

“We’re nostalgic but we’re not crazy”: Retrofitting the Past in Russia

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As far as my memory’s concerned, I know a particular word exists, except that it has lost meaning. I don’t understand it as I did before I was wounded. ... So I have to limit myself to words that “feel” familiar to me, that have some definite meaning for me. These are the only ones that I bother with when I try to think or talk to people.

Lev Zasetzky, a patient suffering from aphasia.

On New Year’s Eve, we’ll sit in front of a Sony TV, drinking Absolut vodka as we watch Russian films and sing Russian songs. ... Of course, the film is a remake shot in 35-millimeter Kodak and cost millions of American dollars. We’re nostalgic but we’re not crazy.

Leonid Parfyonov, a TV producer (1995).

In the scholarship on cultural changes in postsocialist countries it has become a cliché to single out nostalgia as an increasingly prominent symbolic practice through which the legacy of the previous period makes itself visible. Scholars from the Balkans are talking about *Yugonostalgia* and its fascination with “the successes of the *golden* Yugoslav national teams and clubs, personalities and elements of political life.”¹ In a similar fashion, cultural critics of the (former) German Democratic Republic draw attention to the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* centered on *Ostprodukte*, the items of daily consumption from the socialist time, that are available again in the eastern part of Germany.² Often perceived as a reaction to the recent

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¹Mitja Velikonja, “*Ex-Home: ‘Balkan Culture’ in Slovenia after 1991*,” in *The Balkans in Focus: Cultural Boundaries in Europe*, ed. Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Sanimir Resic (Lund, Sweden, 2002), 189–207 (available at <http://www.ces.uj.edu.pl/velikonja/exhome.doc>).

²Jonathan Bach, “*The Taste Remains*”: Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany,” *Public Culture* 14:3 (2002): 545–56; Rainer Gries, “*‘Hurrah, I am still alive!’ East German Products Demonstrating East German Identities*,” in *Over the Wall/After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures through an East-West Gaze*, ed. Sibelan Forrester et al. (Bloomington, 2004); Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 63–88.

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cultural and political dislocation of East Germany, *Ostalgia* is interpreted as a form of material and symbolic rejection of the dichotomy “Trabants or the Stasi” that was routinely used after 1989 to frame the socialist experience.³

In Russia, the situation is not that different. Inspired by glasnost, the initial desire to draw a sharp line between the recent Soviet past and the non-Soviet present gradually exhausted itself by mid 1990s.⁴ Attempts to clearly differentiate “victims” and “villains” of the Soviet regime were increasingly replaced by conscious efforts to restore the lost feeling of collective belonging and to reestablish cultural connections with the past that would be neither horrifying nor humiliating.⁵

Small differences notwithstanding, the academic reaction to the (post)socialist nostalgia in Russia tends to have one common theme. Predominantly, scholars point to the illusory aspect of the current longing for the glorious socialist past, which may or may not have existed.⁶ The major criticism emphasizes a profound gap between the sanitized nostalgic reproductions and the actual traumatic history. As a result, nostalgia for things Soviet is usually construed as a deliberate or implicit denial of the present. But it also is often perceived as a revisionist project of rewriting history, as a postcommunist censorship of sorts aimed at making the complex and troubling past more user-friendly by reinscribing its reformatted version in the context of today’s entertainment.⁷ Commissars seem to vanish again, to use the title of David King’s book, although for an entirely different reason.⁸

Some critics trace this disassociation back to a rather simplistic belief of the early 1990s, when democratization in Russia was directly associated with the idea that “the past could be quickly forgotten or overcome.”⁹ Others see in postsocialist nostalgia a therapeutic mechanism called upon to alleviate the material, moral, and physical despair that became so characteristic in the lives of many people in postsocialist Russia.¹⁰ Yet others perceive the “rehabilitation” of Soviet aesthetics as a specifically postsocialist reaction to market-dominated changes. As the argument goes, the “idealistic and romantic” imagery of Soviet film and music are meant to provide in this case a moral antidote for the persistent assault of capitalist advertising.¹¹

³Stefan Arndt, the producer of *Good bye, Lenin!* as quoted in Dominique Vidal et al., “No Change to Mourn its Passing: Germany: Ostalgia for the GDR,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 4, 2004.

⁴See Tat’iana Zaslavskaiia, “Sotsiostrukturnyi aspekt transformatsii rossiiskogo obshchestva,” *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 2001, no.8:10.

⁵See, for example, Boris Dubin, “Vozvrashenie ‘Bol’shogo stilia’? Staroe i novoe v trekh teleekranizatsiakh 2005 goda,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2006, no. 2:275.

⁶See, for example, Kathleen E. Smith, “Whither Anti-Stalinism?” *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2004); and Birgit Beumers, “Pop Post-Sots, or the Popularization of History in the Musical *Nord-Ost*,” *SEEJ* 48:3 (2004): 378–81.

⁷Semen Faibisovich, “Vozvrashenie,” and Kirill Kobrin, “Devianostye: Epokha bol’shikh metafor,” both in *Logos* 5/6 (2000): 45–52 and 38–44, respectively.

⁸David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin’s Russia* (New York, 1997).

⁹Sarah Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber, “Soviet Nostalgia: An Impediment to Russian Democratization,” *Washington Quarterly* 29:1 (2005): 92–93; Jean-Marie Chauvier, “Russia: Nostalgic for the Soviet Era,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (March 2004).

¹⁰See, for example, Nina Khrushcheva, “‘Rehabilitating’ Stalin,” *World Policy Journal* (Summer 2005): 67–73.

¹¹See, for example, Oleg Kireev, “Neo-hippizm i drugie metody zavoevaniia avtonomii,” *pH* 2 (2003) (available at http://ncca-kaliningrad.ru/index.php3?lang=ru&mode=projects&id_proj=17&id_art=60&ld=ok).

I think this historicizing critique of aesthetic forms—the critique that is mainly driven by political reasoning—is important yet somewhat misleading. The genealogical and biographic lenses through which nostalgic forms are predominantly pursued often obfuscate the role of the form in the process of signification. Personal and artistic significance of cultural objects appears to be totally reduced in this approach to their political biographies.¹² What seems to occupy the attention of these critics is “the content of the form”—that is, a historically specific aesthetic constellation in which the meaningful component and its representations become inseparable and mutually constitutive.¹³ By emphasizing the ideological *origin* of a particular cultural device or stylistic configuration, the antinostalgia critics tend to overlook the function of enframing that these remakes and reproductions accomplish.¹⁴

I propose a different strategy of interpretation. Instead of exploring ideological or social pedigrees of post-Soviet nostalgic evocations I will focus on their pragmatics. By looking mainly at three recent visual projects, I show that the importance of symbolic forms of the past cannot be limited to their original context, meaning, or genealogy. The old form is evoked not in order to express its old meaning. Rather it reveals the inability of existing forms to communicate a relevant content.¹⁵ In order to draw attention to the fact that the persistent presence of formal motifs can go hand in hand with radical semantic ruptures, I want to follow Aby Warburg’s insightful distinction between image-based (mimetic) and sign-based (semiotic) forms of representation.¹⁶ In other words, I will approach post-Soviet reincarnations of the past as pictorial rather than performative projects.¹⁷ By shifting attention to the forms themselves, I will demonstrate that the cultural logic of these reincarnations has more in common with the act of mechanical retrofitting (facilitated by the digital age) rather than with the process of political restoration. It is the familiarity of the old form that becomes crucial. It is a search for a recognizable “image at which ... the mind can stare itself out” that often lies at the core of nostalgic projects.¹⁸ It is the manipulation with “revived” frames within “new” cultural fields that provides current “manipulators” with a certain artistic agency. To frame it simply: what I want to highlight in various post-Soviet attempts to revisit the recent and remote past is a longing for the

¹²For a discussion in the Hungarian context see Maya Nadkarni, “The Death of Socialism and the Afterlife of Its Monuments: Making and Marketing the Past in Budapest’s Statue Park Museum,” in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, ed. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London, 2003), 201.

¹³See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, 1987).

¹⁴Unlike a frame that separates the object from its immediate background, enframing is a process of active (syntactic) ordering through which the field of cultural production becomes graspable. Enframing is less a practice of concealed interpretation than a way of parsing out, containing, and positioning objects that could be endowed with some semiotic importance later. On enframing see Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York, 1969), 19–23. For a useful application of this concept for social analysis see Timothy Mitchell’s chapter on enframing in his *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge, England, 1993), 34–62.

¹⁵See Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL, 1998), 20.

¹⁶See Matthew Rampley, “Iconology of the Interval: Aby Warburg’s Legacy,” *World and Image* 17:4 (2001): 306, 312.

¹⁷On pictorial vs. performative reading see Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)* (London, 2003), 111.

¹⁸Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, 1971), 60.

positive *structuring* effect that old shapes could produce, even when they are not supported by their primary contexts.

In this current revision of the past, television certainly takes the lead, reanimating old shows and updating Soviet blockbusters for new commercial formats.¹⁹ Arguably, the first major nostalgic eruption happened on December 31, 1995, when right after midnight the main Russian TV channel (ORT) presented the \$3 million musical extravaganza *Old Songs About the Most Important (Starye pesni o glavnom)*.²⁰ In this three-hour variety show, leading Russian pop stars performed the golden hits of the 1950s. The 1996 episode of *Old Songs* had a political message that was not entirely subtle. Konstantin Ernst and Leonid Parfyonov, the two authors of the project, used the plot and stylized settings of Ivan Pyriev's 1950 film *Cossacks of the Kuban (Kubanskiye kazaki)* as a narrative filler between fragmented musical numbers.

Popular for its catchy tunes and attractive stars, the film had a complicated biography. Despite its strikingly fairy-tale quality, in the early 1950s the official press routinely presented the film as an exemplary reflection of the "authentic reality ... of the kolkhoz actuality" (*podlinnoi realnoi ... kolzkoznoi deistvitel'nosti*).²¹ Apparently, the film was endorsed by Stalin himself. It also brought to Pyriev his fifth Stalin Prize, the highest Soviet award of the time. After Stalin's death, the situation drastically changed, and the film provoked two rounds of highly publicized and severe critique—during Khrushchev's Thaw of the 1960s and Gorbachev's perestroika. With its rosy story about Soviet peasants happily enjoying a permanent Feast of Plenty in their (postwar) villages, *Cossacks of the Kuban* was firmly perceived as a typical example of Stalinist Socialist Realism—a schlock propagandistic story about nonexistent places.²²

The negative reputation of the *Cossacks* hardly interfered with the reception of *Old Songs*, one of the most successful post-Soviet television projects ever. In fact, by reclaiming the Soviet film with a highly charged political pedigree, Ernst and Parfyonov offered an effective model of utilizing the socialist past: while borrowing past cultural forms, the producers simultaneously detached them from their original context.²³ The overwhelming

¹⁹After the ruble collapsed in 1998, many Russian TV channels could not afford foreign-made TV soap operas and mini-series and were forced to recycle the Soviet cinematic legacy. In late 1998–99 ORT remastered two major Soviet epics directed by Vladimir Krasnopol'skii and Valerii Usov in the 1970s: *Vechnyi zov (The Eternal Call, 1973)*, the longest Soviet TV production, and *Teni ischezaiut v polden' (The Shadows Disappear at Noon, 1971)*. Since original lengths of each episode varied, all of them were reedited to fit the standard fifty-two-minute slot (Elizaveta Treneva, "Nevidimye miry slezy" *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, January 29, 1999). In some cases such reformatting prompted lawsuits. When another TV channel decided to air the original ten-episode series *TASS upolnomochen zaiavit' (TASS is Authorized to Announce, dir. Vladimir Fokin, 1984)* in a new thirteen-episode format, the director of the series sued the company for violating intellectual property rights and demanded that the original version of the series be aired. The case was eventually dismissed. See Aleksandr Voronov, "TASS upolnomochen otkazat'," *Kommersant*, February 2, 2006.

