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Materials for the History of Modern Art of 'Rural' Russia//2018

The city and the state always wanted to reform the village – to civilise the household, peasants, labour processes, way of life, infrastructure. In Russia the keys to these processes were the 'abandoning of paganism' and Christianisation, abolition of serfdom and 'inoculation' of capitalist methods of management, Sovietisation in line with 'dictatorship of proletariat' – from the destruction of peasant households to collectivisation; urbanisation; the 'southern turn' and the 'erosion' of rural life forms and migration of country dwellers to cities.

When, where and how did an art component appear in these political, social, economic, demographic processes? What role does it play and who are its performers?

At first, the village was the subject of remote, and, then, conscious artists' observation. At the same time the principle of observation during the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century changed its characteristics (and intonation) from idealisation and admiration to criticism of mentality and finally to the redesigning of the new forms of village life. The background of the village 'object evolution' in the eyes of the city artist is important in itself as well as in the context of the first experiences of culturally-focused downshifting.

Actually, this situation can be described as follows: the early nineteenth century artist Alexey Venetsianov presented a wonderful Russian village in his paintings – sunny, womanly, beautiful and fertile. Sixty years later Ilya Repin finds an absolutely different side of the village – ugliness, alcoholism, unbelief, utter despair ('the movement into emptiness'). And three or four decades later prominent Russian avant-gardists, such as Natalya Goncharova and Kazimir Malevich, discover in the village the primary source of inspiration, the soil, the innocent-from-civilisation, 'picturesquely painted nature', the foundation for designing a new rural and urban reality.¹

In parallel, starting from the 1880s, art patrons and artists were opening 'creative centres' in rural areas. In 'Abramtsevo', 'Mamontovo', 'Talashkino', estates were founded with the assistance of prominent Russian art patrons, artists found use of new materials and technologies, new subjects and narratives, and part of the local population joined in this form of production, which can be understood

as a prototype of creative industries. Commonly they processed wood, created sculptures from clay, made children's toys, textile products and so on. In this environment, in 1890, a nested doll appeared – a paradoxical combination of Japanese *netsuke* forms and traditional Russian decor.²

A productive combination of residential artistic forms and the involvement of peasants in creative (or creative and industrial) activity became a model and a principle for further episodes through which rural art in Russia developed. Rural art in Russia is always a promise, issued by the state; by large art institutions and educational centres in the formulations of their cultural politics, but the practical initiatives always come from artists, cultural activists, local museums. Thus, the 'political necessity' to form an atheistic mode of thinking in the USSR forced the redirection from the former iconographic centres – Kholuy, Mstera, Palekh – located 300–400km from Moscow. New imagery, sometimes fantastic and more often, triumphal and industrial in the 'socialist realism' style were executed by local craftsmen on the covers of the varnished papier-mâché boxes, a technology borrowed from China. Thus, was another (after the nested doll) phenomenon of 'the Russian souvenir' created.³

The inertia of Palekh social and economic experiment was impressive. In the early 1890s seven thousand craftsmen worked in the village of Palekh. All of them were members of the Union of Artists. However, the involvement of village dwellers in the creative work was a rarity in the Soviet period. The more regular form of village 'artification' was the execution of creative orders by city artists – painters, sculptors, monumentalists. Thousands of square metres of frescos and mosaics on agricultural theme, portraits of milkmaids and machine operators, scenes of rural life, landscapes and still lives – all of this was integrated into rural clubs and libraries and became part of the universal city vision of the world in a thematic refraction of the 'development of socialism in the village' – symbolic ('we are a part of the whole'), or local and specific ('we have our own achievements', 'we are heroes').

Therefore, the essence and form of Russian rural life didn't find practical expression in art outside urban areas, locals took part in it only as models or prototypes. More generally one may say that the creative subjectivity of villagers didn't practically develop, and the identity of their talents more often found expression in traditional and literary-centred practices.

