

A R T C A T C H

ONLINE GALLERY & CULTURAL HUB

russian curators abroad

The review of the most renowned Russian contemporary art curators on international scene.

Text: Sergey Guskov
Translation: Basil Ballhatchet
Posted on: January 26, 2021



EKATERINA DEGOT, PHOTO © MATHIAS VOELZKE / ART REVIEW

A successful 2020

To a certain extent 2020 was the year when Russian curators started to be noted. According to the magazine ArtReview, Ekaterina Degot is

ranked 54th in the annual rating of the 100 most influential people in art. Technically she was recognised for the most recent Steirischer Herbst festival which was adapted for a TV channel (September-October 2020), but in actual fact this was recognition for her overall achievements. This is the first time that a Russian curator has appeared on this list. Previously Russia was only represented through the patroness and founder of *Garage* Daria Zhukova: the first time in 2008 together with her husband back then oligarch Roman Abramovich, and subsequently in 2011-2016 on her own. In addition, Katerina Chuchalina was one of the curators of the travelling European biennale Manifesta, which was held on this occasion in Marseille (August-November 2020). It was a miracle that the event held for the 13th time actually went ahead: it opened two and half months earlier than had been planned, albeit subject to health and hygiene restrictions. Judging by press feedback, however, the Manifesta was a success.

The list of Russian curators in demand in the west is quite short. For a long time the founder of the legendary Moscow publication “Art Magazine” Viktor Misiano was the only significant figure from Russia globally. Since the late 1980s he has

worked proactively at Europe's exhibition spaces, in collaboration with leading figures on the international art scene. In particular, he was one of the pioneers of Manifesta together with Roza Martinez and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (mid-1990s). His success story can be attributed to a combination of circumstances: when the chance appeared — borders started to open — Misiano turned out to be one of the few people in the Soviet Union who was simultaneously proficient in several foreign languages and capable of navigating the current art and humanities agenda. Incidentally, such a turn of fate does not detract in any way from the role of the actual curator: back then nobody else in the curatorial and artistic community in Russia had leveraged so successfully the new opportunities.

By contrast, Ekaterina Degot did not encounter such problems as the closing of borders and the language barrier. On the contrary, in the 1990s-2000s the choices open to the Russian art community grew, as everybody proactively began travelling round the world. However, whereas Misiano developed in parallel two career trajectories, international and Russian, Degot from the outset achieved as much success as she could back home. By the start of the 2010s she was considered Russia's leading art critic and curated