²⁰For details see Alessandra Stanley, "Russians Begin to Gild the Communist Past," *New York Times*, December 30, 1995.

²¹For a brief history of the film's reception see, for example, Elena Stishova, "Kakim ty byl...," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, January 3, 2000; and Nina Dymshits, "Plamennyi Ivan," *Vremia MN*, March 11, 2001.

²²See J. Hoberman, "The Communist Musical," *Film Comment* (July/August 1997): 34–35.

²³For more discussion see Tat'iana Cherednichenko, ed., *Rossia 90-kh v sloganakh, reitingakh, imidzhakh* (Moscow, 1999), 37–50. For a useful comparison see Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, "The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-socialist Practices," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2004).

popularity of the initial show was confirmed again in 1997 and 1998, when the producers expanded their temporal frame of reference by reinstating the 1960s and the 1970s correspondingly.²⁴ The prime-time exposure on the main Russian channel, together with a highly orchestrated promotion, has helped to establish *Old Songs* as a major post-Soviet model for reframing and reappropriating the cultural repertoire of the past. More than ten years after the premier broadcasting of the *Old Songs*, Russian TV still heavily relies on the same genre. For the 2007 New Year holidays, Channel One, the successor of ORT, aired a remake of Eldar Riazanov’s 1956 musical *Karnaval'naia noch' (The Carnival Night)*, with the same Ludmila Gurchenko who starred fifty years ago in the original version. The traditionally pro-Western NTV Channel offered to spend the New Year’s Eve in “ABBA’s style” and presented a three-hour variety show, in which Soviet and post-Soviet pop stars sang the Swedish quartet’s hits in Russian.²⁵

Obviously, this approach is not limited to commercially driven mass culture. In its own way the Bolshoi Theater also followed suit, and in 2003 restored Shostakovich’s ballet *Svetlyi ruchei (Bright Stream)*, depicting the jolly life of the Soviet *kolkhozniki* of the 1930s.²⁶ The publishing industry, dramatic theater, and the visual arts have been actively revisiting the recent and remote past during last two decades, too.²⁷ The trend is so persistent that Natalia Ivanova, a prominent cultural critic in contemporary Russia, even coined the word “nowstalgia” (*nostal'iashchee*), a cross of “nostalgia” (*nostalgiia*) and “the present/real” (*nastoiashchee*), to emphasize the “living past” in post-Soviet Russia.²⁸

Along with providing ready-to-use frameworks, reclaimed shapes of the past perform one more important function. Ostensibly ahistorical, the post-Soviet nostalgia nonetheless reveals a peculiar fascination with the temporal sequencing of the Soviet experience and its past. The nostalgia, in other words, is stylistically driven only to a point. Also, and perhaps more importantly, it is an attempt to chronologically enclose, to “complete” the past in order to correlate it with the present. Constructed as an assortment of “consumable images,” nostalgic reproductions offer a version of “generational periodization of a stereotypical kind.”²⁹ As Parfyonov succinctly put it, “every period has its own *lubok*,” referring to the

²⁴See *Starye pesni o glavnom (1996–98)* and *Post scriptum (2000)*, DVD, Moscow: ORT, 2003. For more discussion of this particular project see Ol'ga Kabanova, “Ves' Parfenov – eto ‘Namedni,’” *Izvestiia*, February 17, 2000. See also Vasilii Pichul, “Luchshe krasnogo znameni nichego net,” *Iskusstvo kino*, 2004, no. 10: 9–16.

²⁵See Anna Borodina, “Novogodnie telekhity,” *Kommersant*, December 29, 2006; and Irina Petrovskaia, “Obyknovennoe chu ... to est' shou,” *Izvestiia*, January 12, 2007.

²⁶Despite its name, the ballet had a very grim history. Dmitry Shostakovich wrote the music and the ballet was staged in 1935. The production provoked a hostile reaction from Soviet officials. It was deemed “false,” while Shostakovich’s music was labeled “a decadent dead-end” (*dekadentskii tupik*). See Ol'ga Gerdt, “Kak ‘Svetlomu ruch'u’ ustroili ‘temnuuiu,’” *Gazeta*, April 18, 2003; and Anna Galaida and Nikolai Galkin, “Vpered k sotsrealizmu,” *Itogi*, April 8, 2003. For a less politically charged version of the same restorative trend see Tim Scholl’s exploration of the 1999 production of the 1890 version of *Sleeping Beauty* by the Kirov Company in St. Petersburg, *Sleeping Beauty: A Legend in Progress* (New Haven, 2004), 131–72.

²⁷For a useful review see a special issue of *Ezhenedel'nyi zhurnal* 16 (April 30–March 4, 2003).

²⁸Natalia Ivanova, “No(w)stalgia: Retro on the (Post)-Soviet Television Screen,” *The Harriman Review* 12:2–3 (1999): 25–32. See also N. Ivanova, *No\$tal'iashchee: Sobranie nabliudenii* (Moscow, 2002).

²⁹Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London, 1998), 129.

old popular genre of Russian prints that combined in a bold visual manner the moral lesson of religious icons, the propagandistic clarity of political posters, and the entertaining quality of advertisement and comics.³⁰

Yet what Parfyonov brackets off in his definition is the obvious fact that each “period *lubok*” is usually constructed *post factum*, from a distance, by a generation that could use this distance as a precondition for typologizing and stereotyping the remote experience.³¹ As a result, the aesthetically enhanced history is simultaneously depleted of an immediate emotional attachment but is reestablished as a removed yet still usable set of stylistic choices.

To make my argument more explicit, in what follows I deliberately focus on three visual projects that are *not* directly associated with the Soviet experience: Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia’s cover art for the glossy magazine *Karavan istorii* (*Caravan of Stories*), Farid Bogdalov and Sergei Kalinin’s recent remake of Repin’s 1903 monumental group portrait of the State Council, and several series of computer-generated photomontages in which the heads of the contemporary political elite are substituted for original heads of people depicted in well known classical paintings. All three projects took shape in the new century. All three use the same artistic method of retrofitting post-Soviet celebrities of various calibers in familiar visual narratives of earlier periods. All three represent a tendency that could be easily traced in other fields of post-Soviet cultural production.³²

The visual nature of these art projects helpfully reveals the fact that nostalgic borrowings are attractive first and foremost for the framing effect that they could successfully deliver. Often this framing capacity of nostalgic shapes is understood quite literally—incarnations and impersonations provide stylistic presence for those who have not yet produced a recognizable symbolic structure of their own.³³ Functioning as visual templates, retroframeworks offer a recognizable outline without suggesting an obvious ideological strategy of its interpretation.

³⁰Kabanova, “Ves’ Parfenov.” See also Alla Sytova et al., eds., *The Lubok: Russian Folk Pictures, 17th to 19th Centuries*, trans. Alex Miller (Leningrad, 1984).

³¹See, for example, Stephen Norris, “Tsarist Russia, Lubok Style: Nikita Mikhalkov’s *Barber of Siberia* (1999) and Post-Soviet National Identity,” *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television* 25:1 (2005): 101–18.

³²Contemporary Russian literature provides, perhaps, the most elaborate array of examples in this respect. Suffice it to mention two of the more interesting instances. In 2001 Zakharov, a small but very successful Moscow publishing house that made its name by publishing quality biographies, memoirs, and detective novels written by B. Akunin, started a new series named “The new Russian novel” (“Novyi russkii roman”). Three first publications in the series were Fedor Mikhailov’s *Idiot*; Lev Nikolaev’s *Anna Karenina*, and Ivan Sergeev’s *Fathers and Sons*. Closely following the plots and general structures of dialogues and descriptions of the Russian classics, these new versions of old novels drastically “updated” the original language as well as the professional occupation of main characters. For a discussion see M. A. Cherniak, “‘Novyi russkii’ kniaz’ Myshkin: K voprosy ob adaptatsii klassiki v sovremennykh usloviakh,” *Rossiiskaia massovaia kul’tura kontsa XX veka* (St. Petersburg, 2001), 187–99. Viacheslav P’etsukh’, *Plagiat* (Moscow, 2005), is another example of the same creative recycling of classical plots. In both cases it is the replication of the shape of the original narrative structure—accompanied by its simultaneous saturation with new elements—that makes the recycling artistically meaningful.

³³Symptomatically, Konstantin Ernst emphasized in his 2004 interview that *Old Songs About the Most Important* were motivated *not* by nostalgic feelings but by a sheer lack of good contemporary songs available to fill up the three-hour time slot usually allocated for the annual New Year show. See Mila Kuzina, “Konstantin Ernst: Nas ne dogoniat,” *Izvestiia*, July 22, 2004.

I argue that these nostalgic manipulations with ready-to-use frameworks and ready-to-wear signs have a lot in common with the linguistic efforts of aphasiacs described most notably by Sigmund Freud and Roman Jakobson. Symbolic limitations—first of all, the individual’s inability to match a particular meaning (the signified) with a unique graphic form (the signifier)—are compensated here by excessive exploitation of formal (“morphological” and “syntactic”) possibilities of available symbolic structures. In the absence of signs able to express new (post-Soviet) situations and new experience, old shapes are turned into sites of complex strategies of formal recycling.³⁴

PLACING (ART IN) PRODUCTS



FIG. 1 E. Rozhdestvenskaia. *Private Collection*: Pop singer Filipp Kirkorov as Peter the Great. Courtesy of the author.

