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FORBIDDEN DANDYISM:
IMPERIAL AESTHETICS IN
CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

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Three words symbolise the beginning of the 21st century in Russia – oil, glamour and patriotism. The ambiguous slogan “Oil is Our Everything” (“Nefit Nashe Vsyo”), where “oil” has replaced the name of Russian national scald Alexander Pushkin in the classical slogan “Pushkin is Our Everything”, is printed on T-shirts in one of the latest collections of the most famous fashion designer in contemporary Russia, Denis Simachev. This fusion between fashion and national pride for a strong Russia is obvious not only in the world of design and art, but in the world of politics as well, in Putin’s party “United Russia”, for example. On the party’s website the fashions reports are at least as important as political analysis. According to historian and political analyst Andrey Fursov, this union between a contemporary corporate state and fashion reflects the death of traditional ideology and transformation of ideology into an administrative resource, on the one hand, and populist show or “catwalk of political dummies”, on the other (Fursov 2006, 52-57). In this development, which is common for the whole globalising world, the role of fashion, aesthetics and image in society and politics in the future can only grow.

Soviet Retro

This new wave of patriotism most often is expressed in images borrowed from Soviet times. Soviet retro, which in an eclectic way combines tradition and modernity, nostalgia and futurism, is the leading trend in contemporary Russian culture in general and fashion in particular. One of the last Russian issues of the quarterly journal *Fashion Theory: Dress, Body and Culture* was dedicated to fashion as a cultural phenomenon during the So-

viet period as well as an examination of the popularity of Soviet symbols in contemporary Russian culture.¹ The return to Soviet aesthetics, glorifying the Soviet past and reassessment of the Soviet period of history has become a massive phenomenon, which can be explained by different factors, for instance, the strengthened role of the state during Putin's terms as president, the need of seductive and mass appealing political imagery and, most importantly, the fact that the ruling elite is now dominated by representatives of the "last Soviet generation" (born between 1960-1970), who share late Soviet everyday life experiences, have common socio-political consciousness, and who, unlike their nomenclature or dissident fathers, do not think of Soviet in binary models (see Yurchak 2006).

There are a few different aspects of Soviet retro.² Soviet times are represented today on the one hand in soft nostalgic mood, as a time of comfort and elegance, pretty school uniforms, caviar and champagne, Yuri Gagarin and the Olympic Games of 1980, as we can see for example in Denis Simachev's collections or in the very popular collections of young pro-Kremlin designer 21-years old Antonia Shapovalova. On the other hand there is a "hard-core" nostalgia, where the Soviet period of Russian history is represented as the time of heroic and patriotic effort, as the time of participation and sacrifice for the cause, as the time of clear identity. Nostalgia for the sublime, which is rooted in terror and fear, for hierarchy and order is not exclusively a post-Soviet phenomenon. Fascination with neoclassical gigantism and monumentalism of the 1930s, which one can feel in the Moscow Metro or looking at the city's old and new architecture, goes hand in hand with archaisation, megalomania, violence and cult of the male body in American pop-culture, for example

1. *Fashion Theory: Dress, Body and Culture*, spring (3) 2007, Moscow.
2. I follow Linor Goralik and use the notion of "Soviet retro" as a mechanism of selection, simplification, temporal and ideological distancing from the object of "retroization". "Soviet retro" is a kind of game with symbols and historical facts and their interpretation, a history, which has gone through the *camp*-machine to become a product of mass culture, which can not deal with complex systems (see Goralik 2007, 13-32).

in blockbusters such as *Gladiator* and *300*, both of which enjoyed great popularity in Russia.

In this paper I would like to look closer into this second aspect of Soviet retro, which is not as well known as “soft” retro and has not yet been the object of academic research. I want to illustrate this trend, which in my opinion is the most interesting socio-cultural evidence of a desire for a new post-Soviet identity, by presenting the ideology and aesthetics of the leading Russian radical-conservative movement—*Neo-Eurasianism*—and the artists affiliated to this movement. Neo-Eurasianism offers a highly aesthetical imperial project, a “third way” project, an alternative to the mainstream ideological trends; the post-liberalism of those parts of the Russian elite who are now transforming Russia into a corporate state, and the nationalism of the opposition, the supporters of the idea of “Russia as nation-state”.