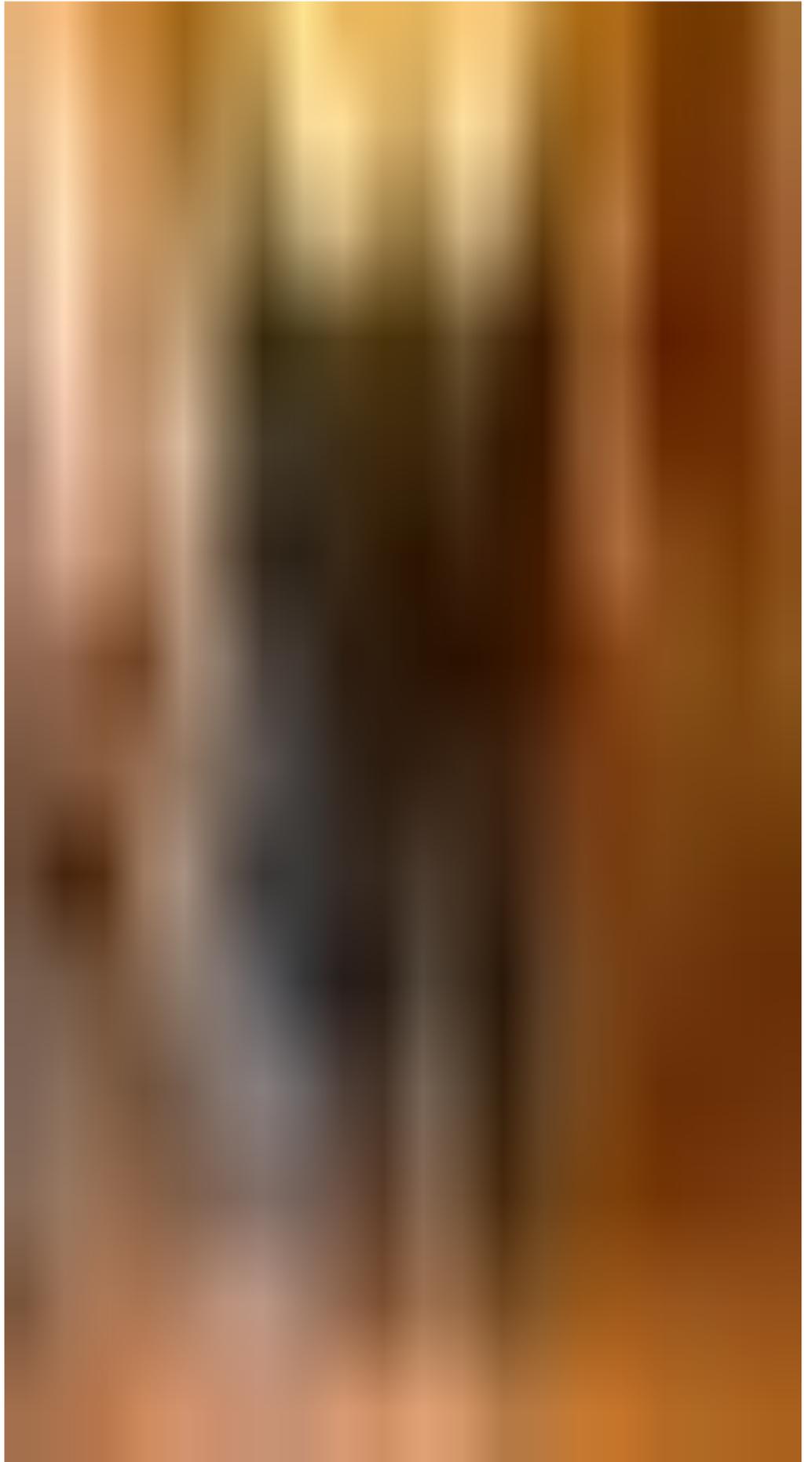
several important exhibitions such as *Struggling for the Banner: Soviet Art Between Trotsky and Stalin* (June–July 2008) and the 1st Ural Biennale (September–October 2010), but hit her head not against a glass ceiling, but rather the unmistakable palpable limits of local culture. The online publication OpenSpace.ru, where Degot ran the extremely popular section “Art”, was destroyed by the new owners, and she was effectively unable to obtain a decent position at any art institution, and most importantly, work there without experiencing external pressures. She decided to relocate to Europe. She worked initially on short-term projects (Bergen Assembly), and then, after her appointment as Director at the Academy of Arts of the World in Cologne, moved for good. Thanks to international connections established during the previous decade and professional experience accumulated at exhibitions at Russian institutions, she was able to secure a high status immediately at her new position and was not required to prove herself once more. Degot made the most of these opportunities. For example, she not only became the curator of inaugural edition of Bergen Assembly triennial (August–October 2013), but also managed to redesign the event as she saw fit. At a time when Norwegian officials were persistently demanding the holding of a series of

events, *de facto*, a festival, Degot managed to defend the format of a traditional exhibition. The Academy of Arts of the World that she headed from 2014 to 2018 was to all intents and purposes created in line with the director's wishes and offered a rate benefit for European public institutions — it had a regular budget, so there was no need to constantly compete for grants. Today Degot runs the Steirischer Herbst festival in Graz which she has reconfigured in the spirit of a biennale — with a general project and concept, and not a bundle of disparate events. She continues to pressure the Austrian bureaucracy (by her own admission, drawing on the experience gathered in the Soviet Union), promoting her understanding of important topics as a counterbalance to attempts to compel her to follow the line. At her first festival Degot had to stand up to the Graz authorities and insist on the relevance of several works of the participants. And succeeded.

Ekaterina Chuchalina's story is different. She has been working on a high position at V-A-C Foundation almost since its establishment. An important part of her professional activity at this organisation has involved the holding of art exhibitions in non-core institutions, such as the

Museum of Entrepreneurs, Patrons and Philanthropists, the Institute for African Studies, Presnya Museum, the Museum of the Armed Forces, the All-Russia Exhibition Centre [VDNkh] and GULAG History Museum. In most cases, Chuchalina participated in these projects as the producer, and not the curator. She arranged for the necessary infrastructure, supervised the budget and conducted negotiations with the management teams of museums or city officials — she would do all the unpleasant work that tends to be too challenging for irresolute, frequently oversensitive, fragile radical artists and independent curators. And she has had good reason to tear her hair out: the exhibition *Three Days in October* (2013) at Presnya Museum closed early and controversially, while Arseny Zhilyaev's project at the Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics (2016) was demolished at the preparation stage. Thanks to her experience of such crises, when she was a member of the Manifesta team in 2019, Chuchalina was morally ready for her encounters with French bureaucracy in the turbulent city of Marseille. Moreover, the role of officialdom everywhere only intensified after the outbreak of the pandemic.