The illusion of a saturation of rural areas by art in the Soviet period stems, on the one hand, from big exhibitions about landscape – agricultural themes which took place in big cities – and, on the other hand, in big industrialised collective farms (collective farms and state farms) paintings and monumental artworks were paid by the 2 percent assignments from the total construction budget. These huge sums of money were distributed centrally and applied mainly in cities –

city artists in city institutions created 'rural' or 'agricultural' works. Alongside these projects, the ideas of socialist management and elements of lifestyle from the city were 'exported' to and imposed upon the village, as well as norms of art 'realistic in form and socialist in contents'.

Local citizens could only express themselves in the non-professional leisure formats of amateur and traditional 'folk' culture. And even now people's choral singing is one of the creative activities which is most encouraged and promoted in the village by the state.

To imagine the current state of rural art, one should start with a very 'general outlook' and large figures: the number of inhabitants of rural areas of Russia is about 38 million people. The average share of village dwellers considerably fluctuates in regions – from 51 percent in the North Caucasus, up to 15.8 percent in the Northwest. But, anyway, these indicators, stable for the last fifteen years, look surprising next to statistics of another sort: in the first ten years of the twenty-first century the official number of deserted villages increased by more than six thousand, and the number of deserted but officially inhabited villages went up to more than 19 thousand. In 15 years, by 2016, in rural areas of Russia the number of social institutions has considerably reduced – in 2000 there were 45.4 thousand schools, in 2016 – 24.5 thousand, the number of kindergartens has decreased by 23 percent, the number of medical institutions has reduced by more than four times.⁴

Recent calculation shows how much time is required to build asphalt roads (instead of existing dirt roads) to the villages located only five kilometers away from the operating automobile highways – at the current volume of investments and the speed of construction the work should be completed in 241 years.

Before we present the tendencies and experience of the current state of participation art in rural areas of Russia, I will share a story by the photographer Anastasia Khoroshilova who after fifteen years returned to the village where she had been shooting materials for the 'Bezhin Lug' project.

At that time the name of the work associated for me with the Russian cultural phenomena: the story by Ivan Turgenev, the movie by Sergey Eisenstein and the novel Roman by Vladimir Sorokin became nominal, a symbol of what I have found in the changing environment of the rural world.

Changes which I have seen now seemed even more essential, irreversible. What has occurred and was occurring in front of my eyes obtained the clear sense of disappearance. In this sense the name of the new project *Once There Was a Sea Here* is a metaphor of 'subtraction'.

Those places which I have visited about fifteen years before, changed and were not recognisable. Villages turned into summer housing estates or were

absorbed by cities. Distant villages disappeared physically and, gradually, from administrative topography as well. For example, the village where my great-grandfather was born has been almost completely abandoned by the inhabitants. [...]

I had to make it to many other places that day. Thinking, I start assembling my equipment about to leave.

Maria Ivanovna nods to me and suddenly, unexpectedly, waves to come up closer. I approach, and for the first time she starts talking to me: 'And do you want to know what was here before?'. 'Yes, of course', I answer politely prepared to listen to a story about the collective farm which once existed in these area.

For a moment Maria Ivanovna stays still, looking in the distance and says: 'Once there was a sea here'.⁵

Anastasia Khoroshilova's photos and texts present the idea of the new anti-utopia – elements of poor management, destruction and overgrowing, filling of all lacunas with extra cultural and natural stratifications – a pathway back to the status of the world of before or beyond mankind when everything was a sea.

The inhabitants of this world are captured by the artist – suggestively and occasionally – visible, living in a state of premonition and, even amidst the slow process of 'floods', disappearances and the dissolution of sensual and conceptual borders by categories of time and space. It is no accident that I have lingered on Anastasia Khoroshilova's project – this work provides the background and prologue to the description of multivalent and multifocal processes that took place and take place in the capital of the Russian rural-culture – on 650 hectares in the Kaluga region approximately 220 km away and to the south of Moscow. This territory is limited by 'Ugra' National Park and three villages – Koltsovo, Nikola Lenivets and Zvizzchi. A typical place with the typical social and demographic characteristics of the post-Soviet period. The uniqueness, the peculiarity of this territory, as a cultural phenomenon, new in Russia, appeared in 2000 when an artist Nikolay Polissky bought an inexpensive cottage here and his friends and colleagues, architects and designers began to lodge nearby.

