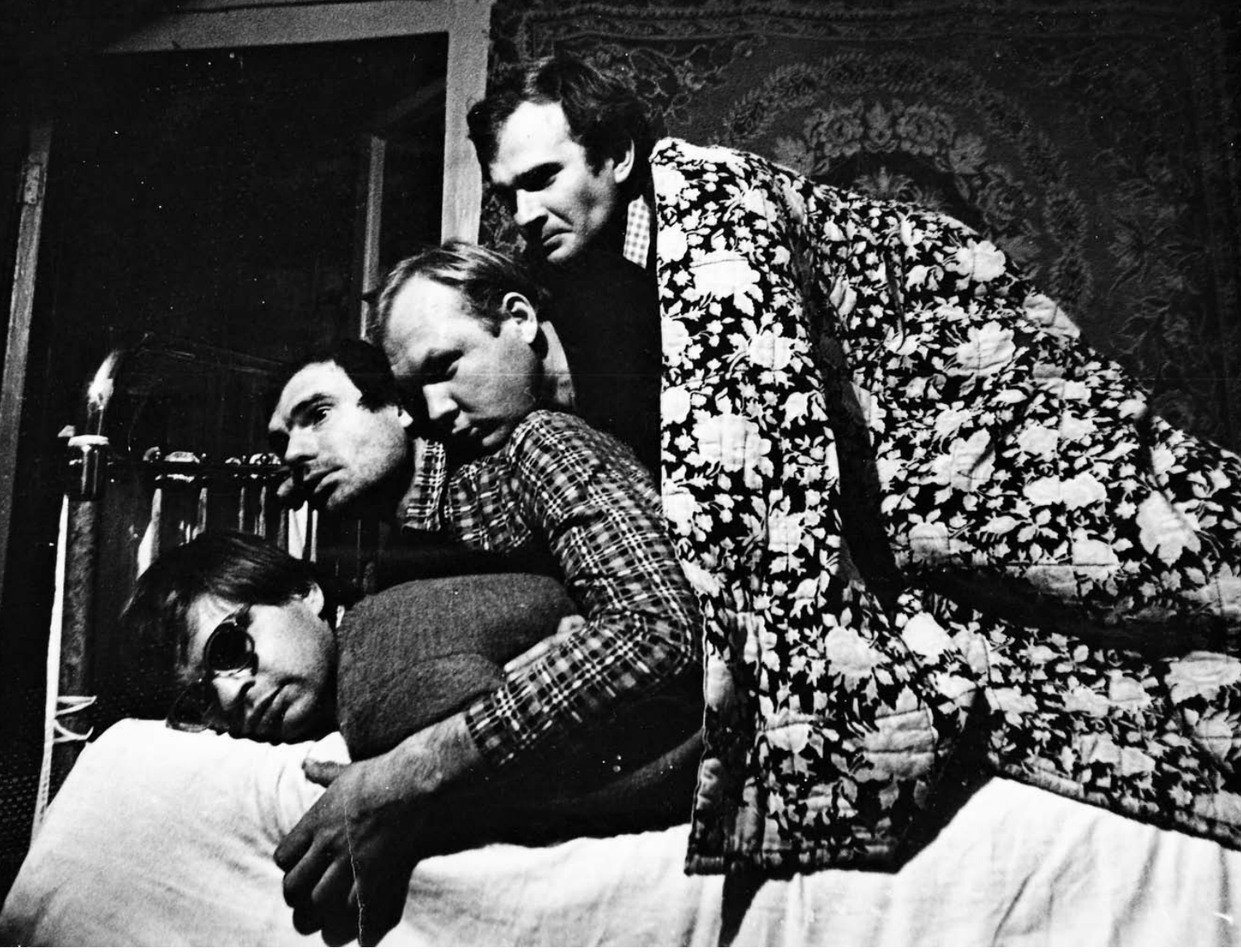
And yet numerous human factors and phenomena of nonlinguistic reality unfold themselves amid abstraction: identitarian thinking fails to say what they come under. Its inability to take stock of Being hints at the fact that "the supposition of identity is indeed the ideological element of pure thought"[10] and that hidden in the "lower depths" of identification is the seed of its own death: nonidentity. The inadequacy of the concept of identity—professional, national, sexual, religious, political, linguistic, aesthetic, or any other—is an irritation for those who, in the rush to absolutize the phenomenon of negativity (repression as a means of producing not only literary, but social metaphors), endorse the notion of a single identity frame shared by an artist and by a power broker. As Mikhail Ryklin noted correctly in his book *Iskusstvo kak prepiatstvie,* Vladimir Mayakovsky's versified confession, "I am delighted watching children die," is no reason to equate the young poet's affectations with the "art of will" to sign death warrants or carry out the executions.[11] Moreover, the "nondifferentiation of differences" between idiomatic narratives and political "speech acts" is one of the manifestations of the identity principle.