THE KEEPERS. ONE-DIMENSIONAL SPHERE GAME/ LES
GARDIENS. JEU DE SPHÈRE UNIDIMENSIONNELLE, 2020 ©
ARSENY ZHILYAEV
PHOTO ©JEANCHRISTOPHE LETT /MANIFESTA

Russian citizen, but Dutch curator

Important moment: Manifesta-13 provided Chuchalina with the opportunity to work as an independent curator. For until then she had only created exhibitions in her role at V-A-C, which had naturally included foreign projects, for example, two Venetian platforms — Casa dei Tre Oci and DK Zattere (the latter is actually owned by the foundation). In general, ties to domestic institutions have been a major problem for Russian curators. While a number of Russian curators also managed to do something in Venice, to a large extent the projects would be implemented under the aegis of some museum or foundation — in other words they would reflect the interests, demands, and what is even more dangerous, the views of management of various structures, and not the intellectual focus of the actual curator. And even if in the rare instances where this was not the case, and the authors of the exhibitions were free to make their own choices, it often proved hard to convince the professional community that this was true.

One merely needs to refer to the telling example of Zelfira Tregulova. Before heading the State Tretyakov Gallery in 2015, she organised on her own or as co-author — and more frequently as a coordinator than a curator — exhibitions of Russian art abroad which had been authorised by the state. The exhibitions *Russia!* at New York's Guggenheim Museum, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932* (1992–1993), which was held in Frankfurt, Amsterdam, New York, Saint Petersburg and Moscow, *Amazons of the Avant-Garde: Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova and Nadezhda Udaltsova* (1999–2001) were particularly successful — the last project toured Berlin, London, Venice, Bilbao and New York, and then returned triumphantly to the Russian capital. The aforementioned exhibitions were organised professionally and enjoyed unprecedented success (for example, the *Amazons of the Avant-Garde* exhibition attracted approximately one million visitors). At the same time, however, the curatorial approach was rotten to the core. Russian art was perceived first and foremost as an export product — and would be packaged as a blockbuster (in one interview Tregulova to all intents and purposes made this crystal clear: the key was not the

concept, but rather the selection of masterpieces). Such branding of avant-garde, and Russian art in general, on the same semantic level as art, icons, caviar, vodka, bears, balalaika and Sputnik, can hardly be called the right approach. In addition, from the outset the Russian authorities considered the exhibitions to be a key tool for diplomacy. Participating in the Millennium Summit (2000) in New York, Vladimir Putin attended the opening of *Amazons of the Avant-Garde* together with the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and delivered a short speech on Russia's contribution to the cultural bank of the international community and highlighted the “meticulous professional work” of curators. In theory, the promotion of soft power through culture (“cultural expansion”, as Russia's President put it) is useful and practised by all countries. It is clearly better than a fight between economies, cold, hot or hybrid wars. However, these circumstances leave the indelible imprint of the dependence, secondary nature of artistic substance and curatorial ideas on the organisers of such exhibitions, regardless of their actual merits and the depth of the research, compared to the primary and all-important political function of such events. Furthermore, in these instances curators are frequently compelled to conjure up miracles in terms of initiative (if not downright disingenuity), in

order to “push through” even relatively non-confrontational solutions and works of art. Orders from the high office are not the same as spokes in the wheel from the Graz city authorities. Incidentally, the curators who worked on such projects also gained a certain renown and connections in other countries, and in addition acquired authority in Russia that they were subsequently able to convert into leadership positions at the country’s top museums.



PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN AND UN SECRETARY GENERAL KOFI ANNAN AT THE OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION “THE AMAZONS OF RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE” AT THE SOLOMON GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
PHOTO: KREMLIN.RU

Since the mid-2010s, as Russia’s confrontation with the West intensified, the situation has been exacerbated by the fact that state cultural projects abroad would all too often be hijacked by smooth

operators pretending to be patriots, and transformed into a universal joke, while the initiatives of private institutions would automatically meet with a hostile reaction and the comment: “Yet another Putin oligarch is providing a fashionable veneer for a decaying system” (sometimes, incidentally this assessment was accurate). The reaction to developments is fairly predictable. Now when they seek to go global, young cultural workers try to act as international figures, whatever that may mean in each specific instance, and seek to minimise or rule out any association with Russia.

