

The art of Elena Elagina and Igor Makarevich, long valued by Russian experts, has recently drawn the attention of curators of international exhibitions. Their work could recently be admired at the Venice Biennale and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Their installations are often artistic mystifications—alternative and fantastic versions of Soviet and Russian history. Their work is a rare example of contemporary art that can easily be confused with classics of the Old Masters. Faina Balakhovskaya visited the artists' workshop on Malaya Bronnaya Street in Moscow to find out who their teachers were and why these colleagues of Ilya Kabakov and Andrei Monastyrsky laugh when they are called Conceptualists.



Elena Elagina
and Igor Makarevich:
*“Classics
of Conceptualism?
Sounds
ridiculous”*

Q: These are rather good times for you. You have an exhibition in Vienna in the Kunsthistorisches Museum and are in the main exhibition of the Venice Biennale, "Making Worlds." You must be happy.

M.: We are happy that we're able to stay involved in art, and we feel that our exhibition in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna is maybe our best ever.

Q: Was the hall with Bruegel and Bosch your choice?

I. M.: Yes, it was our choice. In fact, our *Pagan* is essentially the Tower of Babel. Perhaps the persistence with which we've used this subject can be explained by my longtime fascination with Bruegel's paintings. Back in 1978, when I was working on the *Alternations* series, I often thought that some details were permeated with influences from masters of the Northern Renaissance such as Cranach, Altdorfer, and Gr newald. But I could not imagine that my work would one day hang close to these legendary artists. The Kunsthistorisches Museum is one of the finest museums we have ever been in. It's a cabinet of wonders. And all its magnificence surrounded our works. They stood up to this environment. Boris Manner, our curator in Vienna, sincerely fell in love with what we do, and asked about every piece, the stories behind each one. This is rare nowadays.

Q: Really, that rarely?

I. M.: Usually the curator demands that the artwork correspond to some idea that is not necessarily close to us. But here they were very attentive to our work. Although at first, some on the museum staff were rather watchful...

E. E.: They were afraid we'd make something repellent.

I. M.: They told us afterwards that they were afraid there would be "contemporary art." I am not even sure how to feel about that. But, anyway, they were very happy with what we did there. On their own initiative, the museum distributed brochures explaining our exhibition and organized a special guided tour.

Q: How did you chose works for Venice?

I. M.: Daniel Birnbaum, the curator of the Biennale, came to Moscow and was very impressed with our project. As we were supported by the Stella Art Foundation, *Frosty Eagle* and etchings from *Life in the Snow* from the foundation's collection became part of *Common Cause*, which is the name we gave to our new work. We also included the pieces *Cupboard* and *Iron Fly*. Birnbaum chose the ideal place for our installation, approximately in the middle of the endless space of the Arsenale, opposite the impressive Paul Chan video about the Marquis de Sade. Viewers move through this dark space

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of silence, where erotic shadows wriggle on one side and on the other the icy block of the frozen eagle sparkles.

Q: Where does Common Cause come from?

I. M.: *Common Cause* is devoted to Nikolai Fyodorov's Utopia and its concept of space. Besides the "dark" portion of the project, we also prepared a "light" one, somewhat like a Russian furnace with a pipe (more than five meters off the ground) with stepladders, and the whole construction looks like a rocket about to launch. Everything is painted white, and when the Sun lights the object, it looks like a fountain of light in Giardini. Another issue is that our work, as a whole, is perceived as historical and devoted to totalitarianism. We did not realize that. When we created it, we realized that we couldn't get rid of the past so easily.

E. E.: In Russia it's impossible to work without ideology, it feels uncomfortable, unnatural even. What happens to these beliefs, the Russian idea,



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Памела Андерсон,
усыпанная звездами. 2001
(c) David LaChapelle

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Джон Леннон и Йоко Оно,
музыканты. 1980,
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Orthodoxy? These are terrible processes against art; I cannot understand where it all comes from, where the wind blows from...

Q: Lena, you were a big public person. You helped Joseph Backstein with the Moscow Avant-Gardist Club in the late eighties.

E. E.: I simply went with Joseph to different venues; he used me as a voice of reason, if I can say so. At that time there was certain element of danger, difficult moments such as when the police came to exhibitions. And the chairman of the club was Sergei Anufryev, who wore green tights. ...