In October 2002 downtown Moscow was pasted with posters depicting the omnipresent Russian pop singer Filipp Kirkorov. Known for his larger-than-life personality, in the poster Kirkorov remained true to his reputation. Impersonating young Peter the Great from an eighteenth-century lithograph, Kirkorov the Emperor invited potential viewers to attend an exhibit in the House of Photography, one of the most intellectually prestigious Moscow venues (fig. 1). For six weeks, the narrow sidewalk that led to the House of Photography in the old part of Moscow was occupied by crowds trying to see similar contemporary incarnations of old paintings presented by Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia in her photo-show *Private Collection*.

As critics unanimously agreed, the show was the most commercially successful exhibit in the six-year history of the House. During the first two weeks *Private Collection* attracted ninety-five thousand people, despite quite expensive tickets.³⁵ This popular acclaim did not stop

experts from making serious objections. Outraged by Rozhdestvenskaia’s attempt to populate high art with contemporary pop stars, Russian art-critics drew attention to the ethical dimension of this artistic approach. For instance, Liudmila Lunina, a leading Moscow art critic, cast the verdict: “From an artistic point of view ... all that is shown here is vulgarity

³⁴For details see my earlier attempt to use the concept of aphasia for the analysis of Russia’s sociocultural situation in the late 1990s, “In the State of Post-Soviet Aphasia: Symbolic Development in Contemporary Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52:6 (2001): 991–1016. See also Jonathan Crary, “Unbinding Vision,” *October* 68 (1994): 21–44, in which he uses the notions of aphasia and agnosia to analyze modernist paintings.

³⁵Sergei Shapoval, “Lakirovshik deistvitel’nosti,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, October 25, 2002.

beyond any limit or scale. ... One must completely lack all cultural sensitivity in order to be able to carry out—or even to envision—such a project.”³⁶

Some journalists discovered in Rozhdestvenskaia’s approach a post-Soviet modification of the genre of the official Soviet portrait. Often associated with Il’ia Glazunov and Aleksandr Shilov, powerful and prolific artists, the genre was known for its static, unimaginative, and flattering depictions of the political and artistic *nomenklatura*. Rozhdestvenskaia’s recycling of visual narratives of old paintings for framing today’s celebrities was perceived as an exercise of crude flattery, seemingly inspired by a desire to equip Russia’s *nouveaux riches* and newly famous with signs of unearned respect. As one observer put it, “with minimal time and money, Rozhdestvenskaia managed to transform masterpieces of Rafael and Durer, Repin and Somov, Goya and Vrubel’, into Shilov and Glazunov.”³⁷

Apart from the ostensible disregard for the cultural hierarchy exhibited by *Private Collection* (high art vs. meretricious pop culture), the predominantly negative reception of *Private Collection* on the part of journalists and art critics was also caused by Rozhdestvenskaia’s obvious and deliberate transgression of institutional borders. Before two hundred photos from *Private Collection* were enlarged and printed on canvases for display in the Moscow House of Photography, many of them appeared in smaller formats as cover art and illustrations for *Karavan istorii*.

Started in 1995, this magazine aims mostly at a female audience (although about 30 percent of its readership are reportedly men), competing for the same customers as do Russian versions of *Cosmopolitan*, *Burda*, *Glamour*, or *Elle*.³⁸ Unlike many of its Western rivals, *Karavan* is owned by the Russian company Sem’ dnei, which is a subsidiary of the giant energy conglomerate *Gazprom*.³⁹ Every month *Karavan* publishes more than 300,000 copies, and with 1.9 million readers it is steadily the second most profitable glossy monthly in Russia (exceeded only by *Cosmopolitan*, with 3.3 million readers).⁴⁰

Karavan’s quick success, as the influential Russian business-weekly *Ekspert* put it, has to do with its never-ending supply of the “idyllic-romantic” version of celebrity gossips and biographical exposé of international and Russian stars.⁴¹ A single issue can easily combine a lengthy story about uneasy relations between Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre with a dramatized rendition of the complicated life of Liubov’ Orlova, a major film star of the 1930s–1950s. In another issue, a “love story” (titled in English) told by the widow of Mikael Tariverdiev, a famous composer of soundtracks for major Soviet

³⁶Liudmila Lunina, “Domokhoziaikiny zabavy,” *Vedomosti*, October 21, 2002.

³⁷Faina Balakhovskaia, “Esl’ na kletke slona napisano ‘tigr,’ ne ver’ glazam svoim,” *Vremia novostei*, October 10, 2002.

³⁸TNS Gallup Media as quoted in *Auditoria ezhemesiachnogo zhurnala “Karavan istorii,”* March–July 2006 (available at http://www.7days.ru/www.nsf/All/_Advert_Karavan_audit.html); and, for example, Tat’iana Romanova, “Reklamnyi khod *Elle*,” *Vedomosti*, August 22, 2005.

³⁹See, for example, Konstantin Vorontsov, “Reklama na radio stoit slishkom deshevo,” *Kommersant-Daily*, October 29, 2003.

⁴⁰Romanova, Reklamnyi khod *Elle*.” See also N. A., “On a Caravan Journey to Success,” *HANSAPRESS 2* (2003) (available at http://www.hansaprint.fi/eng/asiakas/nayta.asp?p=caravan_istoriy.html).

⁴¹Anastasia Deduikhina, “Pereglamur i nedoglianets,” *Ekspert*, May 16, 2005 (available at <http://www.expert.ru/printissues/expert/2005/18/18ex-woman1/print>).

blockbusters, could be tacitly offset by a special section called “Duke Ellington and His Women.”⁴²

Karavan purposefully stays away from publishing fashion ads; nonetheless, it provides an elaborate spectacle by relying almost exclusively on Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia’s visual projects. The unusual frameworks and settings of her photography offer a necessary contrast with the rather conservative choice of stories published in *Karavan*. Since 2000 each issue of the magazine has been presenting dozens of pages of her photographic experiments; by the end of 2004 the number of published portraits exceeded one thousand. In December 2004, when opening Rozhdestvenskaia’s second major exhibit, Ol’ga Orlova, *Karavan*’s editor-in-chief, jokingly recognized the importance of Rozhdestvenskaia’s input for the magazine: “Our monthly magazine has a very good possibility of becoming a weekly, due most of all to the industriousness of Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia.”⁴³

By displaying her *Collection* in the dilapidated halls of the House of Photography, known for its brainy and utterly noncommercial exhibits of Rodchenko and alike, Rozhdestvenskaia not only crossed stylistic and sociogeographical boundaries but also vividly expanded the territory of the commercially driven cultural production. This expansion, however, came with a price: merging (computer) design with art, Rozhdestvenskaia left no room for the aesthetic and moral autonomy with which art objects (and art subjects) have been associated for so long.⁴⁴ From this point of view, Moscow critics’ perception of *Private Collection* as an example of “vulgarity beyond any limit” is not dissimilar from rebukes caused by *The Art of the Motorcycle* (1998) and *Giorgio Armani* (2001) presented at the Guggenheim Museum or *Chanel* (2005) exhibited at the Met. Heavily promoted products of mass consumption are hardly in need of the academic clout that fine art galleries and museums tend to provide. More importantly, as critics maintain, by displaying commercial objects in their halls, museums increasingly blur the line between art collections and product placements.⁴⁵ Yet despite all the critical responses, Rozhdestvenskaia steadily pursued her goal, albeit with some modifications: her 2004 continuation of *Private Collection* was displayed in the Gallery of Arts, sponsored by President of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts Zurab Tseretelli, known for his passion for flashy artistic gestures.⁴⁶

THE PAST AS PASTICHE

Until she began experimenting with a camera and Photoshop software, Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia, a daughter of a famous Soviet poet and the wife of the CEO of the company that produces *Karavan*, worked as a translator of W. Somerset Maugham, John Steinbeck, John le Carré, and Sidney Sheldon. It is tempting to see in this earlier professional

⁴²See a recent issue of *Karavan istorii* at <http://www.karavan.ru/Karavan.nsf/Karavan/Karavan.html>.

⁴³Iadviga Zhuk, “Chastnaia kollektsiia,” *Itogi* (December 14, 2004): 98.

⁴⁴See Foster, *Design and Crime*, 100–101.

⁴⁵See, for example, Michael Kimmelman, “Art, Money, and Power,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2005; and Mark Honigsbaum, “McGuggenheim?” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2001.

⁴⁶See, for example, Veronika Chernysheva, “V vostorge ot sebja,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, December 10, 2004.

activity the roots of Rozhdestvenskaia's current attempts to "render" the world's visual masterpieces into a language easily accessible to the Russian mass audience. Yet in multiple interviews that followed the first exhibit, Rozhestvenskaia linked her inspiration for the project with a desire to create a new type of the magazine cover—a cover-girl "with some past," as she explained it.⁴⁷ Her artistic method seemed to emerge spontaneously. One of Rozhdestvenskaia's friends reminded her of Zinaida Serebriakova's self-portrait *At the Dressing Table* (*Za tualetom*, 1909). Struck by the facial resemblance, Rozhdestvenskaia decided to reenact the painting and then to photograph it. The facial resemblance of the original and a current model was reinforced by the meticulous restoration of the environment depicted in the reproduced painting. As Rozhdestvenskaia explained it, "I combed one antique store after another, buying up lotion jars and beads so that everything [in the photograph] would match [the painting] exactly, to the very last millimeter."⁴⁸ While



Figs. 2 and 3 E. Rozhdestvenskaia. *Private Collection*. The pop singer Alexander Buinov as Orest Kiprenskii's Pushkin (1827) and pop singer Alsu as Natalia Lanskaia, Pushkin's wife (from Alexander Briullov's portrait, 1831). Courtesy of the author.

mimetically reproducing distinctive objects, Rozhdestvenskaia at the same time drastically reduced the overall complexity of original paintings; she simplified the portraits' backgrounds and got rid of accessories that seemed redundant. By singling out a limited number of "interpreting" details in order to represent the whole—"the method of Luminous Detail," as Ezra Pound called it—Rozhdestvenskaia approached old portraits as sets of visual clues, whose material reproduction could ensure the recognition of the portraits themselves.⁴⁹ Pound's Luminous Details, in other words, function here as "patterned integrities": even

⁴⁷Shapoval, "Lakirovshik deistvite'nosti," 13.

⁴⁸Balakhovskaia, "Esli na kletke slona napisano 'tigr,'" 1.

⁴⁹Ezra Pound as quoted in Gallagher Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, 2000), 15.

when taken out of their primary context such fragments still retain the overall effect of the original whole (figs. 2 and 3).⁵⁰

The initial reenactment seemed to be successful, and a hobby was quickly transformed into an artistic method: isolated photos were followed by several thematic series (*Associations; Fantasies, Brothers and Sisters, and The Twentieth Century*). The original *Private Collection* displayed in the House of Photography was expanded and eventually turned into a popular show. Periodically updated, the show still travels around the former Soviet Union.⁵¹

In the process of this commercial development the method of the Luminous Detail was somewhat transformed, too. Ironically, celebrities’ *own* faces became less and less crucial for anchoring the reproduced portraits. Increasingly, *Private Collection* acted as “an abstract machine of faciality” that used famous personalities as a screen on which recognizable faces and facial traits of the past could be distributed and organized.⁵² Mundane “jars and beads” that initially were expected to reinforce the effect of facial resemblance became more prominent instead.