The following opinion is typical. Katya Kruppenikova told me: “I have been living permanently in Europe for nine years now. Almost immediately after my relocation to the Netherlands (straight after the end of De Appel), I felt that I was a Russian citizen, but a Dutch curator. And I always stress this fact. My ethical, political and social understanding of curatorship have been formed in the Netherlands.” Her understanding of personal and universal history has changed distinctively: “In the first years of my life in Europe, I did several projects pertaining to my personal experiences as a migrant and the regional context of my own roots. However, it is highly likely that

this was my decision, because this was required at the time. For example, the festival *Commentators: Russia and Ukraine*, created by the Katarzyna Kozyra Foundation in Warsaw in 2014, or the *INSIDEOUT* exhibition in Moscow in 2015. Both projects are extremely important to me, they gave me a great deal in terms of personal development. This was a form of psychotherapy: I did them, *inter alia*, for myself, in order to understand and respond to intractable issues in my own head. My interests have always been fairly universal — through exhibitions I raise issues of interest to me as a human being, part of society, a political unit. My observational focus has shifted during my life in Europe, the angles and issues of interest to me are being transformed, depending on how my environment changes.”

KATIA KRUPENNIKOVA. CURATOR'S WORKDAY IN UJAZDOW
CASTLE. WARSAW, 2013.
PHOTO: SERGEY GUSKOV

Since January 2019, Krupennikova has been
working at V-A-C where she is responsible

specifically for exhibition projects. This has not quashed her autonomous curatorial activity. In September-October 2020, she launched in Riga the 11th festival Survival Kit. And in autumn 2019, as part of a curatorial group she worked on the third Bergen Assembly, which continued at the start of 2020 with a series of exhibitions at the art association Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart, where she was also a part of curatorial team. However, things have not always been so smooth in her career. In 2016, the exhibition *Post-Peace* that she had prepared in the Istanbul Cultural Centre Akbank Sanat was cancelled before its opening due to censorship (in an interview Krupennikova sums up wearily that censorship “exists everywhere — even in democratic European countries”). In the end, the exhibition was held, but already the following year in the aforementioned Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart. Meanwhile, she had to leave the Warsaw museum Ujazdów Castle, where she worked from 2013-2014, as at the very start its director Fabio Cavallucci, who had hired Katya, was dismissed in a scandal. Subsequently, the presence of a Russian on staff, even though she had relocated to the Netherlands, was an obstacle to the museum’s new management, because the institution was already an irritant in all possible

ways to Poland's conservative and nationalist government. And her departure to all intents and purposes was a sacramental sacrifice, although admittedly it did not save Ujazdów Castle from ruin. For Kruppenikova such shocks were part of the "joys" of semi-precarious daily life: "Naturally, in my first years of work as a curator I did not receive any offers from institutions, and instead personally initiated a great deal and received the support of local foundations. During this time I started feeling more confident in my professional life. I know what I want to do, why and with whom. I know the fee that I want to be paid in exchange. I know which of my colleagues share my views, who will support me, who will provide me with critical and honest feedback. It goes without saying that I have work today, but may not have it tomorrow. However, I have learned how to orchestrate projects and do a great deal to improve working conditions in the cultural sector. At present, I feel that I am in a strong position, because I understand what I am doing and see the fruits of my labour not only in the creation of exhibition and conversational programmes, but also in the country's cultural policy."