This observation bring us back to an old controversy over our belief or disbelief in the existence of the so-called blind spots reserved for a creative "I" within overtly political environments. On the one hand, a "blind spot" may inflict blindness upon our critical insight; on the other, the denial of such an option contributes—as in George Orwell's *1984*—to the triumph of total transparency. The notion that the authorial and the authoritarian are related or interchangeable is precisely what Stalin tried to force

on Pasternak. Especially in this day and age, the insistence on such a position (without aiming at deconstruction or subversion) is a manifestation of "enlightened" cynicism.

When Mayakovsky wrote that "he [was] delighted watching children die," he most likely meant the literary watching of literary children who die just as literary a death. But what is literature? "Everything," replies Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.[12] And the body? "The body, too." The only difference is that the body can feel nonliterary pain and suffering. "The subject has to make up for what it has done to non[literary]identity," writes Adorno.[13] In this sense, my own bodily "I" is the bulwark of resistance to literary objectification. Hence, the heightened interest in "bodiliness" on the part of contemporary artists. Quite in contrast to the physical body, the literary body is in the state experienced by the pushmi-pullyu. The component parts of such lines by T. S. Eliot as "Morning stirs the feet and hands / (Nausicaa and Polypheme)"[14] push and pull in different directions, with no chance of a rendezvous—except for a purely literary one. But when the flesh of a literary body is torn apart, it fascinates; lacerations of the physical body, on the other hand, cause torment comparable in intensity only to physical pleasures. Nor is there any reason to believe that a breeze of transcendental truth comes from the gashes and the gaping caesural holes that rend apart the literary pushmi-pullyu. The inability of flesh to coexist with alien forms of identity (cancerous cells and so forth) makes it nonidentical to text, whose health is not threatened by any tumor (including itself). That is why attention shifts either to the sphere of bodily experience or to the unconscious. However, the unconscious "compromises" itself by living the life of (or being structured like) language, and thus resembling literature. In this way, all roads lead to the body.[15]

The problem of artists' reaction to social disjunctions and discontinuities is interesting in itself. Before perestroika and glasnost, the attention of the alternative milieu in Moscow and Leningrad was focused not on bridging the gap between culture and life but rather on preventing their interpenetration. The desire to accentuate such an escapist gap stemmed from the necessity of preventing a cathartic fusion with representation imposed by the powers that be. In the 1970s, such prophylactic measures (toward the alternative milieu) were proposed by the artists Kabakov, Viktor Pivovarov, Monastyrsky, Erik Bulatov, Ivan Chuikov, and Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid. They became adepts of the dichotomy, zealots of ruptures and clearances, which they regarded as the only possible manifestation of the real (*le réel*) in reality (*la réalité*). Having created the language for describing fragmented public and private narratives, they realized a project that under normal circumstances would have required armies of historians, sociologists,



7.4
A scene from Evgenii Iufit's necrorealist film, late 1980s.

and therapists. Simultaneously, the exculpatory motivations that justified the prolonged stay in the zone of the "blind spot" were exhausted.

4.