Q: How did you get into this sphere of unofficial art?

E. E.: I was fourteen years old when I first came to Ernst Neizvestny's studio. It was after Khrushchev's outburst about modern art at the Manezh exhibition in Moscow. A friend of my mother's had shown him an album of mine; we were fooling around, drawing figures in parts. He had a look at it and said: "Who drew these



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parts? Bring her here, I will teach her.” He put me to work on a plaster eye of David, then poured a sculpture, I did everything students do in studios and gradually mastered all the knowledge of the profession.

Q: And then you studied with Alisa Poret, the artist from Pavel Filonov’s circle?

E. E.: She was my painting teacher and then we became such friends that we were like relatives. My mother started to take care of her, because at the end of her life she was totally alone.

Q: Did she influence you?

E. E.: She staged these optimistic still-lives, with leopard-print draperies or everything in shades of canary yellow. In the early seventies, this didn’t arouse any particular enthusiasm. Only later, after having read her memoirs, did we understand what a hard life she’d had. She was always incredibly elegant. Her Leningrad apartment was like a salon. She was even afraid to show her works of the Filonov period; she hid them instead. Recently one of them sold at auction for a huge sum (*Poor People* at Sotheby’s in New York in 2006 for \$1.5 million—*Artchronika*). Alisa Ivanovna was a magnificent storyteller, pointed and ruthlessly

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witty. We not only learned the names Kharms, Filonov, and Vvedensky, we also saw them up close and imagined their environment. They almost became our companions, and that was worth all the rest.

Q: Igor, how did you come to be part of the underground?

I. M.: I studied at the Moscow Secondary Art School [Moscow’s most reputable art school — *Artchronika*]. My friends at school included Alexander Kosolapov, Alexander Yulikov, Leonid Sokov, Prigov. It was one circle. But it seems to me that your environment is less of an influence than your inner needs.

Q: Where did your interest in photography come from?

I. M.: I studied at the All-Soviet State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) and was active in photography, but for a long time I didn’t realize that it was so important for me. When I was young, photography tormented me; it took away a lot of time and money. I was annoyed, as though it was a sin that haunted me. I even named it “that Demon of photography.” But gradually I came to understand that for me, photography is the simplest and most natural way to express



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something. A shoot’s flaws can turn out to be a rich field for experiments and discoveries.

Q: You worked together on monuments.

I. M.: We simply had to make money. I couldn’t illustrate books like Kabakov and Bulatov, but working with space was an easy task for me. It just turned out that Lena and I took on projects like murals for the cultural center of the Olympic Village, the Satirikon Theater, resorts outside the city, and club B-69, although by then it was the 1990s. Lena made gravestones, ordinary work for sculptors,

E. E.: I inherited that from Neizvestny. I once took part in his work on Khrushchev’s grave. I made many memorials, including for [Vasily] Shukshin and [Evgeny] Yevstigneyev.

Q: Why did Ernst Neizvestny make such a big impression on you?

E. E.: He was the chief. Everyone went to him, and he didn’t go to anybody except Ilya Kabakov, whom I also met in 1965. Neizvestny’s studio was a very interesting place, the most fashionable and famous people went there. All foreigners who came to Moscow were brought to him. He had somehow unmasked and befriended the official informer assigned to him.

I. M.: Nowadays we have forgotten how fear owned everyone who dared not to be on friendly terms with the State. Ernst Neizvestny was fearless as a mobster. He grappled with Khrushchev and took responsibility for an era, the responsibility of opposition. Oscar Rabin was also like that, after all. It’s thanks to his courage that the Bulldozer Exhibition took place.

Q: Many artists emigrated then. What made you stay?

I. M.: It was infectious, like an illness. The West was idealized and it seemed like you just had to get there and everything would work out somehow. But Collective Actions didn’t share that attitude and none of us left in the 1970s. It was like a cave, our refuge from the traumas inflicted by mass departures. As for me, I have difficulty dealing with big spaces; walking from one street to another is already a journey.

Q: You mentioned Collective Actions. You took part in these legendary actions conceived by Andrei Monastyrsky. What was it like for you?

I. M.: Andrei could be funny, boyish, but he was very strong and bright and influenced all of us. This



strength he had was sometimes perceived as violence. Back then, not everyone understood what creativity was. ... At that time, the unofficial artists who belonged to the small community of Collective Actions were some of the most interesting people and artists we knew.