Rebirth of Imperial Conservatism

The entire spectrum of right-wing ideas has recently acquired political and media legitimacy in Russia. Words such as *nation* and *empire*, which were almost taboo only ten years ago, have become acceptable in the public consciousness. The cultural fad for ultra-radical movements is also quite clear, as explicitly politicized views enjoy popularity among the intelligentsia as well as the broad masses. In this respect the situation in Russia is not very different from the rest of the world, where diverse religious, nationalist or paranormal ideologies of salvation have been characterized as the principal ideological commodity of the twenty-first century. The rightist idea that was inhibited by the modern sees its historic chance in the postmodern situation, where success is synonymous with simulation and a feature of inert form, and it is that which is unrealized, unclaimed, misunderstood and unrecognized, that is most authentic and promising. As a phenomenon of the postmodernist age, imperial conservatism is an extremely eclectic and contradictory, motley amalgam of radicalism and traditionalism. The neoconservatives regard it as their mission to find or create a “re-enchanted milieu” to return authenticity to the world, and to get out of the “irresponsible

discourse” of postmodernism. In today’s blurred, amorphous world they are motivated by an active nostalgia for logos and hierarchy. Postmodernism on the other hand combines a suspicious or ironic attitude toward historical hierarchies and an intensive search for holiness outside existing power structures. The longing for the sacred and search for the noumenous are characteristic of the late modern as a whole, which has generated the pseudo-myths and pseudo-religions of sports, fashion, and consumerism. The homogeneity and neutrality of profane space cannot but arouse a desire for the sacred, and rationality leads to irrationality and attempts to break out of subjective isolation. As Russian theologian Tatiana Goricheva puts it, “the process of leveling and smoothing out all differences was naturally bound to make philosophers once again yearn for hierarchy, differentiation, and the Other” (Goricheva 1991, 11).

In the opinion of conservative ideologists, the new empires should be neo-archaic. This is the archaism not of the Russian avant-garde, however, but of the postmodern, where the modernist utopias have already been deconstructed and almost eliminated (Nietzsche’s “convalescent”). In contemporary art and literature, recourse to the imperial theme usually includes elements of ambiguity, eclecticism, irony, play, and a certain coyeness, but these techniques are necessary steps toward a new seriousness and positive spirit. As in late conceptualism, the aesthetics of conservative postmodernism “flicker”, and it is not always clear what is sincere and what is a parody. Neoconservatism aspires above all to restore the future and to design tradition and a new national myth. In a Russia disappointed in the reforms of the 1990s, today as never before there is a tendency to oppose Western rationalism and a new wave of interest in tradition-oriented discourses such as slavophilism, pre-revolutionary Russian conservatism, and European traditionalism. Neoconservatism opposes Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the “end of history”, which postulates that the “movement of meanings” will cease in the era of triumphant liberalism. It proposes to find a way out of the stagnation of post-history, return metanarratives buried by postmodernism, and formulate new

meanings and new Great Projects that will once again set Russia on her accustomed path of ideocracy.

The movement of Neo-Eurasianism, founded by the philosopher and public figure Alexandr Dugin (b. 1962) in the late 1980s and early 1990s may be regarded as one of the most prominent intellectual movements, which provides new ideas and concepts for the neoconservative camp³. Its philosophical sources include classic Eurasianism, the Western geopoliticians Friedrich Ratzel, Halford Mackinder, Alfred Mahan, and Karl Haushofer, European criticism of the Enlightenment Project as represented by René Guenon's traditionalism, the Conservative Revolution movement in Germany,⁴ the French poststructuralists, and the European New Right. Dugin is known outside Russia as a geopolitician and the author of the widely discussed 1997 book *Osnovy geopolitiki* (*The Basics of Geopolitics*). Today Neo-Eurasianism is not merely an intellectual but also a social and political movement, and it became a party in 2002. Works by Dugin enunciating the neo-Eurasian worldview and political program include *Misteriia Evrazii* (*The Mystery of Eurasia*, 1989), *Osnovy evraziistva* (*The Basics of Eurasianism*, 2002), and *Proekt Evraziia* (*The Eurasia Project*, 2004). He is the founder of the think-tank *Arctogaia* and together with writer Yuri Mamleev, poet Evgenii Golovin, and philosopher Geidar Dzhemal the open *New University*.⁵ Since 2005 he has been hosting the television program *Vekhi* (*Landmarks*) on the Orthodox channel *Spas* (*Savior*).