When selecting and recreating details of the original painting in order to achieve the effect of visual verisimilitude, Rozhdestvenskaia—perhaps unwillingly—followed the approach that the Italian Giovanni Morelli developed in 1874–76 in order to establish the authenticity of old paintings. As Morelli insisted, neither the overall impression of the painting, nor its documented history could sufficiently distinguish between an original painting and a copy. Instead of focusing on the most conspicuous features of a painting (for example, a face), which are limited and therefore relatively easy to mimic or forge, Morelli suggested that one should pay attention to “trifles” that would be least affected by the creative style that the artist is interested in cultivating.⁵³ Morelli convincingly demonstrated that such usually overlooked details as fingernails, earlobes, or drapery are executed *routinely* in paintings, however, they retain the expressive idiosyncrasies of the master and provide crucial evidence for establishing the authenticity of the painting.⁵⁴ At the same time, because of their narrative marginality these elements somewhat escape stylistic pressure and allow the painter (and a copyist) to execute them in a habitual, if not unconscious manner.

The representational stability of the trivial (and the formal), in other words, was construed as a confirmation of the authenticity of the extraordinary. And in her similar obsession with “jars and beads” Rozhdestvenskaia, in fact, pointed to the same larger issue that Morelli tried to address: we tend to associate an object of art with the “general

⁵⁰For more see Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley, 1971), 152–53.

⁵¹The latest installment of Rozhdestvenskaia’s project was exhibited in spring 2006 in the Moscow House of Photography—as a part of its Photo-Biennale 2006. See the museum’s Web site, http://www.mdf.ru/festivals/fotobiennale/biennale2006/calendar_fb06/.

⁵²On faciality see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1987), 167–92.

⁵³For a discussion of the Morellian method see, for example, Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1989), 96–125.

⁵⁴As Morelli put it, “anyone who wants to study a painter closely must know how to discover these material trifles and attend them with care: a student of calligraphy would call them flourishes” (quoted in Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* [Evanston, 1985], 38).

impression” (*geistigen Inhalt*) that it produces. Yet usually it is precisely these minute and peripheral details that trigger our attention and structure our “intuitive” *overall* reception.⁵⁵

What I find significant for my general discussion here is the role that the repetition of these pedestrian fragments plays both in sustaining the formal structure of the visual narrative and in identifying its authenticity.⁵⁶ Not unlike *Ostalgie* products of daily consumption or *Old Songs*, these marginal yet crucial details of the painting help us understand why the past’s most striking features might not be the most revealing or even the most significant for people who try to reconnect with it. In order to retain its effect of authenticity, the “still grandeur” of the past must be propped up by animated bits and pieces.⁵⁷

In *Private Collection*, the material reproduction of original “trifles” in many cases was also supplemented by computer-simulated background effects. By locating a well-known Russian star within the frame of a well-known artistic masterpiece, Rozhdestvenskaia doubly enhanced the effect of recognition. Amalgamating in space and time two recognizable images, she supplied a necessary historical backdrop for the post-Soviet celebrities and, simultaneously, popularized artistic masterpieces. The original painting did not just provide the photographer with clues for reconstructing environment—and the star—with a role model to emulate. Masterpieces also acted as visual prompters for the viewer, suggesting a trajectory of critical engagement: at the exhibit, as well as in the magazine, each photo was accompanied by a smaller reproduction of the original painting. The comparison of the source and its photographed incarnation was part and parcel of the show. The visual pleasure of the spectacle to a large extent came from one’s ability to register formal differences and similarities between the two artifacts, two periods, and two personas.

It is remarkable, however, that the public perception of the project predominantly did not accept its carnivalesque interpretation. Instead, visual affinity was seen as synonymous to authenticity; and it is precisely the failure of incarnations to completely match their originals that structured the dominant attitude to Rozhdestvenskaia’s *Collection*. The act of mimicry, in other words, was taken seriously. Rozhdestvenskaia explained one side of this dynamic:

As far as the [celebrities] go—sometimes they get so attached to their images that they don’t want to part with them. ... When I suggested the image of Proserpina [Greek Queen of the Underworld] to Tatiana Mitkova [a TV news presenter], she started reading about the character. She was getting ready for the photo session as if it was a test. Many come with such a deep knowledge about their picture that I have no answers to their questions.⁵⁸

What could have been an innocent masquerade joke turned into an earnest process of identification. Andrei Makarevich, a rock singer and a TV-show host, for instance, demonstrated that the game of visual doubling was a game only up to a certain point.

⁵⁵See Richard Wollheim, *On Art and The Mind: Essays and Lectures* (London, 1973), 180–81.

⁵⁶See Roland Barthes’s discussion of the metonymic power of *punctum* in his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1981), 41–60.

⁵⁷On “still grandeur” and “animated details” see Matthew Rampley, “From Symbol to Allegory: Aby Warburg’s Theory of Art,” *Art Bulletin* 79:1 (1997): 42.

⁵⁸Shapoval, “Lakirovshik deistvite’nosti,” 13.

Commenting on his impersonation of one of Durer's self-portraits, Makarevich said: "I have known [for quite some time] that I resemble Durer; and [Rozhdestvenskaia's team] was correct in choosing this painter for me; but this particular self-portrait I picked myself" (fig. 4).⁵⁹

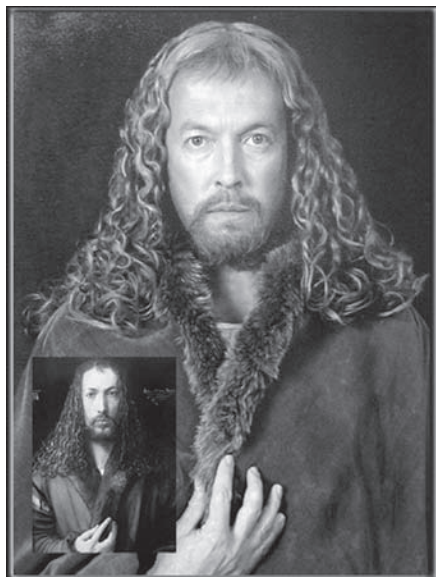


FIG. 4 E. Rozhdestvenskaia. *Private Collection*. The rock singer Andrei Makarevich impersonating Durer's *Self-Portrait* (1500). Courtesy of the author.

A lack of playfulness on the part of the "doubles" was paralleled by reviewers. In this case, the photographer's attempt to follow the original as closely as possible was perceived as jarring and crass. For critics, this literal loyalty to the *form* of masterpieces appeared to obscure the *messages* that each of these masterpieces implicitly conveyed. Replicating the logic of the antinostalgia critics, Lunina insisted that traumatic biographies of paintings—ignored by Rozhdestvenskaia—were an inseparable part of their perception:

The paintings that are used as the backdrop for this play ... they all have their own history, their own suffering, their own resistance, and their own impact on world progress. ... In principle, it would have been just fine had the photographer created a distance between her play and her attitude to this play. Say, by putting a cell phone next to Valentina Tolkunova, who impersonated a grand dame of the nineteenth century in the portrait. But there is no distance whatsoever. The photographer

and her heroes are playing a serious game of *la dolce vita* together, not without a certain ecstasy even (*v nekotorem dazhe upoenii*).⁶⁰

Lunina's search for materialized signs of Rozhdestvenskaia's attitude to her own method ("a cell phone next to the dame") is hardly new, of course. Such signs—just like Morelli's earlobes—are also signatures that reveal the hand of the master. Without them, even most meticulous reproductions have nothing in common with the transformative impulse that is usually associated with creativity. The absence of clear signs of added value of authorship in the incarnation, in other words, was perceived as perplexing not only because it blurred the distinction between the copy and the original but also because it obscured all traces of the efforts invested in these painstaking reproductions. The "seriousness" of the process of reproduction is not matched here by the seriousness of the overall purpose of the "game."

To frame it differently, the overwhelming loyalty to the original's *morphology*, which incarnations demonstrated, appears to have radically undercut the *semantic* possibilities

⁵⁹Ol'ga Kabanova, "Sostoialos' shou dvochnikov starykh geroev," *Izvestiia*, October 10, 2002.

⁶⁰Lunina, "Domokhoziaikiny zabavy."

that the original offers. In that respect, Rozhdestvenskaia's critics followed closely a long and well-established tradition among art critics of viewing overtly mimetic art projects with scorn. Exaggerated verisimilitude as an artistic device has been polarizing the general audience and the art experts ever since Madame Tussaud started exhibiting her waxworks in England in 1802. Popular with the masses, such exercises of the ultimate imitation (*verism*) were traditionally seen by professionals as devoid of any independent artistic contribution and, hence, as "the absolute end, the total negation of all that is vitally necessary to art."⁶¹

Symptomatically, when Rozhdestvenskaia decided to strip her celebrity models of all supporting garment and had them impersonate famous images of nudes for her project-calendar *Twelve Seasons*, she was confronted by the same reaction. Unwilling to take the project lightly, critics continued to look for historical authenticity, for a proper context or, at least, for some interpretative hints (fig. 5). Unable to



FIG. 5 E. Rozhdestvenskaia. *Twelve Months*. Many newspapers commented that the pop singer Oleg Gazmanov managed to impersonate two artifacts at once: Michelangelo's *David* (1500–1504) and Malevich's *Black Square* (1915). Courtesy of the author.

discern a clear trajectory of reading, one critic after another seemed to be baffled by the same dilemma: if the history of a particular style cannot be seen anymore as the ultimate source of categories of this style's appreciation, then *where* exactly could one find a new source of meaningful interpretative tools? "In order to provoke feelings or even associations, as Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaia likes to do, it is not enough just to have a good eye," complained one journalist, who summarized well this general refusal to accept the shift of interpretative responsibility from the producer onto the spectator that Rozhdestvenskaia's formal play suggested. "There must be a clear motivation that indicates for what purpose and for whom this particular woman decided to turn herself into an Eve" (fig. 6).⁶²

Few reporters did accept the rules of the game as offered. Instead of taking seriously the method and motivation, they took seriously the results, studiously comparing originals

⁶¹Heather Martiensen, "Madame Tussaud and the Limits of Likeness," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 20:2 (1980): 133. Trompe l'oeil, another extreme example of imitative art, was similarly scorned by critics, despite its incredible popular success. See, for example, Sybille Evert-Schifferer, "Trompe l'oeil: The Underestimated Trick," in *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting*, ed. S. Evert-Schifferer (Washington, 2003), 18.