After the celebration of the New Year residents of the neighbouring village came to him with a request to borrow some money. Polissky set a condition: he promised to give money but in the morning and only as much money as there were snowmen in the field in front of his house. The next day a huge number of snowmen were already crowding the field. This was the beginning of a creative and working alliance between the artist and locals, who subsequently received the appellation of 'Nikola-Lenivets Crafts'.

Under the leadership of the artist, with an increasing share of creative initiative, a group of nine people created huge temporary objects from hay, rods and wood. The

formula 'land & community art + ecology' 'demanded' an audience – events were announced: a modernised version of traditional Maslenitsa, with a performance (the burning of a land art object) and the 'Archstoyanie' festival.

By 2012 the festival became traditional and was institutionalised, the 'Archpolis' company became its producer, the land around was bought up by a businessman who saw in the art initiative the potential for the development of the place, the basis for communication with the regional authorities.

By 2013, the scope of construction of Nikolay Polissky's objects already exceeded the scale of 'Nikola-Lenivets Crafts', and to make the work *Bobur* local guest workers were employed whose task it was to fill concrete into the earth to build up the design – resolving into neither ecology, nor community.⁶

Nearby, in the field, a French architect Xavier Juillot carried out the *Zvizzchi* project (with the assistance of the curator Bertrán Goslen) – huge ephemeral sculptures from yellow fabric were supported by the air by powerful French fans which were specially brought for the project, old local tractors became the foundation for each of the three elements of Juillot's composition. A great number of *Zvizzchi* village residents wanted to participate in this project. Equipment which didn't work for more than twenty years was repaired, and a group of women expressed desire to bring fabrics from homes to create together with the French the local flying objects. They felt a possibility of utopia. However, the festival management did not support this idea.

The coexistence of these projects – Russian *Bobur* and French *Zvizzchi* – turned out to be informative from the point of view of sociological and cultural analysis. The attractive viewpoint established by Polissky became the centre and the scenery of a consumer zone – not by chance this was adjoined with a cafe and live music. Xavier Juillot's project was located away from the tourist flow but it concentrated creative energy and the expectations of the villagers. The conceptual complexity did not interfere with the positive perception of the figurative, technical and communication aspects of Xavier Juillot's project.

Therefore, within the Archstoyanie festival an evident meeting of both infrastructure and human-focused approaches took place: makings and manifestations, paradigms of object-centred and artistic-process concepts, orientation on external (tourists) and internal (local people). It is possible to formulate it even more broadly – it was a visible demonstration of the choice between development connected to consumption, and the creation of communication and educational formats based on exchange.

Cultural practices of participation always assume two risks – indistinctive conceptual and aesthetic results – and therefore imply the need to apply special, extra-aesthetic criteria, and to allow for 'unevenness', unequal partnership or co-authorship between the initiator (an artist) and the locals. The second risk is

expressed in the fact that the role of the locals becomes more and more servile, and even the material benefits gained by them in the course of work do not compensate for the feeling of social and psychological dissonance.

Going on with our description it is important to note the demographic aspect: the three villages surrounding the territory of Archstoyanie differ considerably from each other. Nikola Lenivets is a settlement 100 percent occupied by 'seasonal inhabitants' – Moscow artists and architects. In Koltsovo there is only one local dweller while others are summer residents from Moscow and Kaluga. In the village of *Zvizzchi* there are more than 150 locals, there is a school and a cultural centre there. Elderly inhabitants remember a big local collective farm. Thanks to the festival, real estate prices went up here, two cafes opened, local products – jams, pickles, homemade schnapps – are in bigger demand.

But five years ago the research conducted within the River Scene project (the Dutch artist William Speakman with the curator, Theo Tegelaers) revealed a rigid border of mistrust between the locals and all others, businessmen, managers, artists, tourists (i.e. outsiders, 'not ours').