This ideological current is aspiring to the role of opposition to the official “liberal” postmodernism that became mainstream in the 1990s. Dugin distinguishes two tendencies in the culture of

3. On Neo-Eurasianism and Dugin's activities see Mark Sedgwick (2004); Sergei Prozorov (2004); Marlène Laruelle (1999 and 2001).
4. See Armin Mohler (1989); Jeffrey Herf (2002); Martin Travers (2001); and Roger Woods (1996).
5. The *New University* is a continuation of Yuri Mamleev's famous underground salon in Iuzhinskii pereulok, where during the 1970s Russian intellectuals discussed forbidden topics such as alchemy, medieval esotericism, dandyism and mannerism, black fantasy, and experimental music. Dugin was a member of this circle. See also the interview with Mamleev in Ljunggren and Rotkirch (2008).

the postmodern period: the *hypermodern*, which continues rather than overcomes the modern, and the *turned* or *refaced premodern*, which represents a reevaluation of everything that modernism discarded and is a re-archaization of modernity. Neo-Eurasianism and the imperial discourse are completely contained within the second of these paradigms, which Dugin, after Jean Parvulesco calls "le retour des Grands Temps" (Dugin 2005, 459). According to Dugin, postmodernism must be reborn and become conservative, i.e. active. The ambiguity, elusiveness, and irony of the liberal hypermodern corrupts and levels all positions that actively propose *something*. Neoconservatism cannot agree with a world that denies energetic, positive action:

Active postmodernism is the radical antithesis of post-history, the active dissolution of the existing System, the loud and triumphant declaration that its center is a void. Instead of remaining coquettish, superficial, titillating, and playful and claiming to be eternal, this void must open up as the void of the bottomless mine crater of ontological annihilation. (Dugin 2005, 433)

Unity in Diversity

Not the least of the reasons why neoconservatives sharply reject the democratic and egalitarian Western model of development is that in their view it leads to the death of culture, while democracy dries up the vital wellspring of diversity and consequently of art as well. Thus neoconservative anti-Americanism, which continues the, to Russia, traditional negative view of liberal democratic Europe, should be regarded in an ontological perspective as a critique of Western culture, which by equalizing and leveling all differences destroys life itself. The neoconservative empire of *flowering complexity* is regarded as an alternative to the technocratic empire of American equalizing globalism. The principal figure of the diversity discourse in the Russian tradition is Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891), the "Russian Nietzsche." Among the central concepts of neoconservatism is

Leontiev's "flowering complexity" described in his 1875 essay *Byzantinism and Slavdom* ("Vizantizm i slavianstvo") as unity in diversity and the pinnacle of organic social development:

In the beginning everything is simple, then complicated, and then it is once again simplified, becoming internally equalized and mixed, and then it becomes even more simple as parts fall away and there is a general decomposition, until it all passes into an inorganic "Nirvana" . . . (Leontiev 2005, 379)

State organisms and entire world cultures are subject to the same law. They very clearly progress through these three periods: 1) initial simplicity, 2) flowering complexity, and 3) a second mixed simplification. (Leontiev 2005, 382)

According to Leontiev, Europe's period of flowering complexity lay in the past, in the Renaissance. His assessment of contemporary bourgeois Europe was thoroughly negative. As a young culture, Russia had a chance to experience a period of flowering complexity, but only if it could create a culture of its own distinct from that of Western Europe. The basis of this culture should be a Byzantine symphony of Church and State. In the view of Leontiev and all conservative thought, it is only Empire that furthers the preservation of vitality and "flowering complexity".