⁶²Anzhelika Zaozerskaia, "Venery i madonny na luboi vkus," *Tribuna*, December 7, 2004.

and their incarnations. Several of them drew a list of photographs that managed to produce an effect of authenticity or an obvious lack of it. In some cases a lack of expected visual resemblance was perceived as a sign of discrepancies of a larger scale. Commenting on Gennadii Khazanov’s impersonation of Charlie Chaplin, one reporter drew the line at the famous standup comedian’s career: “If not for this project, who would have thought that Gennadii Khazanov had anything in common with Charlie Chaplin?”⁶³



FIG. 6 E. Rozhdestvenskaia. *Twelve Months*. The TV anchor Ruslana Pisanka as Peter Paul Rubens’ *Venus at a Mirror* (1615). Courtesy of the author.



FIG. 7 E. Rozhdestvenskaia. *Private Collection*. The cabaret actress Ludmila Gurchenko as Pablo Picasso’s *Absinthe Drinker* (1901). Courtesy of the author.

There were, however, several unanimously recognized successes. The list of these artistic “achievements” was hardly invigorating, though. It appeared that the technology of luster practiced by Rozhdestvenskaia failed to produce its glorifying effect. As a journalist from *Vremia novosti*, a liberal Moscow daily, somewhat caustically pointed out, Russian celebrities seem to be most convincing when they impersonated the least glamorous characters: “cheap vamps (this is why Alfons Muha’s paintings are used so often), simple peasants (hence, the Wanderers [*peredvizhniki*]), and drunkards (Picasso)” (fig. 7).⁶⁴

I think that Rozhdestvenskaia’s critics persistent attempts to see the flawed nature of these impersonations in their lack of relevant experience is not dissimilar from the antinostalgia scholarship. Both approaches are rooted in the same relentless belief that the form and its context of origin should be inseparable. Both employ the same symbolic disposition that equates the aesthetic object with a historical document. Of course, it is not authenticity as such that is at stake in this critique. Critics’ complaints about historical

⁶³Kabanova, “Sostoialos’ shou dvoinikov,” 2.

⁶⁴Balakhovskaia, “Esli na kletke slona napisano ‘tigr,’” 1.

insensitivity and amnesia of the original context ignore the fact that the “documentary” approach to paintings is a relatively recent phenomenon. For instance, in his fundamental study of the Russian icon Oleg Tarasov points out that between the sixteenth and early eighteenth century Russian religious art followed a similar (and widespread) artistic tendency—of the visual inhabiting of canonic forms. In this case sacral iconic “frames” were supplemented with contemporary faces: “official Moscow iconography began to depict real “portraits” of donators in icons.”⁶⁵ Catherine the Great demanded to depict herself in the image of St. Catherine on the iconostasis that she commissioned for the Assumption Cathedral in Vladimir. As a result, at the end of the eighteenth century and in the early nineteenth century icons with St. Catherine-cum-Empress became routine.⁶⁶

While critics’ attempts to present themselves as the ultimate guardians of the presumed “sacrality” of paintings might have shaped their negative attitude toward the retrofitted projects, I believe their vocal resistance had another important source. Appeals to the documentary aspect of art objects of the past, in fact, revealed the privileged status of a particular manner of their reading. Critics’ narrative interpretation tended to emphasize the importance of the story hidden or manifested in the painting. Correspondingly, they “normalized” their own ability to use the canvas as a visual index, as a frame of historical *references*, rather than as a framed visual object.

This exercise of a particular symbolic literacy, however, is possible at the expense of formal—in this case, spatial or chromatic—perception that the art object might produce.⁶⁷ The underlying message of these critics’ struggle for retaining authenticity is clear: if the appropriation of a historical symbol is to be successful, it must reproduce the original context of the symbol and original categories of its perception. Otherwise, symbols of the past can be brought to life *today* only in objectified, “archived” forms that set apart stylistic codes of the past and the present. Stylistic borrowings, in other words, must be referenced. The technique of appropriation must be demarcated. Ironically, this insistence on presenting the trace of appropriation *in* the reproduced image, this desire to discover narrative or visual quotation marks in a newly created text (say, an inserted cell phone), not only legitimizes the reproduction but also makes it obviously impossible. But, as Lunina correctly noticed, nothing like that was happening in *Private Collection*. Instead, the seriousness of the photographer and her models was enormously amplified by the seriousness of the professional and popular fascination with these displays of transformative mimicry.

BORROWED LANGUAGE

I find it is useful to approach the disregard for the original genealogy of borrowed artifacts demonstrated so clearly in *Private Collection* through the linguistic studies of aphasia, a language disturbance that demonstrates an inability either to select words that could match adequately the ideas or objects that an individual wants to name (“similarity disorder”) or

⁶⁵Oleg Tarasov, *Ikona i blagochestie: Ocherki ikonnoogo dela v imperatorskoi Rossii* (Moscow, 1995), 167.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 107.

⁶⁷See Roman Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, trans. Stephen Rudy (New York, 1992), 151. See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford, 1998), 102–4.

to combine words and signs into more complex constructions (“contiguity disorder”). While using terminology and methods of aphasia studies, I am far from suggesting that this verbal disorder causes the artistic projects and social conditions that I describe here. Rather, I am interested in tracing a particular tendency of symbol formation that appears to exhibit a structure similar to the aphasic ones.

More specifically, I argue that the projects discussed in this article are based on a particular interplay between associations by similarity (the metaphoric pole) and associations by contiguity (the metonymic pole). The difficulty with finding adequate signs for expressing new situations—“expressive aphasia,” in Jakobson’s terms—is compensated by extensive manipulations with available elements *within* adopted visual or textual borders (“ready-to-wear past”).⁶⁸ Elaborate rituals of *combination* of borrowed signs become the main condition and the main content of symbolic production. At the same time, the open-ended *selection* of new tools and materials is drastically diminished.⁶⁹

These two symbolic strategies (combination vs. selection), as Jakobson famously indicated, reflect two types of symbolic preferences. Selection disorder makes it impossible to rely on (poetic) metaphor as a device that links together two unconnected ideas or objects (for example, “Communism is the youth of the world”). This deficiency is often compensated by signification of the metonymic type that emphasizes functional or spatial proximity and tends to privilege constitutive parts instead of the overall framework (“The Communist party is the vanguard of the working class,” for instance). As a result, as Jakobson put it, in the metonymic type of symbolic production, the individual’s narrative usually “digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the character to the setting in space and time.”⁷⁰ Luminous details and animated fragments emerge as the main descriptive device that dominates the usage of overarching concepts or abstract frameworks.⁷¹ Without going into details, let me offer an example that epitomizes the essence of the approach.⁷²

⁶⁸Roman Jakobson, “Aphasia as a Linguistic Topic,” in his *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, *Word and Language* (The Hague, 1971), 234.

⁶⁹In his *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu uses a structurally similar concept of the “hysteresis of habitus” to describe situations in which people rely on categories of perception and conceptualization that are radically out of synch with their current status or lifestyle. While the individual’s actual practices could be determined by new forms of economic or political capital, the perception and evaluation of these practices might be still determined by the attachment to anachronistic symbolic skills and value qualification systems (*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice [Cambridge, MA, 1984], 142). For a discussion of the hysteresis effect in post-Soviet conditions see Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika* (Ithaca, 1997), 188.

⁷⁰Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” in R. Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague, 1956), 92.

⁷¹See, for example, Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria, “Tool and Symbol in Child Development,” in *The Vygotsky Reader*, ed. Rene van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner (Oxford, 1994), 112.

⁷²For detailed discussion on different types of aphasia see Jakobson’s classic “Two Aspects of Language.” See also R. Jakobson and Krystyna Pomorska, *Dialogues* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 25–35. For the role of aphasia studies in understanding the symbol and symbolization see, for example, Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 4 vols., trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, 1953–96), 3 (*The Phenomenology of Knowledge*):202–15. See also Rachelle Doody, “Aphasia as Postmodern (Anthropological Discourse),” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47:3 (1993): 285–303. For a history of aphasia studies see Valerie Greenberg, *Freud and His Aphasia Book: Language and the Source of Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, 1997); and John Forrester, *Language and the Origin of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1980).

In 1972 the Soviet psychologist Alexander Luria published a small book called *The Man with a Shattered World*. The book was structured as a set of Luria's comments on notes of his patient, Lev Zasetky, written over the course of twenty-five years. Zasetky's brain was damaged during World War II. Having lost most of his memory, as well as his ability to write and to read, the man suffered from aphasia. He was incapable of expressing himself, of putting his experience and his thoughts in any symbolic form. Slowly, some of his symbolic abilities were recovered, and his notes demonstrate how it happened. To quote from one entry:

The purpose of my writing is to show how I was struggling to restore my memory which was wounded by the bullet. ... I am very patient, I can wait for a long time until a necessary word emerges from the depths of my head... I immediately write this word down on a piece of paper. Then—another one. But if nothing comes from my memory, I listen to the radio and write down the words that seem to be appropriate or necessary. Later, I use all these collected words to build a sentence, and I compare this sentence with similar phrases or sentences from a book, or from a radio show. When the sentence is modified to a necessary degree, I finally write it down in my notebook.⁷³

Limited by its scope, the search for a right word is, in fact, an act of symbolic retrofitting. No approximation would work, hence synonymy, metaphor, or allegory make little sense. To produce a meaningful effect, the missing fragment (word) must come as ready-to-use object and fit exactly into the allocated slot. It is also important that an incredible difficulty with selecting an “appropriate or necessary” word was accompanied here by an unceasing effort to assemble sentence structures and to compare them with already existing phrases. Searching in the form of “waiting” is counterbalanced by writing perceived as syntactic mimicry: replication of ready-made forms is construed as the only model of meaningful activity.

The example helps to illuminate the structure that underlies various strategies of symbolic appropriation. Not unlike Zasetky's verbal exercises, Rozhdestvenskaia's *Private Collection* is a type of symbolic production that makes extensive use of structures “borrowed” from a particular “radio.” Perceived metonymically, as a network of spatial clues, these visual structures are slowly inhabited—step by step, sign by sign, jar by jar. This symbolic inhabiting of ready-made collections, however, is effective as long as it keeps intact the overall shape of the borrowed structure. And Rozhdestvenskaia is not alone in following this rule. The newly built Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow or recently finished Amber Room in the Katherine Palace in Tsarskoe Selo exhibit the same logic: painstaking reproduction of the external shapes of these signifiers of the past is called upon to hide in these *novodely* (newly made replicas) various current modifications of their internal structures.⁷⁴

The point of this cultural industry is not to create something *new*; nor is it to demonstrate the uniqueness of the author's relation to borrowed artifacts. Instead, what is revealed here

⁷³Aleksandr Luria, *Romanticheskie esse* (Moscow, 1996), 171. For a slightly different version see A. Luria, *The Man with a Shattered World*, trans. Lynn Solotarev (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

⁷⁴For more on *novodely* as a cultural strategy in Russia see, for example, Stanislav Safonov, “Komu nuzhno nepodlinnoe iskusstvo?” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, June 3, 2003.

is one’s ability to achieve a certain meaningful effect by “occupying” a recognizable form from the past.⁷⁵ It is not *self*-expression or authorial ambition that drive this form of symbolization. Rather, it is a combination of two structural aspects: the already mentioned lack of new expressive forms is reinforced here by perceived gaps in the historical landscape, which *novodely* are aimed to fill up. The main task of impeccably imitated old structures is to produce an already known and previously encountered effect of recognition, to evoke a shared experience, to point toward a common vocabulary of symbolic gestures.