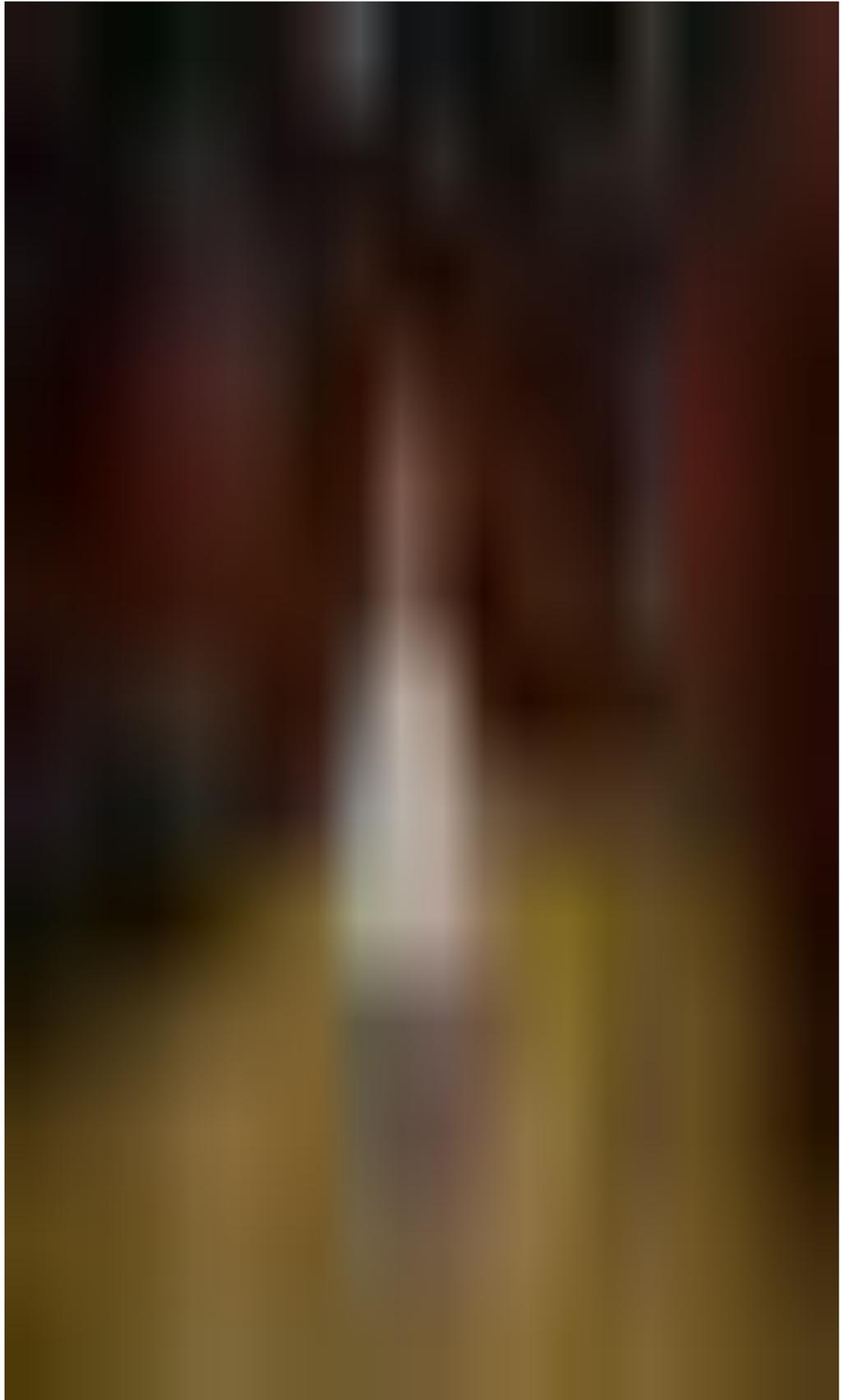
Language of international communications

“Contemporary art is the language of international communications, that is why it is important to be open to a global network of ties and cultural exchanges.” This is the wording used by Alexander Burenkov, curator of the Non-Profit Foundation for Contemporary Art Cosmospow, in an interview in November 2019. This maxim contains in a nutshell the ideology of Generation 2010s, which in a new historical loop reproduces both the ideals and illusions of the art community of the 1990s. Obrist & Co. have also dreamed about an open world superimposed with a network of institutions of contemporary art and informal contacts. Incidentally the heroes of the 1990s did not enjoy such a developed system of contacts as today; indeed the internet was far slower and was not available everywhere. Now, notwithstanding the universal resurgence of nationalism, the new walls being erected between countries, regions and social groups, and the consequences of the pandemic, Russian curators are still able to leave for other countries and rapidly interact and establish ties with local colleagues there. The global network of contacts of the new generation functions smoothly. In May 2017, as part of the Art-Athens trade fair, the self-same Burenkov ran the video programme *CITIZENSFIVE*, which was comparable to a major exhibition in terms of the

diversity of the works and participants from several countries, and also the conceived curatorial approach. The selection of one medium was attributable to the simplicity of delivery and ease of exposition. It became easy to make an exhibition with a small budget. The key is that the works can be brought along or sent without any problem, the exposition can be assembled-disassembled quickly, and in the interim — must be filmed and published in all available media and social networks.