The second notion of Leontiev's popular among contemporary conservatives is the "despotism of the inner idea" (Leontiev 2005, 383) without which society loses its form and decrystallizes:

the egalitarian-liberal process is the antithesis of the process of development. In the latter the internal idea firmly grips the social material in its organizing, despotic embrace and limits its tendencies to disperse and dissolve. Egalitarian-liberal progress is similar to the phenomena of burning, rotting, and the melting of ice. . . it is similar, for example, to cholera, which gradually transforms very di-

verse people at first into more uniform corpses (equality), then into almost similar skeletons (equality), and finally into free (relatively speaking, of course) nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen, etc. (Leontiev 2005, 384)

What made Russia a unique, special civilization, according to Leontiev, was that throughout its history it is as always possible to identify a single idea binding the people and the state together. Leontiev and today's neoconservatives after him perceive in *Byzantinism* this higher idea shaping the Russian nation. Neoconservatives consider that the "despotism of the inner idea" is especially characteristic of two periods in Russian history—Muscovy and the Soviet Union, which they regard as Red Byzantinism. In the neoconservative discourse of the Putin era in contrast to the national-patriotic movements of the 1990s, the nationalistic element is strong but subordinate to religion and state authority. Russia is first of all the Russian state and only then the nation. The Russian people are described as a superethnos, an independent civilization, a messianic project or in Spengler's words "the magical nation," in which people, faith, and state form an indivisible unity. According to neoconservative ideologists, the decrystallization and disintegration of contemporary Russia can only be stopped and the vitality and flowering complexity of its culture can only be preserved through ideological, political, and military expansion, which is possible only if Russia is an *empire* and not a nation-state and democracy based on liberal values. This statism and supranationalism, where the national element is subordinate to religion and state authority also have roots in Leontiev, who wrote:

The idea of purely tribal nationalities in the form it is found in the nineteenth century is a notion that is essentially thoroughly cosmopolitan, anti-state, and anti-religious; it contains a great deal of destructive power and nothing creative and does not distinguish nations on the basis of culture. For culture is nothing other than distinctiveness, and distinctiveness today is perishing almost

everywhere from political freedom. Individualism kills the individuality of people, regions, and nations. (Leontiev 2005, 333)

Most influential in the neoconservative artistic sphere is Leontiev's aestheticism, which draws on vitalism and the cult of life and anti-mortality. Imperial aesthetics appeals not only to artists and writers, architects and filmmakers, but also to neoconservative politicians, who rarely discuss the economic or juridical aspects of their imperial projects. The writings of contemporary radical conservatives are not so much a political program as manifestoes and pamphlets on imperial aesthetics. Nikolai Berdyaev (1847-1948) pointed to the aesthetic dimension of Leontiev's apology for reaction, when he wrote in 1926:

Leontiev's point of view had little in common with the ordinary run of reactionary opinion; his outlook was in any case untrammelled and far-sighted. Leontiev had in fact attempted to provide a unique biological, sociological, and esthetic foundation for the cause of reaction. His reactionary outlook was the result of his love for the development and flowering of culture. . . He was a Renaissance type, and for that reason he tended to be a reactionary in our own time. . . His reactionary ethos was bound up with his love of life rather than his disgust of it. (Berdyaev 1971, 85-86)

Although Leontiev does not operate with the Dionysian and Apollonian myths used by the neoconservatives, his notions of "form as the despotism of an inner idea" and "crystallization" are obviously based on the order, hierarchy, and verticality inherent in the Apollonian principle.

Imper-Art

Neo-Eurasianism characterizes itself as a revolt against formless politics, formless life, and formless values. The poetics of the art of the new empires consists in a serious, ponderous eclecticism

and the return of ontology. As art critic Ekaterina Bobrinskaya observed in her article "The suspicious nature of art",

in today's artistic milieu "imperial" mythology is not so much a political utopia as a reminiscence or fantasy of organic forms of art that break its contemporary isolation—a reminiscence of the lost ontological foundations of art, its inseparable and natural link with what is sacred and authoritative. (Bobrinskaya 2004).