The most sensitive, multilateral and long-term practices were carried out here by the Myvillages group (Wapke Feenstra and Antje Schiffers) whose projects, with the assistance of AMK (Association of Culture Managers), were implemented in *Zvizzchi* as a conscious alternative to the tourist tendencies of the Archstoyanie festival: involving the delegation of research and creative activity; the formation of new horizons in respect to the place and opportunities for activity; promotion of the value of the word '*Zvizzchi*', as an addition and even an alternative to the concepts of 'Nikola Lenivets' and 'Archstoyanie'.⁷ Dutch and German activists (once again in line with the historic initiatives of the Tsar Peter I at the beginning of the eighteenth century) have, for three years, been staging tea parties; distributing photo cameras; bringing the seeds of garden plants; rescuing the school from closing; laying out a children's kitchen garden, have brought geologists and ceramists; built a public ceramic furnace; opened a new department in the local shop; and the locals photographed and created the 'Made in *Zvizzchi*' project: in the shop shelves of such products, 'Made in *Zvizzchi*', appeared. Some goods from *Zvizzchi* were exhibited at Frieze in London by Myvillages and Grizedale Arts (2012). Myvillages were presented twice at the Moscow Biennial of Modern Art ('Greetings from *Zvizzchi*', the ZILL cultural center, 2013; 'International Village Shop', Bogorodskoye Gallery, 2015).

An 'International Village Shop', where the *Zvizzchi* Goods happened to be placed next to a Northern-Irish village, was exhibited at the International Village Show at the Museum of Modern Art of Leipzig. Though such an opportunity was open, none of *Zvizzchi*'s inhabitants wanted to go to the exhibition in Germany. Peasants have no motivation to leave the earth for no particular reason not

knowing for whom they should 'be a representative' abroad. The language barrier and an hereditary psychological 'iron curtain' seemed to be the strongest demotivator (at the same time 'Nikola-Lenivets Crafts' of Nikolay Polissky together with the artist had visited already many countries – the keywords 'work' and 'together' outweighed all doubts).

It is important to emphasise the role and sense of distance in communications between the locals and the facts (acts) of art. We will note three gradations:

1. Remote demonstration of their participation in projects (in Moscow, in Europe) isn't perceived as an interesting and relevant aspect of life. It is a matter of mythology or pragmatism.
2. The Archstoyanie festival as 'an invasion' of strange objects and unfamiliar people is perceived critically but is accepted as providing the possibility of profit.
3. The work of artists (Myvillages) in their territory (in the village) with some available forms of activity and technologies (to photograph; collect stones; look for clay; look after a kitchen garden; preserve food products; knit woollen products) generates trust and 'product response'. What artists call art they see as an updating of routine skills and practices.

Eventually, art influences the locals through collateral, but not aesthetic or conceptual, properties. Meanwhile they prefer to remain 'subordinate elements', accepting and responding with sincere interest and comprehensive communication. The useful effects of the new art practices offered by Myvillages began to be perceived as an inexplicable derivative of inexplicable value models of an art different from what in the Soviet period was considered beautiful and 'art in general' in the village.⁸

In 2017 Myvillages presented their Russian projects in the program of Krasnoyarsk Museum Biennial. Its subject was formulated in a way which is hard to translate through the phrase 'The World and Me'.⁹ Among the numerous art researches presented there it was difficult to find other long-term initiatives which would involve real inhabitants of the villages.

We can hardly speak about any specifics of rural art today but must consider the phenomenon from the point of view of art ethnography, analysis of urbanistic processes, or the potential use of the huge number of deserted villages for land art, actions and performances, photography.

Rural art, if it exists in Russia, isn't reflective, it implements itself outside any concept, it is eclectic and descriptive. Its subject and idea is 'the rural' rather than 'art'. Within a village without the influence of culture professionals and modern artists, home collections were created and are still created (and developed). They often enter into the category of a local attraction which sometimes is called a museum.