These replicas do not have to be necessarily simplistic or aesthetically poor. The aphasic subject, as Jacques Lacan pointed out, “demonstrates complete mastery of everything articulated, organized, subordinated, and structured in the sentence.” Yet, as the psychoanalyst continues, employing his or her “enormous, extraordinarily articulate bla-bla-bla,” the aphasic “can never get to the heart” of what he or she has to say.⁷⁶ The successful populating of available structures, in other words, comes only at a price: for what this mimicry leaves out is precisely the historical specificity of cultural fields that made possible these structures in the first place. Liberated from their signifieds and referents, cultural symbols in the “original” and “remade” fields are reduced to their graphic shapes. Simultaneously, the fields themselves are turned into vast agglomerates of objects and images which could be appropriated as a “private collection” of sorts. Without a unifying logic, there are no distinctive “fields” to speak of. There are just objects to be picked up and combined with the already collected.

In this situation, subjectivity emerges as an outcome of manipulation with signs and objects for which one bears no authorship. As *Private Collection* makes it clear, this manipulation is built on conscious disregard of existing hierarchies of symbolic codes (“histories and biographies”), a disregard that makes the very project possible. The absence of an overall code—stylistic or ideological—is compensated by an order of a different kind. Hierarchy is replaced by the horizontal seriality: a repeated application of the same artistic method in time and space links newly made replicas together. Thus, in *Private Collection* the very act of impersonation is the only metadiscursive principle that unifies all retrofitted masterpieces; no other thematic or stylistic organization has been attempted. Seriality here is the seriality of superimposition of a stereotyped background with a stereotyped face. Its repetitiveness, and its fragmented, isolated nature, is structurally conditioned. For in this form of symbolization—as in any nostalgic reproduction in general—neither the artistic method nor the reproduced images can develop, and the project evolves as an expanding string of resuscitated images. Devoid of any definite anchor, this chain of signifiers has no internal logical closure, apart from exhaustion of its producer or a lack of financial support.

⁷⁵Mimetic *novodely*, however, should be distinguished from pastiches that produce creative representations of the past that did not but could have happened, such as Moscow’s *Café Pushkin* built in 2000 to look *exactly* like a nineteenth-century manor (settling cracks included), or some *detektivny* of Boris Akunin. For a discussion see, respectively, Anna Komleva, “Aleksandr Sergeevich ‘Pushkin’ kak zerkalo russkoi mental’nosti,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, March 10, 2000; and Elena Baraban, “A Country Resembling Russia: The Use of History in Boris Akunin’s Detective Novels,” *SEEJ* 48:3 (2004): 396–420.

⁷⁶See Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955–1956: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III*, trans. Russel Grigg (New York, 1993), 219–20.

In her more recent projects Rozhdestvenskaia has tried to find additional visual plots that could allow her to escape the organizing hegemony of a single artistic method. Symptomatically, the narrative logic that was supposed to provide a symbolic coherence in this case was the logic of temporal contiguity. In *The Twentieth Century* major Russian personalities—from Vladislav Tretiak, a hockey player, to Liudmila Gurchenko, a film and cabaret star, to Nikolai Tsiskaridze, a Bol'shoi Ballet soloist—were dressed up as stereotypical models from a particular time-period: the revolutionary 1910s (fig. 8), the decadent 1920s, the militarized 1940s (fig. 9), or the hippie 1960s, and so on.



FIG. 8 E. Rozhdestvenskaia. *The Twentieth Century*. The actress Ludmila Gurchenko and the Bol'shoi's dancer Nikolai Tsiskaridze imagining the 1910s. Courtesy of the author.



FIG. 9 E. Rozhdestvenskaia. *The Twentieth Century*. Talk show hosts Dmitrii Nagiev and Julia Men'shova in the 1940s. Courtesy of the author.

In the absence of ready-made frameworks of famous masterpieces, the effect of verisimilitude was achieved here through a thorough metonymic reproduction of material clichés of past

decades—a red kerchief, a signature military hat (*Budenovka*), or a typical military blouse (*gimmasterka*). In this aesthetic of temporal cross-dressing, recognizable elements of the daily life not only prop up, but also frame current pop stars.

However, the visual enframing provided by the props of the past is not the same as emplotment.⁷⁷ There is no story behind reproduced material clichés. Longing for the signifiers of the past has very little in common with longing for the past *experience*, glorious or otherwise. Rather, it is a desire to retain the stereotyped, “automatized perception” driven by the search to confirm the familiarity of the already familiar that determines the production of these period pieces.⁷⁸



But Rozhdestvenskaia is no Cindy Sherman, who in her *Untitled Stills* addressed and upset precisely this desire of the audience to be reminded about its knowledge of stereotypical visual plots. In Sherman’s case, the apparent

FIG. 10 Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #7*, 1978. Black-and-white photograph 10 in. x 8 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Metro Pictures.

familiarity of *Stills* was determined by predictable narrative possibilities that each photo visualized. The series consisted of a set of “possible scenes of imaginary films,” each of which depicted a woman (Sherman herself) in a “real” film pose (fig. 10). As if halting the film for a moment, every *Still* offered the viewer a point of entry into the unfolding

plot: the recognition of the narrative structure of the imaginary film was bound here with the spectator’s visual literacy.⁷⁹ However, unlike in *Stills*, it is not a familiar narrative

⁷⁷On emplotment see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), 5–11.

⁷⁸Shklovsky *Theory of Prose*, 7. In his classic study *Art and Illusion*, Ernst Gombrich captured well the mechanism that underlies perceptions of this kind. As the historian put it, “the individual visual information ... [is] entered, as it were, upon a pre-existing blank or formulary. And, as often happens with blanks, if they have no provisions for certain kinds of information we consider essential, it is just too bad for the information. ... And just as the lawyer or the statistician could plead that he could never get hold of the individual case without some sort of framework provided by his forms or blanks, so the artist could argue that it makes no sense to look at a motif unless one has learned how to classify and catch it within the network of a schematic form” (*Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* [Princeton, 1989], 73).

⁷⁹Verena Lueken, “Cindy Sherman and Her *Film Stills* – Frozen Performances,” in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Karel Schampers and Talitha Schoon (Rotterdam, 1996), 25. See also Amada Cruz and Elizabeth A. T. Smith, *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (Chicago, 1997).

structure that *The Twentieth Century* tries to bring out in the viewer. The aim of “possible scenes” in Rozhdestvenskaia’s spectacle is to highlight mimetic abilities of the depicted celebrities.⁸⁰ Hence, comparing celebrities’ usual images with their impersonations is a part of the game: Dmitrii Nagiev’s incarnation of the typical Russian intellectual of the war period could not be more removed from his more familiar role of an arrogant host of a tabloid talk show (fig. 9), while the actress Liudmila Gurchenko is more known for her flamboyant personality as a vaudeville diva rather than for her revolutionary stylistic austerity (fig. 8).

If Sherman managed to turn herself into a screen, displaying different personalities, precisely because no other stable identities could be associated with her, then *The Twentieth Century* appealed to the viewer’s ability to activate the *gap* between the impersonator’s artistic past and current incarnation. To some degree, Rozhdestvenskaia turned the tables on the critics of her *Private Collection*, who blamed her for historical insensitivity. Now it was the biography of the star (not the historical circumstances of the reproduced framing) that was important for the understanding of these time-specific *lubki*. In either case, however, the comparative aspect remains a key element for Rozhdestvenskaia’s projects. The analytic mode of viewing is imposed on her audience: forced to reveal differences and similarities between the original and its recent incarnation, the viewer must constantly oscillate between the two depicted time-frames. No larger story is articulated here, no palimpsest emerges in the process of the visual layering of famous paintings and pop stars. Instead, Rozhdestvenskaia’s projects activate the feeling of “familiarity” by providing holding ropes in the shape of properly restored details. The logic of recognition is rooted here in a double contiguity—first, between the original painting and its retrofitted version alongside it, and, second, between the impersonating celebrity and his or her “borrowed” props *in* the photograph.

Jakobson, again, might suggest a plausible explanation for this choice of symbolic trajectory. As the linguist put it, dependence on the metonymic detail often reveals the lack of a metalanguage that could make explicit one’s own coding practices. It is a lack of a viewpoint *outside the frame* from which both the speaking subject and his or her speech could be observed simultaneously.⁸¹ The distancing that could clear a space for a parodying, ironic, or critical self-reflection—the cell phone next to the nineteenth-century dame—implies first of all an ability to assume a position *in regard to* the dominant code.⁸²

It was precisely this ironic “outsidedness” that allowed the artists Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid to replicate stylistic gestures of Socialist Realism in their Sots art projects of the early 1980s without fully merging with the replicated style.⁸³ The effect of the visual familiarity with the Sots art painting’s syntax and morphology was subverted by internal

⁸⁰This aspect of Rozhdestvenskaia’s project was emphasized even more by the fact that some stars impersonated several, often radically different, portraits.

⁸¹Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language,” 81.

⁸²For a detailed discussion see Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana, 2000), 1–49.

⁸³For the original definition and discussion of Sots art see Zinovii Zinik, “Sots-Art,” in *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture*, ed. Alla Efimova and Lef Manovich (Chicago, 1993), 70–88.

discrepancies within this apparently homogeneous stylistic code. As *The Origin of Socialist Realism* demonstrates (fig.11), the scrupulous replication of visual conventions associated with the Romantic painting is undermined by the ideologically alien figure of Stalin. This



reading, of course, could be reversed, and depending on the approach, the figure of Muse might be seen as clashing with the overall message of the painting. What is significant for my discussion here is the

FIG. 11 Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. *The Origin of Socialist Realism* (from *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series), 1982–83. Tempera and oil on canvas, 72 in. x 48 in. Zimmerly Museum, NJ. Courtesy of the former Komar and Melamid Art Studio Archive.

semantic polyphony of Sots art, its inherent symbolic conflict between formally integrated but ideologically incompatible elements. It is precisely this polyphony that is largely absent in retro replicas.