But in Neo-Eurasianism the power of utopia and the emphasis on passion, emotion and action in politics are combined with a cold and sober detachment. This self-distance and deep-seated ambiguity marks off the avant-garde aesthetics of the Neo-Eurasianism from the fascist aestheticization of politics and the communist politicization of art.⁶ There is as yet no generally accepted term that adequately describes this new phenomenon. A few critical works on post-Soviet radical conservatism in art and literature use the following notions, which are used as synonyms: "reactionary avant-gardism", "right-wing postmodernism", "punk-conservatism" and "the imperial avant-garde." For lack of an established term I offer to call this new imperial style *Imper-Art*, because of its complex relationship to *Sots-Art*.⁷

Like *Sots-Art*, *Imper-Art* gazes in admiration upon its object—the totalitarian, hierarchical system. Here as well is a metaphysics of power that emphasizes its magical foundations and its sacrality and numinosity, consisting in a combination of veneration and "fear and trembling". But the attitude of *Imper-Art* toward power resembles that of traditional, archaic cultures, where power expresses a kind of special ontological status and will, desire, strength, energy, and the ability to act

6. For an interesting approach to Walter Benjamin's theory, articulated in his famous "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" see: David Roberts, "The Sublime in Politics: the Fascist Aestheticization of Politics Revisited", <http://arts.monash.edu.au/cclcs/news-and-events/index.php> (accessed 2008-09-15).
7. On *Sots-Art* see, for example Balina, Condee and Dobrenko (2000)

are the necessary condition for wielding it. Unlike Sots-Art, which ironically linked Socialist Realism and the avant-garde in order to deconstruct them, Imper-Art and its combination of imperial mentality and the avant-garde is extremely calm and regards twentieth-century Russia from a metaphysical, almost otherworldly perspective that mixes positive enthusiasm and emotional coldness. Imper-Art preserves the basic devices of postmodernist poetics (irony, estrangement, double reading, the combination of central and marginal, etc.), but the axiology is different. There is no contradiction here, since as Slavoj Žižek notes, cynical distancing is an element of all contemporary ideologies, liberal or totalitarian alike, and the presence of irony, laughter, or the carnivalesque does not in itself signify anti-totalitarian deconstruction (see Žižek 1989).

One example of contemporary Russian Imper-Art, which I would like to discuss in this paper, is the work of Alexey Beliayev-Guintovt (b. 1965), who has been the art designer of the Neo-Eurasian movement since 2002.⁸ Beliayev-Guintovt often appears in the pages of the fashion magazines and exhibits in the same Yakut Gallery as Denis Simachev. His art is an example of a close relationship between state ideology, glamour and entertainment in contemporary Russia. Beliayev-Guintovt is one of the most colorful and best-known representatives of the *New academism* or *New classicism*, a 1990s movement that has strongly influenced Imper-Art.⁹ The neoacademists reject total irony, and because they are instead attracted to total seriousness, they turn to mythology, history and canonical art, whose hierarchical structure serves as an image of the hierarchical structure of the sacred universe (Lotman 1992, 243-47). Unlike conceptualism, neoacademism does not require interpretation, combines mass appeal and elitism. From the very outset, this art community was intimately connected with the dandyism and narcissistic

8. It is worth noting that it is Dmitry Shostakovich, grandson of the great composer, who is in charge of the musical aspect of the Neo-Eurasian movement.
9. The New Academy of the Fine Arts (NAII) was founded by the Petersburg artist Timur Novikov (1958-2002) in 1989 (see Novikov 1998).

culture of the Petersburg fops, who worshipped a cult of Pushkin, Mayakovsky, Kharms, and Vaginov (Khlobystin 2002, 96-103). The New Academy practices a pronounced conservative ritualism and ceremonialism and may be characterized as an answer to the “junk aesthetics” of Moscow conceptualism and the first attempt to restore a symbolic order as an ideological strategy for overcoming the trauma of the Real. In Dugin’s words,

creating the art of the “new empires” is the business of modernist artists who have in fact authentically gone through the dramatic experience of the abyss. (Dugin 2005, 474)