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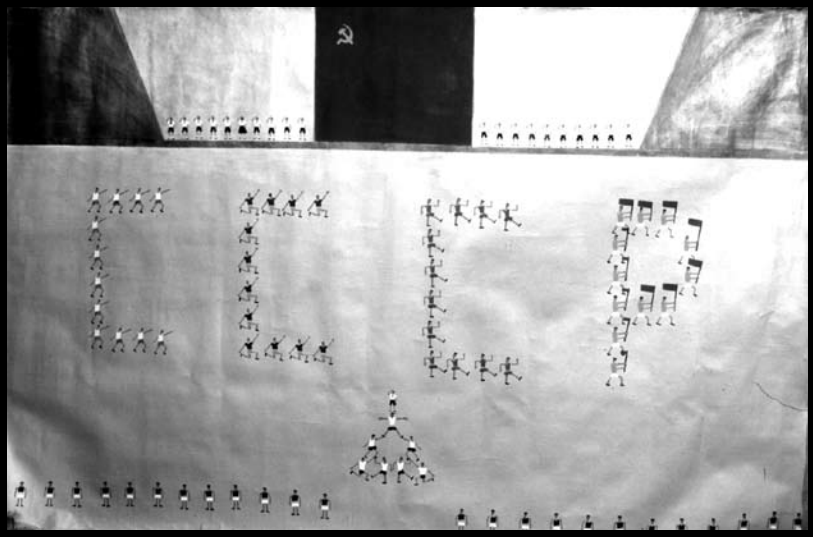
Artists and critics living in both St. Petersburg and Moscow constantly change identity, while like Oedipus they try to guess the answer to the sphinx's riddle: "Who are our men and who are not?" The difference, however, lies in the fact that today the capital A and capital B happen to be the Moscow and St. Petersburg art schools along with their respective paradigms of artistic mentality and sensibility. Since both groups of artists consist of the members of alternative milieus, they are still eligible for conferral as "nonidentity within identity." And yet accentuation of the cultural dichotomies between the cities is needed, especially at this point in time, to undermine the existing tendency to perceive the post-Soviet vanguard as a unicellular totality.

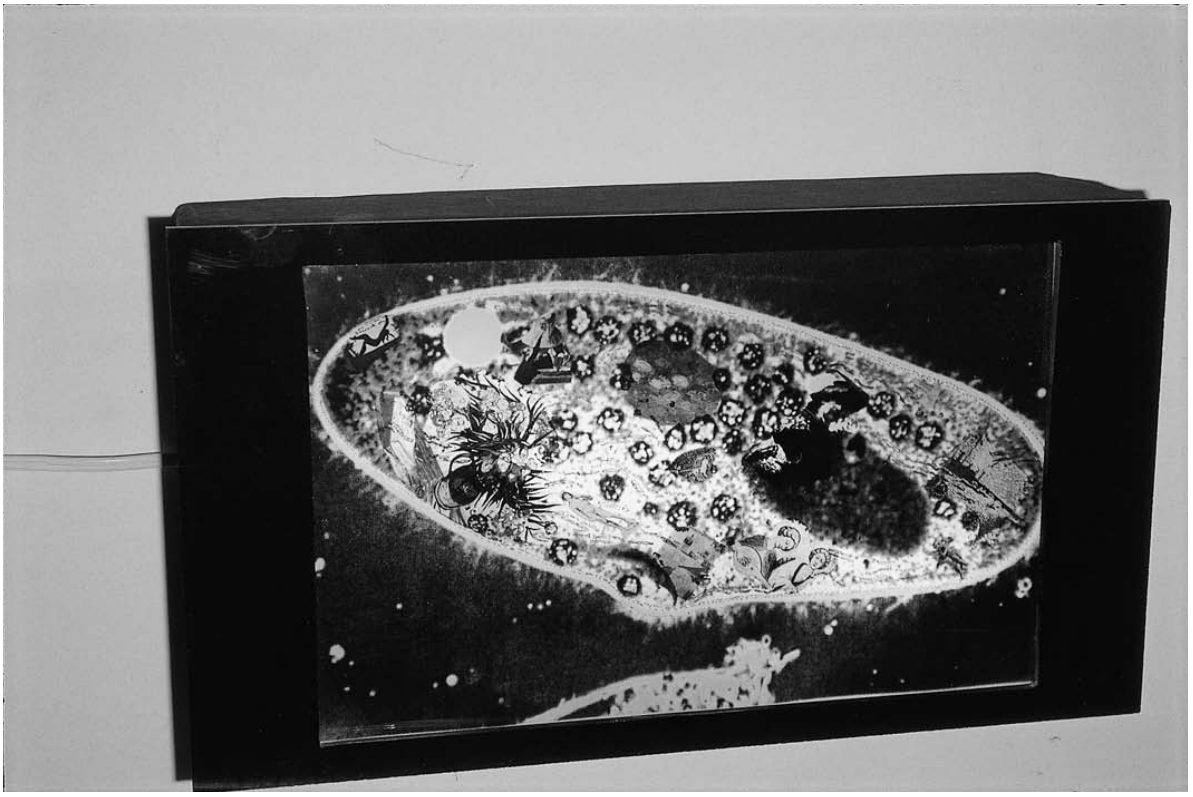
Given that the distance between the two cities exceeds 700 kilometers, it is appropriate to describe Leningrad art as being somewhat peripheral vis-à-vis its Moscow counterpart. Compared to that of other urban centers, Moscow's cultural life has always been characterized by a higher level of "transparency" due to the closeness of the state leadership's watchful eye. This partially explains why manifestations of the "optical unconscious" are generally more opaque, corporeal, and sensual on the banks of the Neva than they are in Moscow, where the initiative—until fairly recently—belonged to conceptual art (read: transparent, sterile, intellectualized). Thus, Moscow's visual paradigm can be characterized in terms of an "aesthetics of transparency" as opposed to the "aesthetics of a blind spot" (in St. Petersburg's case). These polarities reveal themselves as we compare *Parallel'noe kino* (Parallel cinema) of Igor' and Gleb Aleinikov to Evgenii Iufit's necrorealist films (fig. 7.4). Likewise, Kabakov and Collective Actions share no aesthetic programs with Afrika, Novikov, Bella Matveeva, Oleg Maslov and Victor Kuznetsov, Andrei Khlobystin, or Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe (figs. 7.5, 7.6).