In Gory village in 1981 Sergei Ivanov started collecting keys, buttons, lighters, packs of tea, coffee tins, matchboxes. Twenty years later his collection took on the name of 'A Museum of the Bygone Life'. Both then and now, the main place among the exhibits is taken by bottles. Less than 80 people live in the village now, while in the Soviet period they were more than 400. Fellow villagers keep drinking and Sergei Ivanov – the only one who does not drink – continues to collect bottles.¹⁰

This local archaeology in fact is the true rural art. The fabric of which does not allow us to draw a line between traditional and modern, relevant and banal, private and general, rural and urban.

Rural art in Russia is mainly an art picnic. It is not by chance that in the late nineties and the beginning of the 2000s the Togliatti Museum of Local Lore began a 'Museum Picnic' project in which one of several different projects presented took place in a field facing the main building. For city artists, city curators and managers, city patrons, a trip out of the city is an escape into nature, a new environment and new visual contexts. For rural art as a product of rural civilisation and rural culture – it is not Russian but foreign artists who are most interested in its 'manifestation'. Rural art is appreciated by city dwellers and city experts in the context of their criteria, at collections, exhibitions and museum displays.

Art residences provide temporary and non-durable contacts, while events – first of all festivals and 'rural biennials' – transfer the potential for new contents and interest in rural art into tourist formats. Culture submits to business, modern art looks most fruitful and authentic in models and formats generated by the creative industries.

Still, the most natural art in rural areas turns out to be that which is done by the city people who have purchased or built dachas in the village. Near towns there will always be art settlements – Tarusa and its vicinities at the border of Moscow and Kaluga regions, Ozerki near St. Petersburg, Volyna near Yekaterinburg. But if we call what arises here as art phenomena 'modern rural art', then in the next moment we will cease to distinguish rural specificities (it is no accident that festivals in small cities are connected with metallurgy and oil industry – Vyksa, Satka, Surgut are organised by the same curators who realised rural initiatives in Nicola Lenivets, Zvizzchi or Shiryaev).¹¹ When in 2002 the artist Nikolay Polissky with the help of peasants ('Nikola-Lenivets Crafts') created a huge wattled media tower on the walls of which he placed trays where vegetables were cultivated, a program model of the rural art 'life cycle' was created – first peasants help the artist to realise his idea (to build a tower). Then PR-properties are created – tilt carts are woven out of rods, in them vegetables are placed which were allegedly cultivated on the tower walls (vegetables go up in trays and 'pictures of the harvest' are taken). A Moscow art critic gives peasants lectures on art – a video clearly shows that peasants do not really understand what he is talking about, and one of them asks the artist (but not the art critic): 'Is it true that we shall go

somewhere with all of that, go to Moscow? I shall feel awkward, I have only one pair of trousers – with holes and unwashed. What shall I do?’

And it is true that the following step in the participation of this project is the Art-Klyazma biennial in Moscow where an architectural composition with a restaurant and a steam-bath is built from tilt carts, while peasants and their wives sell pickles, self-made schnapps and food, earning what is ‘city’ money – as much as over 2000 dollars a month from ‘life in art’ – a threshold which is normally unreachable for village minds.¹²