Beliayev-Guintovt is a monumentalist. His supersized canvases are extremely laconic and suggestive, and his palette is limited, dominated by black and white or black and gold. Subjects are an eclectic mix of symbolic archetypes of Russian-Soviet-Eurasian civilization: the Kremlin star, Ivan the Terrible, Mukhina’s Worker and Peasant Girl sculpture, rockets, a Russian cemetery, a Victory Parade on Red Square. He is very candid about his “imperialism”:

I am not at all intimidated by so called cultural imperialism. We live in an empire whether we want to or not, and this is the only possible form of existence for this country. (Beliayev-Guintovt 2008a)¹⁰

In his opinion, only the Grand Style corresponds to the metaphysics of empire:

The essence of empire is the Grand Style. As we look back we see the general features of the Great Project in the Russian and Soviet States — anonymous will, collectivism, self-effacing labor for the benefit of posterity even when it is known beforehand that the announced goals

10. Interview “Krasota spaset mir” on Beliayev-Guintovt’s web site, www.doctrine.ru/vchera/interview/inostranec/ (accessed 2008-09-04).

will not be attained in the lifetime of the participants. The Project presupposes selflessness and a dream. The basic concepts of the Grand Style are hierarchy, the canon, order. Its features are utility, stability, and beauty. Apollo is with us. (Beliayev-Guintovt 2008b)

Beliayev-Guintovt appeals exclusively to powerful discourses — symbols of war, violence, male dominance, and death. Imper-Art is full of longing and nostalgia for active masculinity and enchantment with well-trained male bodies, the army and uniforms, and the expression and simultaneous overcoming of the “eternally womanish” (“vechno bab’e”) in the Russian mentality. Strength and its attributes appear above all as objects of aesthetic and mystical experience, as in Leontiev or in another Russian philosopher, Vasily Rozanov’s (1856-1919) well-known description of a feeling of numinosity when he happened to meet a regiment of cavalry in St. Petersburg 1914:

I gazed timidly at this endlessly moving column of heavy horsemen, each of whom was so huge compared with me! . . . More and more a feeling of depression came over me. Fanning me was an alien force so huge that my “I” seemed to be carried off like a bit of fluff in the whirlwind of this hugeness and this multitude. When I suddenly began to feel that I was not only “afraid” but was also bewitched by them, spellbound by a strange charm that I have experienced only once — at that very moment — in my life, a strange thing happened: the exaggerated masculinity before my eyes transformed, as it were, the structure of my being, casting it aside and turning it upside down into something feminine. Throughout my being I felt an unusual tenderness, languor, and drowsiness. . . My heart sank within me — with love. . . I wanted them to be even huger, I wished there were even more of them. . . This colossus of physiology, this colossus of life and probably also a source of life evoked in me a purely feminine sensation of lack of will, submissiveness, and

an insatiable desire “to be close,” to see, not to lower my eyes. . . Strength—there is the only beauty in the world. . . Strength—it subdues, people fall down before it; ultimately they pray to it. . . In strength resides the mystery of the world. (Rozanov 1914, 231-34)

Thus in addition to Leontiev’s concept of vitalism, Imper-Art also subscribes to Rozanov’s “gendered” notion of power as fullness of being, might and the source of strength and energy that power shares with those subordinate to it, whose ontological status is characterized by weakness, inadequacy, deficiency, and inferiority. Imper-Art visualizes power as a subject that grants, awards, and shares its mystical force and renders the spectator an object that is grateful, reverential, and willing to serve. As Beliyev-Guintovt remarked of his style in an interview with the newspaper *Zavtra*:

it is an aristocratic, anti-bourgeois phenomenon possessing militant, aggressive features. It is not pacified conformism, but an offensive, heroic, military style. (Beliyev-Guintovt 2008c)¹¹