In chapter 3, I described Kabakov's installation in Jablonka Gallery in Cologne (1994), where the artist contrasted the darkness of the communal environment with a brightly lit painting endowed with extracommunal lucency, a Cézannesque landscape. This dichotomy is reversed by a number of St. Petersburg artists in that the attention in their works is shifted back from the "aesthetics of transparency" to the "aesthetics of blind spots," from anesthetized and distilled vision to "bodily" optics. Thus, for Khlobystin, artistic representation is the "apotheosis of dark, dumpy corners," which are interesting not because they can be used for



7.5
Timur Novikov, *USSR*, 1987.

7.6
Anonymous, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe on the roof of the Hermitage, St. Petersburg, 1992.



7.7
Andrei Khlobystin, *Art-Causing Agent,* 1991.

meditation, but because of the intriguing nature of their life structure (fig. 7.7). Khlobystin's latest works are precisely such "corners," installed not at the center but on the periphery of cultural facilities. The images etched onto the surface of blurry film and functioning as indexical signs point to nondiscursive zones, filled with what Paul de Man described as "blindness inseparable from the moments of greatest insight."[16] While Kabakov's *Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (first realized in the artist's Moscow studio in 1985) penetrates the roof of the communal "chaosmos," which the artist identifies with trash, Khlobystin relegates "penetrating" vision to the same fate. For him, as for necrorealists (who were also exhibited in the Stedelijk), the value context is governed not by Kant's sublime but by Freud's sublimated.

Absolute transparency is a condition that the egocrat requires to distinguish those who are "with us" from those who are "against us." In *Farbenlehre,* Goethe wrote that the abundance of light "allows the eye to differentiate—to contrast object to object and one part of an object to another." In his words, excessive "transparency is fraught with loss of sight, blinding those whose eyes are open too wide to the shining of light."[17] Any photographer knows that excessive transparency causes film to become exposed or overexposed. Likewise, aspiration toward unlimited transparency borders on self-blinding (the castration of vision). One may also realize that a Cézannesque "shrine" implanted by Kabakov in Cologne assumes the role of identitarian agency, separating the viewers into "our men" and "not our men." Given that among the things darkened in the Cologne installation is its author's own position, our rage for siding with the right cause seems even more delirious than that faced by Pasternak during his chat with Stalin. Apparently, the inseparability of "blindness and insight" is not so clear-cut.

In some communications, the most important idea is that which the speaker (author, addresser, etc.) cannot, will not, dares not (or does not know how to) say. "The spoken thought" is thus a form of repression toward other thoughts, linked to the "desire" to extend (their) state of unspokenness, an unconscious attempt to block or defer the moment of utterance. Those who study contemporary Russian culture know that in the three preceding decades, the emphasis in this field has been placed on decoding, comprehending, and interpreting the messages communicated to us by artists, writers, and philosophers. The time has come to become sensitive to unspoken as well as spoken thoughts, to become interested in allegories of silencing—in unspokenness as a signifier.