- 1 The historic dynamics of the image of the rural is effective and evident in the following examples of ‘rural art’: Alexey Venetsianov (1780–1847) *Harvesting. Summer* (1827), State Tretyakov Gallery (www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/collection/na-zhatve-letu/). Ilya Repin (1844–1930) *Religious Procession in Kursk Province* (1880–1883), State Tretyakov Gallery (www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/collection/krestnyy-khod-v-kurskoy-gubernii/). Natalya Goncharova, (1881–1962) *Peasants Picking Apples* (1911), (www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/collection/krestyane-sobirayushchie-yabloki/). Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935) *The reaper on red* (1912–1913), (www.theartstory.org/artist-malevich-kasimir-artworks.html).
- 2 [Eds. note: *Netsuke* are miniature sculptures that were invented in seventeenth-century Japan to serve a practical function such as carrying small items.] First Matryoshka, 1890s, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_matryoshka_museum_doll_open.jpg
- 3 [Eds. note: the Palekh miniature is a Russian folk handicraft of a miniature painting, which is made with tempera paints on varnished articles made of papier-mâché (small boxes, cigarette and powder cases etc.), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palekh_miniature]
- 4 Federal State Statistics Service, http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/en/main/
- 5 Anastasia Khoroshilova, *Once the Sea Was Here* (2016), see <http://khoroshilova.net/work/work/fruher-war-hier-ein-meer/>
- 6 See <http://en.polissky.ru/artworks/snowmen/> and <http://en.polissky.ru/artworks/beaubourg/>
- 7 AMK is a Moscow based Association of Culture Managers – curators Georgy Nikich, Olga Gartman. The project was also supported by Mondriaan Fund Amsterdam (2012–2015) and Goethe Institute Moscow (2014–2015).
- 8 See <https://ru-ru.facebook.com/villagezvizzchi/>, www.biennale.ru/ and www.facebook.com/artbogorodskoe/photos/pcb.922241227892311/922241131225654/?type=3&theater, <https://gfk.de/2016/deinternational-village-show-zwizzchi-und-ballykinlar/>
- 9 [Eds. note: *Mir* is a word which in Russian pre-revolutionary orthography means ‘the surrounding world, the Universe’, which distinguished it from the proximate term – ‘peace, calmness’.]
- 10 Museum of Lost Way of Life, Gory, Novgorod Region (<https://tinyurl.com/y9tpdy24>).
- 11 On Ozerki, see <https://ru-ru.facebook.com/ozerki/>. Vyksa – <http://artovrag-fest.ru/>, Art Ovrage festival, the curator – Yulia Bychkova (she is a permanent curator of Archstoyanie). Satka – ‘My Satka’ is an architectural festival, a festival of Elena Obraztsova, ‘Ural Kislitsa’, a group of curators from Moscow (they are initiators of many Archstoyanie programs and the Shiryaevo Biennale).

Surgut, ‘The 60 parallel’ festival, the curator Georgy Nikich is also a developer of the residences program in Zvizzchi village. On Shiryaevo, see <http://en.shiryaevo-biennale.ru/>

12 See <http://www.artklyazma.ru/>

Georgy Nikich, ‘The Borders of the Rural: Materials for a History of Modern Art of “Rural” Russia’. Translated by Maria Shestakova, previously unpublished, 2018.

Renzo Martens

In Conversation with Sacha Bronwasser//2017

The Institute for Human Activities (IHA), founded by artist Renzo Martens, has been operating in the Congo since 2012. Sculptures (mainly self-portraits) fashioned from river clay by former plantation workers, now recognised as artists and working under the umbrella of the *Cercle d’Art Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise*, are 3D scanned on site and cast in chocolate in Amsterdam. This unique and imaginative activity, which has led to exhibitions in London, Berlin, Amsterdam and New York, marked the start of what Martens calls ‘reverse gentrification’: a process in which capital is returned to the place it was initially removed from. The project is located on twenty hectares of terrain, the site of the first Unilever plantation, established in 1911 and now owned by the IHA. In 2016 the revenue was invested in a new type of plantation – the post-plantation – which grows a variety of high-quality crops for the benefit of the entire village. Martens’ third brainchild (besides the chocolate sculptures and the post-plantation model) is the White Cube, a central element of the Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Equality, which will accommodate a study programme in the coming years and generate capital. In addition to a small team of Dutch, Congolese, Flemish and French workers, around twelve permanent artists and several Congolese environmental experts, including the famous biologist and activist René Ngongo, are directly involved in the Institute for Human Activities and the Cercle d’Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC).

Since 2012, a few years after the release of his controversial film *Enjoy Poverty*, the artist Renzo Martens has been working in the Congo. This year, with the opening of the White Cube on a former plantation, his mission to make critical art truly productive in a postcolonial world entered a new phase. Sacha Bronwasser paid him a visit to find out more.