Novonovosibirsk

Alexey Beliyev-Guintovt, Andrey Molodkin, and Gleb Kosorukov’s project *Novonovosibirsk*, fragments of which were first exhibited in 1999 at the prestigious La Chapelle Saint-Louis de Salpêtrière in Paris, aroused considerable attention. The exhibition has been shown in the Bolshoi Manege, the Marble Palace of the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, the Museum of Architecture in Moscow, the State Duma, and again in Paris. Since 2000 there has been a rapprochement between the state, contemporary art and pop culture. Beliyev-Guintovt was one of the first to give a visual version of this process, which came

11. Interview “Zvezda vo lbu” on Beliyev-Guintovt’s web site www.doctrine.ru/vchera/zvezda/kovalev, (accessed 2008-09-04).



FIG. 1: Andrei Molodkin, Alexei Guintovt, *Barrage of Apollo* (2001). Blue ball pen on canvas, 250x420 cm.

to characterize the entire Putin-period. Russian art critic Alexander Borovsky noticed, emphasizing the formative power of cultural products and artistic visions of society and history:

As horrible as it is to say, the project foresaw something; it externalized (as Bakhtin would have put it) something that had only begun to take shape, to condense, in our neo-post-Soviet atmosphere. (Borovsky 2008, 11)

The exhibition consists of a series of gigantic canvases with ballpoint-pen drawings of neoclassical sculptures for the new capital of the Eurasian Empire in Novonovosibirsk. The city is organized around 24 huge monuments (only six have been completed thus far). This is the cold utopia of the new capital of Eurasia, closer to the North Pole at the “geometrical center of Eurasia.”

In contrast to the great number of artists who practice decomposition, we have chosen the diametrically opposite strategy—creative construction. The principal features of constructive art are neoclassical forms and painstaking handwork. “Novonovosibirsk” is the master



FIG. 2: Andrei Molodkin, Alexei Guintovt, *Apollo in Glory* (2001). Blue ball pen on canvas, 250x420 cm.

plan of the new capital of Eurasia consisting of drafts of sculptures —Apollo with a quiver full of rockets, a giant swan, ears of grain—drawn by means of many ballpoint pens (Beliayev-Guintovt 2008d).¹²

Such patent incongruence between the material (ballpoint pens with dark blue ink of the type used by schoolchildren) and the scale of the project neutralizes its utopian and deliberately totalitarian character and introduces an element of “flickering aesthetics.” Moreover, although in neo-Eurasian ideology “the exponents of the Petersburg idea are the enemies of Eurasianism”, Novonovosibirsk is patterned on models from antiquity, which inadvertently brings to mind the most consistently classical and successful Great Project in Russian history. Thus it is only at first glance that neoimperial discourse and its Byzantinism, Eurasianism, and Third Rome mythology are connected exclusively with Moscow. Genetically, the turn to Imper-Art is a realization of the Petersburg text of Russian culture and can be regarded, in literary historian Vladimir Toporov’s words, as

12. Interview “Magiia i Propaganda” on Beliayev-Guintovt’s web site www.doctrine.ru/vchera/interview/rzhn, (accessed 2008-09-04).