In post-Soviet nostalgia, disruption of the replicated code, so typical for Sots art, is replaced by a similarly powerful desire to be faithful to the detail. No general narrative or style can yet harmonize or estrange

distinct symbolic fields linked together by nostalgic projects (for example, the *Cossacks* vs. *Old Songs*). No narrative frame yet can go beyond formal similarities in order to illuminate the internal logic that has produced resemblances between the reimagined past and the present in the first place. In this situation, decontextualization, with which postsocialist nostalgia is frequently charged, allows for the avoidance of unpleasant and unanswerable questions about aesthetic or political incompatibility of different styles (and periods). Also, and perhaps more important, it remains one of the very few available ways of keeping together parts of life that have been split by the dramatic post-Soviet changes and that have not yet been reconciled by existing discursive frameworks.

UNIFORMS AND SURCOATS

Rozhdestvenskaia’s method of glamorizing the post-Soviet present by repopulating the past quickly acquired political undertones. In the remaining part of this article I will look at other artistic projects that exhibit the same retrofitting logic in order to demonstrate how this politicization takes place. Despite obvious stylistic differences, aesthetic effects of these projects are similarly achieved through a repetitive reproduction of a borrowed language.

On October 23, 2002, three weeks after Rozhdestvenskaia opened her show in the Moscow House of Photography, the State Council, an advisory board to the President that includes selected governors, started its session in the Grand Kremlin Palace. The meeting had an unusual staging: in the middle of Georgievsky Hall there was a one-picture exhibit: a canvas by the realist painter Il'ia Repin. Commissioned by the tsar in 1901, *The Ceremonial Session of the State Council Conducted on May 7, 1901, the Day of the Centennial Anniversary of the Council's Establishment* was finished in 1903. The huge canvas—9m wide and 4m high—presented eighty-one state officials of prerevolutionary Russia.⁸⁴ The idea of bringing this artistic monster from the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg to display in the Moscow Kremlin was justified by the bicentennial (1801–2001) of the State Council. Describing the event, the news magazine *Kommersant-Vlast'* concluded that the genre of the group portrait of the Russian political elite died in the 1940s. Not without an ironic twist, the magazine asked what seemed to be a purely rhetorical question: “Will the current ceremonial exhibit of Repin’s classics inspire new life in this dead genre? Should we be waiting for new canvases depicting the State Parliament, the Collegium of the Ministry of the Interior or, say, the Board of the Russian Electric Grid Company?”⁸⁵

The answer came from an unexpected corner and in an unexpected form. In December 2002, Farid Bogdalov and Sergei Kalinin, two Russian artists, decided to replicate the Repin painting. Using the original visual arrangement, they replaced the now forgotten politicians of the previous century with the faces of the current political elite. The selection was done “democratically”: a special Internet site gave everyone a chance to pick a favorite politician from a list of fifteen hundred names. More than one thousand visitors took part in the voting, and eighty-nine figures were finally selected for the painting. Bogdalov and Kalinin contacted each finalist, requesting an introductory meeting and a photo session. Unlike Repin, who insisted on having a mandatory face-to-face forty-minute session for each character, the two artists realistically admitted that politicians would not have time to sit for the picture, and decided to rely on photo sessions only.⁸⁶ But even this modest request was declined by almost everybody. As the newspaper *Kommersant* revealed in 2005, only a handful of individuals agreed to be photographed by the artists.⁸⁷

The project was supported by several organizations (Moscow Museum of the Modern Art, One Work Gallery, Kolodzei Art Foundation, and Flora-Moscow Commercial Bank), and after two years of painting the canvas was finally exhibited—first in Moscow (September

⁸⁴See Ekaterina Barabash, “Aktual'noe politicheskoe iskusstvo: Spustia sto let rossiiskuiu elitu snova narisovali,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, September 17, 2004.

⁸⁵Vasilii Lepskikh, “Kholst, maslo i gruppa tovarishchei,” *Kommersant-vlast'*, November 2, 2002.

⁸⁶“Gospoda klassiki o sovremennikakh,” *Elita obshchestva* 22 (2006) (available at http://www.esj.ru/journal_archive/2006/maj_2006/gospoda_klassiki/).

⁸⁷Different sources indicate different names, however. In addition to two persons mentioned by *Kommersant* (the head of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Alexei II of Moscow and the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party Vladimir Zhironovskii), *Moskovskii komsomolets* reported that Gennadii Seleznev, the Chair of the State Duma until 2003, and Presidential Aide Sergei Iastrzhembskii also visited the studio for brief photo-sessions. See “Sovkom prodaet ‘Zasedanie Federal'nogo sobranii,’” *Kommersant—Weekend*, November 18, 2005; and Marina Ovsova, “Sergei Iastrzhembskii: ‘Zhenshchinam s Repinym ne povezlo,’” *Moskovskii komsomolets*, July 4, 2003.

2004) and later in St. Petersburg (February 2005).⁸⁸ Titled with the name of a nonexistent political body, *Session of the Federal Assembly* brought together a diverse group of politicians—from Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and Vladimir Putin to Egor Gaidar, Mikhail Khodorkovskii, and Boris Berezovskii.⁸⁹ There were several surprise appearances, too: the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the musician Mstislav Rostropovich, and the artist Zurab Tsereteli are in the picture, as are Bogdalov and Kalinin themselves (fig.12).



FIG. 12 Farid Bogdalov and Sergei Kalinin. *Session of the Federal Assembly*, 2004. Canvas, oil, 9 m. x 4 m. Courtesy of the Kolodzei Art Foundation.

During the Moscow show, Vladimir Zhirinovskii, an outspoken nationalist politician, offered his general description:

We politicians like this picture a lot. It reminds us of a glorious period. New reforms that the authorities are implementing are taking us back to what we had. The artists could convey pretty well the psychological mood of everyone. Only Ziuganov is far too well-fed and satisfied (*sytyi i dovol'nyi*). And our president, he looks as if he is thinking “*How should we live now?*” The painting should be included in textbooks. It reflects the whole period of modern history.⁹⁰

Co-creator Kalinin followed the same line of reasoning: “This is didactic material, in several years, people would learn from it who was making history in 2003 [in Russia].”⁹¹ Irina Khakamada, an active critic of Putin’s government, was less convinced about the didactic quality of *Session of the Federal Assembly*, even though she also was in the painting: “I am not familiar with these artists, but I can say for sure: our political leadership (*vlast'*) and the artists, who are so eager to please it, are suffering from a historical insanity (*istoricheskii*

⁸⁸For a review of the project see Natalia Kolodzei and Georgy Litichevsky, *Sergei Kalinin and Farid Bogdalov: Session of the Federal Assembly* (Highland Park, NJ, 2004).

⁸⁹Currently, the term Federal Assembly (*federalnoe sobranie*) is used to refer to the Russian Parliament, with its two chambers—the Duma and the Council of Federation.

⁹⁰Ul'iana Golovchenko, “Personazhi i originaly: Politiki prishli vzglianut' na sebja so storony,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, September 24, 2004.

⁹¹Quoted in Barabash, “Aktual'noe politicheskoe iskusstvo.”

marazm). ... Given the timing and the situation, it is hardly appropriate to portray in such a manner our worthless leadership that has totally lost the country (*proigralo stranu*).⁹²

The post-Soviet reincarnation of Repin's painting, obviously, is not that different from reincarnations in Rozhdestvenskaia's *Private Collection*. The symbolic object of the past provides a morphological frame and syntactic structure for a reproduction, but it can determine neither the content nor the perception of this replica. What the State Council project demonstrates, perhaps, more clearly is how intricate the adjustment of the internal structure of the reproduced frame is. The signifiers are not just borrowed from the "radio," so to speak; they are duplicated. However, these duplicates are not copies, they are examples of mimicry. That is to say, there are examples of an active formal integration of a new object/individual with the available background. The point of this transformative mimicry, as the retrofitting of Repin suggests, is to become a *part* of the visual landscape.



Jacques Lacan's discussion of mimicry explains much here. As the psychoanalyst pointed out, the purpose of mimicry is far from being adaptive. The effect of camouflage that mimicry produces should be taken literally—as an aggressive technique aimed to ensure “the inscription of the subject in the picture.”⁹³ The reproduction of

FIG. 13 Farid Bodgalov and Sergei Kalinin. A study for *Session of the Federal Assembly*. Canvas, oil. Courtesy of the Kolodzei Art Foundation.

signifiers of the past seems to be a necessary device through which an individual can be exposed to the gaze of the outsider in a situation where other symbolic frameworks or tools are unavailable or ineffective (fig. 13).

The painting also demonstrates an important evolution of public perception. As Bodgalov and Kalinin admitted, politicians' initial reaction to the idea of the remake was largely negative. The project was perceived as yet another example of Sots art doublespeak—at the expense of the politicians.⁹⁴ Yet the seriousness with which the painting was treated eventually changed this attitude completely. After its initial exhibit in Tseretelli's Gallery in Moscow, the painting was displayed in the Kremlin, and finally was auctioned in the *Metropol Hotel* in Moscow in November 2005. Nobody offered the asking price of \$1,000,000, but out of ninety-seven smaller studies and individual portraits, sixty-eight

⁹²Quoted in *Novye izvestiia*, September 17, 2004.

⁹³Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1981), 99.

⁹⁴“Gospoda klassiki o sovremenniki.”

were sold very quickly (two small portraits of Putin were sold for \$48,000).⁹⁵ What started as an oversized postmodern joke was turned into a relatively profitable “new Russian realism.”⁹⁶

And not only Russian. The Moscow artist Nikas Safronov, responsible for flooding book stores and state offices all over the country with reproductions of his official portrait of Vladimir Putin, recently publicized a new project called *The River of Times*. The series includes about three dozen portraits of “distinguished contemporaries” (*vydaiushchiesia sovremenniki*): from George Bush, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Madonna to the film director Nikita Mikhalkov, a leading minister, Sergei Ivanov, and President Vladimir Putin.⁹⁷ All of them are depicted as real or mythical heroes of the past—kings, queens, nobility, warriors, or religious hierarchs (fig. 14).



FIG. 14 Nikas Safronov. A portrait of V. V. Putin in a costume of Napoleon, 2006. Fragment. Canvas, oil, 80 cm x 60 cm. Courtesy of the author.

⁹⁵See Ekaterina Barabash, “Presidenta kupili za 48 tysiach dollarov,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, November 21, 2005.

⁹⁶“Sovkom prodaet ‘Zasedanie Federal’nogo sobrania,’” *Kommersant–Weekend*, November 18, 2005. See also an interview with the artists on Radio Svoboda, “K litsu li Vladimiru Putinu mundir Nikolaia Vtorogo?” August 23, 2003, *Radio Svoboda* (available at <http://www.svoboda.org/ll/cult/0803/ll.082303-1.asp>). In an interview with me on October 27, 2006, Natalia Kolodzei, the head of the foundation that was the primary agent for the project, assured me that all money from the auction went to a charity.

