



“Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art”

THE JAMES GALLERY, THE GRADUATE CENTER,
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK/E-FLUX

In perhaps his most popular one-liner, perestroika-era satirist Mikhail Zadornov dubbed Russia “a country with an unpredictable past.” Spanning two continents and eleven time zones, the state now known as the Russian Federation lays claim to conflicting inheritances, from Kievan Rus and the Third Rome to the czarist Russian empire and the Soviet Union. Vladimir Putin was able to consolidate power by cherry-picking aspects from each of these legacies and placing them under the banner of his political party, United Russia; the liberal opposition, however, is having a much harder time formulating a rallying call of its own. The left-leaning collective Chto Delat explores this predicament in its latest film, *The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger*, 2014, a nearly hour-long, twelve-episode Brechtian exercise in which students from Chto Delat’s School of Engaged Art answer questions regarding whom they consider heroes and how they see their place in history. When asked to identify “points of no return,” the participants cite the annexation of Crimea and the trial of Pussy Riot, but also Occupy Wall Street, the attacks on the World Trade Center, and the 1999 bombings in Yugoslavia. Among their role models, they list Antonio Gramsci, Ulrike Meinhof, Guy Fawkes, and the online activist Aaron Swartz.

If, for the post-post-Soviet generation, “the Wall” is no longer the de facto defining historical moment, curator Boris Groys argued that its shadow still looms large with “Specters of Communism: Contemporary Russian Art,” a two-venue exhibition split between the CUNY Graduate

Anton Ginzburg,
Walking the Sea,
2013, digital video,
color, sound,
30 minutes. From
“Specters of
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Center’s James Gallery and e-flux. Through a sampling of seven artists and collectives, Groys attempted to trace a trajectory from the Russian avant-garde through the Moscow Conceptualists of the 1970s and on to the present moment, which he describes as “Post-Conceptual Realism”—a mode of practice in which artists reflect their surrounding social and political conditions as a way to effect change within them. Groys claims that the current political climate, with its outright disavowal of “Soviet leftovers,” prevents artists from paying proper tribute to their past, thus forcing them to devise their own surrogate myths. If the curator leaned a little too heavily on a supposedly shared Soviet experience, it might be because it was one of the few things that united the selected artists, who represent multiple generations as well as multiple geographies. (Nearly half of these artists have lived outside Russia for two decades or more, this exodus predating not only the recent upheavals in the country’s social and economic structures but also the entirety of Putin’s political career).

As in *The Excluded*, there were diverse, often conflicting points of reference. For instance, the exhibition at e-flux juxtaposed Anton Ginzburg’s meditative *Walking the Sea*, 2013—a multicomponent project that channels both Heinz Mack and Gustave Courbet as it surveys a casualty of the utopian extremes of Soviet science, the rapidly disappearing Aral Sea—with the pop-rock theatrics of Pussy Riot. The presentation of the latter focused more on the international publicity around the trial and imprisonment of members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina than on the duo’s recent artistic output. Meanwhile, an excerpt from Arseny Zhilyaev’s sardonic *Museum of Russian History*, 2014—originally developed for the Kadist Art Foundation—suggested that the most radical work currently being made in Moscow may very well be Putin’s.

At CUNY, a second work by Zhilyaev ventured into the milky wilds of cosmism, a school of thought inspired by the teachings of late-nineteenth-century philosopher Nikolai Fedorov. Proclaiming “the common task” of all mankind to be victory over death, Fedorov and his fellow cosmists were convinced that advances in genetic engineering would eventually lead to the resurrection of everyone who has ever lived, thus necessitating the colonization of other planets. Zhilyaev’s *RCC YHV Resurrecting Museum at Home*, 2014, imagines the lobby for a cosmist-inflected museum (LET’S RESURRECT!, an advertisement urges). Fedorov is given a fairer shake in Anton Vidokle’s *This Is Cosmos*, 2014. Shot in the suggestively otherworldly landscapes of Russia and Kazakhstan, the thirty-one-minute HD video indulges a scientific experiment of its own, interspersing explications of cosmist tenets with an irradiation bath of red light. As the text explains, this type of exposure is deemed to stimulate cell reproduction, a first step toward regeneration and thus immortality—a condition that dispenses with nationality altogether.

—Kate Sutton