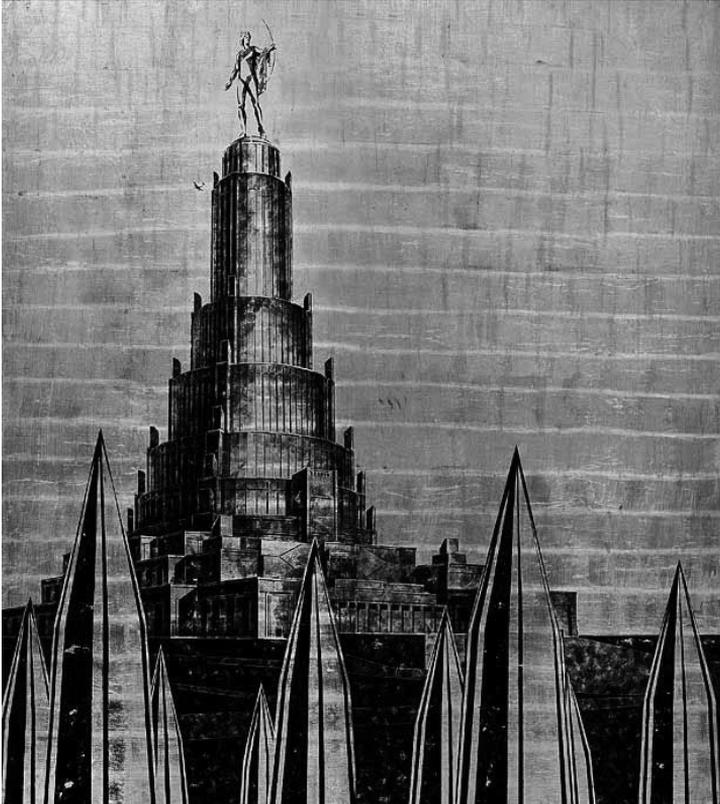


FIG. 3 Alexei Belyaev-Guintovt, *Soviet Palace* (2007). Gold leaf, black printing ink, handprint on canvas, 300x300 cm.

the “peak of Apollonism” which, beginning in the eighteenth century, has left its mark on Russian culture at the beginning of each century (Toporov 2003).

Unlike two-dimensional conceptualism, Imper-Art is based on two visual principles — a play with perspective and a play with scale. It is not a pure return to classicism but rather a kind of mimicry or eclectic turn to this aesthetics, mediated on the one hand by Art Deco and totalitarian art, and on the other by Russian Symbolism, and it is also an attempt to revive the Dionysian-Apollonian discourse uniting these two currents. Imper-Art re-

jects amorphous and styleless Moscow postmodernism, emphasizing instead the intimidating, cold and superhuman nature of Classicism as the art of Apollo. As Ekaterina Bobrinskaya notes:

In the cold style the total illumination and logical readability of art disappears. Paradoxically, beneath the clear, precise, simple form that presupposes no interpretative contrivances is revealed something impenetrable that appeals to a different dimension in art. The viewer left alone before this hard and cold form is forced to breathe rarified air that can cause an irritating sensation of emptiness and discomfort. In the images of the new classicism there is no quiver of life. Instead it appeals to images of death or more precisely the border of death, but perhaps through this cold that is so alien to all the habits of the “spirit of today” something forgotten will return or something still unknown in contemporary culture will seep. (Bobrinskaya 2004)

Conclusion

The neoconservative discourse that emerged in the late Soviet period in the midst of the Moscow and Petersburg non-conformist underground is today in the process of becoming the ideological mainstream as the art that is best suited to the Putin “restoration.” Thus far it is not so much a question of political action as of a search for a new aesthetics, although at present political action itself is in the sphere of aesthetics or metaphysics, as is evidenced by contemporary Russian radicalism, whose aimless protests resemble the extravagances of fools in Christ. The well-known Moscow painter, writer, and “professional extremist” Aleksei Tsvetkov’s *Anarkhiia non stop* (*Non-Stop Anarchy*) makes clear that the essence of contemporary extremism is rebellion as such, which merely masquerades as national, religious, or other radicalism. “Rebellion can take place under any and all flags... (Tsvetkov 1999, 35).” Today’s uprising is metaphysical—thirst for the existential shock of encounters with

the Real is more important than specific political goals. For that reason “style is more important than ideology” in contemporary Russian culture, and this in turn contributes to the prevalence of “decorative” and “literary” radicalism to which neo-conservatism also undoubtedly belongs. As we look upon the ideological, artistic, and literary examples of Imper-Art, which unite archaism and postmodernism, we realize in horror that the Apollonian principle of this art is merely a simulacrum of harmony concealing the incurable trauma of the Real. The coldness and sterility of Imper-Art unerringly conveys to the viewer and reader this worldview of postmodernity. As intellectual Imper-Art is now being transformed into official and mass ideology, it is difficult to predict just where this fascination with the order of imperial hierarchy will lead, but one cannot help asking whether the forbidden love of taboo aesthetics will also rescue from a brief period of obscurity totalitarian discourse and all its unhappy attributes.

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