Q: How did you two meet each other?

E. E.: I had married Leonid Sokov so we could leave the country, as it would have been easier for me than him to receive an invitation from the Promised Land. Igor was a witness at our fake wedding. But we couldn't leave—the invitation wasn't sent. Sokov would shout that the Soviet authorities had taken away two years of his life, and I'd taken three. I eventually decided to give up the idea of leaving. It seemed that it wasn't so bad here. Igor was making a series of works with sculpture, and I helped him make a mask of his face.

Q: You seem to have very different perspectives on many things.

I. M.: Well, we're not a single body. Lena's essence is

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more lively and optimistic. Her pieces gravitate toward clearer thinking and logic, whereas I am interested in the darker side of life, I am attracted to the gloomy moments that feed creativity. Often Lena comes up with an idea and I can more easily think of how to embody it. After all, Lena was the one who invented the story of Buratino. At first he existed as a cheerful but stupid character in *Life in the Snow*, but after that—

E. E.: — he became disillusioned and grew old.

I. M.: To me, the destructive part of this image, already as an ominous mask, has been removed. Artists should be recognized, and our work should be hard to perceive through commercial estimation. The replication of Buratino is a replacement of this trademark. I have some priority here.

Q: And nevertheless it is a very strange idea, to turn Buratino into an elderly maniac, ready to sleep in a wooden coffin, as in your project, Lignomania.

I. M.: As Thomas Mann said, "The history of the soul is the history of pain." I wanted to rethink the image of the cheerful wooden puppet in *Life in the Snow*. In 1996 at XL gallery, we first exhibited this big project under the general name *Homo Lignum*, the wooden man. In 1998, I wrote the diary of Borisov in Italy and many exhibitions followed, with new photos, objects, silk-screen printings, and manuscripts. My character, Nikolai Ivanovich Borisov, is an accountant at a furniture factory. To put it mildly, he is an unhealthy man. I wanted to use his mirthless life and bad habits as an example



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for talking about my perception of Soviet life in the 1960s, to descend into the world of my youth and from there take a look at it. And “descend” is the right word because it’s about fears, subconscious reflexes, and other attributes of an ill soul. This is a dangerous journey and a question of certain depths. I fitted a long-nosed mask on myself like a periscope. Borisov’s torturous “breathing machine” is a time machine.

Q: How did you start working together?

E. E.: We made the *Fish Exhibition* in the early nineties.

I. M.: In the late seventies, I found some archives in an old house that belonged, most likely, to an artist. There were many pre-war invitations to exhibitions and some catalogues. There was a tiny one on yellow newsprint that was especially remarkable. Lena and I studied it for a long time. The inscription on the title page said “Private Fish Exhibition.” It was published by Gosrybtrest at the Astrakhan Party headquarters in 1935. There were no reproductions of works, but the titles were quite curious, a mix of Party jargon and fishery terms. Like a text in a dead language, it was almost impossible to understand. We reconstructed this Stalin-era exhibition, producing seventy objects based on their names, in a Dadaist manner. We were always interested in things like ideology, magic, and alchemy, like the ideas of the pseudo-



scientists [Olga] Lepeshinskaya and [Trofim] Lysenko, who promised miraculous crops and two hundred years of longevity.

Q: And now it is all being displayed alongside Snyders and Bruegel. How do you feel about your success?

E. E.: It’s absolutely unexpected. For some strange reason everything happens suddenly. We’ve been called classics, as though we no longer exist but are something of the past. And “classics of Conceptualism” sounds ridiculous.

Q: The wrong term?

I. M.: I’m not sure it’s even necessary. Frankly speaking, working with words does not denote Conceptualism. The time has passed when we were interested in names of movements.

Q: Who do you consider yourselves to be?

E. E.: Archivists.

I. M.: In Soviet times, I chose unofficial art because of its sensation of emptiness. ... I hate a competition. Back then, there was no competition and this was important to me. When we were in a closed circle, talent was not a means of differentiation; it didn’t mean anything essential. People were just united against the devil of power. And now, to the contrary, the field has become so dense, so many people have rushed to it, and I feel beside myself. As if the fields where Collective Actions met were once deserted and virgin, but then came to be dotted with small houses and now they are covered with garden plots...

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