TZVETNIK Group (Vitaly Bezpалov and Natalya Serkova) is moving along the same trajectory. They have been part of a close international circle, consisting of small galleries, project spaces, groups of artists, diverse coteries of like-minded thinkers, exhibition photo-aggregators, young dynamic media on art, etc. This idiosyncratic international collective is extremely proactive, strongly welded together, and importantly based on indispensable mutual support, even when it comes to small things, such as mandatory reposts and likes. Such proactive cohesion is reminiscent of the Esperanto movement in the first third of the 20th century. As part of a friendly environment, you can count on effective international distribution. Furthermore, independence from major exhibition spaces has a

positive impact. The latter expect to hear tales from artists from Russia (and also other post-Soviet countries, the Middle East and other problem regions) about the horrors of their homelands, and frequently disagree to work with them on other topics. Ending up in such an “atrocities exhibition” to suit a western audience, curators and artists subsequently find it hard to break free of the resulting fame — now they are expected to continually deliver the same message. TZVETNIK avoids such a ghetto of stereotypes, as they do not have to work with behemoth institutions. The partners of Serkova and Bezpалov in other countries are primarily small platforms with no ties to taxpayer money or the foundations of major corporations. They will not insist on the trumpeting of social topics of current interest. Indeed, these galleries and project spaces are outside the remit of major media outlets, but frequently create their own media which rapidly gain traction. However, if there is no pertinent platform out there, TZVETNIK is ready to lease any premises — they are driven by enthusiasm and an entrepreneurial mindset.



L'AMOUR, A GROUP SHOW CURATED BY TZVETNIK AT BDSM
LOUNGE, BERLIN, 2019.
INSTALLATION VIEW.
PHOTO: ©PAUL BARSCH / TZVETNIK

The bias of group interests may well be the key concern for such types of curatorship. Going by the reports published on the websites of ArtViewer, O Fluxo and TZVETNIK, a list of surnames frequently crop up around exhibition projects, akin to a cloud of tags. The artists migrate from one project to another, just like liquid in connecting vessels (as a matter of fact the range of platforms rotated by photo-aggregators is also limited). A similar situation was observed in the 1990s. This is when a strata of biennale artists appeared, which already encountered criticism in the 2000s: the same people would cruise from Venice to Kassel, from Gwangju to Istanbul, from Berlin to Sharjah. This happened because the curators of any future biennale would visit the current biennale in search of participants for their projects, and rarely looked further afield. At present the biennales themselves are trying to diversify the lists of their participants and are in part succeeding, as a fight for greater gender and ethical diversity has been imposed. However, this is also an inorganic solution. At some point in time, the process will encounter a similar situation when the same names will appear everywhere at all the biennales – as the actual mechanism used to select participants is not changing. The operating environment of TZVETNIK and similar organisations has been confronted by

the same problem. The past five years have witnessed the emergence of a strata of artists from the era of the exhibition photo-aggregators. And while criticism of this evolving collectiveness has not even started, it would appear that curators are starting to become aware of this predicament. For example, TZVETNIK organises open calls, looks for artists who have still not been spotted in their orbit — and is finding them. For the time being, these searches only concern Russian projects (which will in any case incidentally be relayed everywhere online). However, it is highly likely that Serkova and Bezpалov will also look for new names internationally.

The internet offers a solution, and this is precisely what young curators targeted in the 2010s. Now, basically, it is not always necessary to travel to distant countries, even to leave your hometown. Travel is required in exceptional instances, more as a way of unwinding and combining the pleasure of tourism with work on an exhibition. And also, simply just like any other normal person to have a drink and mingle with likeminded thinkers from different regions. In all other aspects, there is more than sufficient documentation on offline projects disseminated globally. For the time being this strategy is effective. Although it has to be noted

that the worldwide web is changing rapidly just like the world itself. National segments of the internet stand out more and more distinctively. Not only authoritarian regimes, but also universally recognised democratic countries are filtering the data entering their media space. Meanwhile private corporations, first and foremost Big Tech giants, have been extremely successful in scaling back democracy and increasing inequality online. For the time being it is not entirely clear where this will take us. However, one can already state today: the internet is changing slowly from a place where hopes for freedom have been preserved and is clearly being transformed into a regulated space just like everything else in the world. Which means that what is done with such ease today will lose its habitual effectiveness tomorrow. Curators who work with international distribution online will once more have to come up with underlying grounds for their activity. However, even this might prove to be a challenge well worth embracing.

AUTHOR

Sergey Guskov is an art critic, journalist, editor (magazine Dialogue of Arts) and a contributing writer (Artforum)

PUBLICATION

© Sergey Guskov, 2021

© Art Catch, 2021

Any republishing of this article in full or an abstract is possible only with the strict reference to the author and the source.