⁹⁷Olga Lounina, press secretary of the Nikas Safronov Studio, January 16, 2007 (personal communication). See also Nora FitzGerald, “Moscow Artists Strike a Rich Portrait Vein,” *International Herald Tribune*, November 27, 2006.

In some cases, this art of retrofitting is used to visualize a more pointed political commentary. Over the last fifteen years the Moscow artist Andrei Budaev has been creating several series in which he modifies digitized images of world masterpieces to fit faces and figures of Russian politicians. For instance, in his *Returning to the Kremlin* (2000), Budaev not only updates the original, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Rembrandt (1669), with Boris Yeltsin as the father and Anatoly Chubais as the prodigal son (returning to the Kremlin after being fired), he also offers the modified image as a mirror of sorts—with the usual permutation of the left and the right (fig. 15). Satirical and grotesque, Budaev's art is usually framed within the genre of caricature, and has no pretense of achieving any physical or stylistic resemblance to the original.⁹⁸ Yet, as all the other projects discussed here, Budaev's approach indicates the same desire for a familiar *form*, for a *frame*, for a certain recognizable *structure* within which the individual's presence could acquire some meaning.



My last example shows how this practice of self-inscribing in recognizable visual narratives of the past may be realized on a mass scale. In this case the metonymic appropriation of historical detail, pioneered by Rozhdestvenskaia, is combined with the desire of local elites for a dignifying symbolic setting.

FIG. 15 Andrei Budaev. *Returning to the Kremlin*, 2000. Canvas, print, 100 cm x 150 cm. www.budaev.ru. Courtesy of the author.

In the summer of 2004 several TV channels and popular newspapers covered an exhibit of work by Mikhail Fel'dman, an artist from Nizhnii Novgorod. The creative approach of the artist is simple: he produces portraits of contemporary “VIPs in a historical environment of choice.”⁹⁹ Most of Fel'dman's patrons were local bureaucrats. For instance, Serguei Kirienko, the envoy of the President in the region at the time, picked for his portrait the uniform of a Hungarian cornet of the nineteenth century (after reviewing seven other options, a portrait of Bonaparte included).

In an interview Fel'dman described the main difficulty of working with his clientele: “They ask for more state decorations (*ordena*), regalia, status. I would not name the names, but it happened. My exhibit was about to open, and a person would call and say: Give me a different uniform, give me totally different clothing. So, [because of that] I visited them

⁹⁸See <http://www.budaev.ru/index2.htm>.

⁹⁹See “Segodnia,” *NTV TV Monitoring*, June 4, 2004.

all and they all signed the agreement.”¹⁰⁰ One of the customers, the head of the regional Emergency Service, picked as his artistic environment Vasilii Perov’s *Resting Hunters* (*Okhotniki na privale*, 1871). The officer explained his choice: “First of all, this is my favorite picture. I even went twice to the Tretyakov Gallery to see it. Second, this is not for *Playboy* magazine, after all.” Some customers turned out to be more discriminate in picking their incarnation. Dmitry Birman, a local entrepreneur, was offered an image of Lieutenant Rzhevskii, a fictitious womanizer and a troublemaker from a joke cycle about the nineteenth-century aristocracy. Birman rejected the offer and picked instead Pushkin painted by Orest Kiprenskii (1827). The retrofitting of a famous image, however, required the image’s reformatting. As Birman put it: “Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin had very small feminine hands. And here you even could see that he had manicure, he had these long nails. So, I asked to cut the nails, as it were. Yes, I did. Because in the original the nails are much longer. [So I asked to cut the nails] and get rid of the manicure” (fig. 16).



From start to finish, it takes Fel'dman about two weeks to complete a portrait. Advertising the photo-designer, a local newspaper assured its readers that any head

FIG. 16 “I asked to cut Pushkin’s nails”: the businessman Dmitrii Birman inhabits Pushkin’s portrait. *Segodnia*, June 4, 2004. Courtesy of NTV Company, Russia.

can be “planted” on any shoulders—be it Ivan the Terrible or Mona Liza. All it requires is the client’s good photo and a certain amount of money. Depending on the size and quality of the paper, an individual “portrait-imitation in the historical setting” could cost from \$60 to \$200.¹⁰¹ The artist does collective portraits as well: his current project is Repin’s *Barge Haulers on the Volga River* (*Burlaki na Volge*), and the main heroes are deputies of the local parliament.¹⁰²

Fel'dman’s commercial know-how was quickly replicated in other places. In 2005, at least one souvenir store in Moscow’s Old Arbat tourist district offered the same service. Within several days any customer could have his/her image reproduced in a dignifying historical setting on a canvas (fig. 17).

While studies of aphasia provide some insights into understanding this peculiar post-Soviet investment in the language borrowed from the “radio” of the past, I want to suggest briefly two possible *formal* precursors of this aesthetic of retrofitting. One of them is sacred, the other profane, as it were.

The profane usage of ready-made visual structures is a kind of mass entertainment that is not Russia-specific. It can be seen in some tourist destinations over the world,

¹⁰⁰Ibid. See also “Kak stat’ marsianinom za tysiachi baksov,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda v Nizhnem Novgorode*, April 9, 2004.

¹⁰¹*Komsomol’skaia pravda v Nizhnem Novgorode*, April 9, 2004.

¹⁰²“Segodnia,” *NTV TV Monitoring*, June 4, 2004.

Moscow included. For instance, on the same Old Arbat street in the summer of 2005 there were at least three Polaroid stations, each equipped with a photographer and an enlarged picture-cutout. Depicting sumo wrestlers, American cowboys, and a group of monkeys, the cutouts provided a ready-made visual context and a body image. Each

FIG. 17 Street advertising: “Photomontage on canvases,” 2005. Old Arbat St., Moscow. Author’s photo.

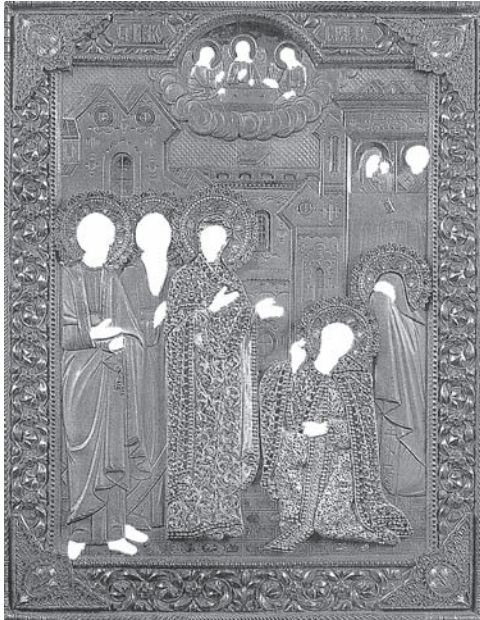
picture has one hole, to be filled up by the face of a wandering tourist (fig. 18). Located not far away from the souvenir store that offered photomontage on canvases, the cutouts silently pointed toward the popular roots of the digital technology of visual retrofitting.

The second, sacred, precursor reveals a possible origin of the glorifying effect with which current cutouts are often associated. Scholars of the Russian icon have convincingly demonstrated that a strong striving toward the “semantic of luster,” so typical for Russian



FIG. 18 Cutout on the Old Arbat, Moscow, 2003. Author’s photograph.

religious life in general and iconography in particular, was often realized through elaborate techniques of decoration.¹⁰³ Gold, silver, and precious stones were supposed to emphasize the association of the sacred with light and enlightenment (*prosvetlennost*). Wooden icons were often adorned with *basma*, a thin sheet of *repoussé* metal (mostly silver) as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries.



With time, the decorative details evolved into something else. The actual painting was marginalized and fragmented. Instead, the *basma oklad*, the decorative silver or metal cover (“surcoat”), visually dominated the religious art-object. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries *oklady*

FIG. 19 Icon *Oklad*, 1910, Moscow. The Andrei Rublev Museum, Moscow.

were even used as facades that hid half-painted icons produced for a mass audience.¹⁰⁴ Fixed in metal, general outlines left uncovered only few spaces reserved for faces, hands, and feet. Cutouts of sorts, they radically minimized the artist’s input, strikingly resembling the secular technology of luster so successfully popularized by *Rozhdestvenskaia* later (fig. 19).

Different as they are, these two precursors, nonetheless, rely on the same technique: the ready-to-wear visual frame—be it *basma* or cutout—offers a visual template that turns into a completed picture when populated by somebody. Simultaneously providing a shape and a way of updating it, this stencil art demonstrates, once again, that the “content,” the “form,” and the “context” are not automatically linked. Similarly, as I have been suggesting throughout this article, it is a mistake to associate the postsocialist poetics of nostalgic clichés exclusively with ideological or historical reminiscences that they might bring with them. Instead, we might also see in these retro-projects a particular way of compensatory (aphasic) signification: borrowed languages, frames, and images reveal first of all a peculiar post-Soviet stylistic block, a particular expressive deficiency of postsocialism.¹⁰⁵ The fragmentation of the relatively homogenized field of Soviet cultural production and the radical multiplication of interpretative strategies that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union have not automatically erased the feeling of shared symbolic experience that had

¹⁰³Tarasov, *Ikona i blagochestie*, 77.

¹⁰⁴See Vera Beaver-Bricken Espinola, “Russian Icon: Spiritual and Material Aspects,” *Journal of American Institute for Conservation* 31:1 (1992): 20.

¹⁰⁵Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 229.

been cultivated by the Soviet culture industry. Nor has this post-Soviet polyphony produced an effective symbolic framework able to meaningfully integrate the Soviet and post-Soviet parts of one's biography.

Not unlike metal surcoats for Russian icons or tourist cutouts, nostalgic attempts to retain or resume the circulation of symbolic objects of the past are also determined by a striving for a recognized and a recognizable shape, for a set of automatized perceptions, and for a common repertoire of cultural references. In many cases this recognition is purely formal: revived or retrofitted forms bring with them no history. Nor do they determine the trajectory of their own reading. Signifiers of the past, they are turned into ready-made objects, able to produce an appearance of historic continuity and stylistic coherence within the limits of one's "private collections."

The retrofitting projects that I have examined here are not the only model of artistic expression in today's Russia. Yet the cultural logic that they reveal helps us understand why the *retrospective* longing becomes such a prominent feature of *postsocialism*. As my examples demonstrate, by activating old forms, by performing acts of transformative mimicry, and by inhabiting already existing structures, actors and authors of various incarnations achieved the same major goal—they become a part of a picture, an element in the symbolic environment that might have lost its original meaning but that still retains its familiarity.