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The Vertical Inverted? Dirt Aesthetics in Russian Conceptualist and Protest Art

Yngvar Steinholt

Russian conceptualist art was born of the late Soviet era. Initially its performances were confined to small groups and could be shared with wider audiences only orally, as tall tales or myth. In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, conceptualist art from Russia made its way into public spaces, galleries, museums, and the media. From around 2005, the spread of social media platforms enabled the low-budget recording and dissemination of conceptualist-inspired performances to ever-growing audiences independently of the editorial policies and priorities of traditional media outlets. Supported by a rising number of views, recorded and documented performances would occasionally alert traditional media and authorities, ensuring high-level public visibility if not always public acclaim. The format would make the art groups and activists Voiná, Pussy Riot, and Piotr Pavlensky known to an international audience.

The fact that Russian conceptualism embraced amateurism, play, and self-irony added to its wide appeal. It replaced the artist-as-genius with the artist-as-jester, often willfully provoking the cultural establishment in the process. While creating art, the conceptualist jesters insist that they are not an artist and do not even aspire to be one. On the contrary, low-life, a fraud, a nobody, a caricature, an “onanist” in the case of author Igor Iarkevitch,¹ a dog in the case of performance artist Oleg Kulik,² are all suitable alternative identities for the conceptualist. This self-ironic, sometimes consciously self-depriving refusal to take on the identity, or conform to established expectations of the artist, forms part of a particular dirt aesthetic. If not always explicit, dirt aesthetics form a vein in late Soviet and post-Soviet conceptualist art. This is

¹ Tine Roesen, “Den nye Ruslands literatur,” *Jyske historiker*, 117–18 (2008): 113–14.

² Andrei Erofeev, “Pussy Riot and the Cossacks: Russian Tradition of Art Resistance,” in *Pussy Riot and the Cossacks 28 June–28 September 2014*, Exhibition catalogue, Havremagasinet Länskunsthall Boden, 2014, 23.

sometimes seen less directly, as when art collective Voiná painted a sixty-five-meter tall, naivistic outline of an erect penis on a St Petersburg drawbridge,³ or when performance artist Aleksandr Brener spray-painted a dollar sign on a famous work by avant-garde icon Kazimir Malevich;⁴ sometimes more directly, as when Brener defecated in the art museum or linguist-and-artist Aleksandr Plutser-Sarno staged mock demonstrations with slogans labeling contemporary art “vomit” and “fuckery.”⁵

This chapter investigates the relationship between imperfection and dirt aesthetics as creative strategies, using Russian conceptualist art as case material. Its focus is not on analyzing individual works or performances. Rather, I ask why the dirty, the filthy, the unclean, vulgar, and profane have featured so prominently in Russian conceptualist and protest art and whether its goals and impacts align with or contrast those of imperfection. In the introduction to this volume, our notions of perfection and imperfection are interlinked with those of the complete and the incomplete, respectively. A key premise for the following argument is that striving for completeness and deliberately embracing the incomplete represent two different approaches to art. The former is often applied in the establishment of aesthetic ideals, which seek to engage the observer in (more or less) passive admiration of the cultural object. What I choose to call the *imperfectionist* approach seeks to involve the observer (consciously or unconsciously) in completing the incomplete. Because our thought patterns are designed to constantly strive for perfection, an imperfect object beckons us to finish it. The imperfectionist, by leaving something out, or by adding some annoying little grain that does not quite fit in, plays on our desire for completeness in order to make us engage with the cultural object. If this holds true, how does imperfection relate to dirt aesthetics? Is dirt aesthetics merely imperfection overload or something else altogether? This question invites a discussion of certain cognitive issues and their interrelationship with spatial perspectives. However, in order to motivate this connection, we first turn to the idea of “high art,” to elitist conceptions of artwork and artist, and the establishment of cultural and aesthetic hierarchies.

³ Oliver Johnson, “War on the Ru-net: Voiná’s *Dick Captured by the FSB* as a Networked Performance,” *Third Text* 27, no. 5 (2013): 591–606.

⁴ Xandra Schutte, “Aleksandr Brener,” *De Groene Amsterdammer* (May 6, 1998), <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/aleksandr-brener>.

⁵ Alexei Plutser-Sarno, “Sovremennoe iskusstvo—gnoi i blevotina!” Aktsiia A. Plutsera-Sarno na otkrytii Art- Moskvy v TsDkh,” *Live Journal* (May 14, 2008), <https://plucer.livejournal.com/tag/Искусство-блевотина!>

Hierarchies

The mutual relationship between art and secular and religious power is arguably as old as human creativity itself. “Canon” is a concept linked to contagious and time-consuming debates that go beyond the scope of this chapter.⁶ Here, focus rests on a single aspect of canon formation, namely the establishment of aesthetic hierarchies. Aesthetic and cultural hierarchies were constructed by people in power centuries before we can speak of a European “art canon,” and they are still being constructed with or without reference to “canon.” In 2000, Vladimir Putin began his first presidential term by listing fourteen Russian heroes, coincidentally all men, and not all artists.⁷ The list emphasized the Russian Federation’s continued commitment to past cultural and aesthetic ideals. Confirming that cultural hierarchies are relevant not only to a former superpower heading for a “managed democracy,” in 2004, Danish minister of culture Brian Mikkelsen created controversy by calling for the establishment of a Danish *Kulturkanon*. After raging debates, it came to include and “elevate” 108 Danish works of art.⁸

Aesthetic hierarchies are created by people in power for the purpose of nation building or, perhaps more commonly, by members of the social elite for the purpose of increasing their personal importance and influence. In the words of literary historian John Carey “high art is that which appeals to the minority whose social rank places them above the struggle for mere survival.”⁹ That art has no practical use simply heightens its appeal. The vertical organization of art objects in hierarchies based on notions of their aesthetic quality is influenced by enlightenment ideas about an unvarying standard of art, which “if it is truly great should *not* be of this time and place.”¹⁰ To this can be added Immanuel Kant’s concept of good art as a balance between pleasure and morals, as opposed to bad art represented by a dubious pleasure for pleasure’s sake.¹¹ Walter Benjamin’s concept “aura,”^{12,13} a social construct that increases the distance between the work

⁶ For a discussion of canon, see, for example, Lee Morrissey (ed.), *Debating the Canon: A Reader from Addison to Nafisi* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁷ Edwin Bacon, *Contemporary Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 25.

⁸ For a full list, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danish_Culture_Canon.

⁹ John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 32.

¹⁰ David Byrne, *How Music Works* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012), 299. His emphasis.

¹¹ For a discussion of Kantian aesthetics and its contemporary critics, see: Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All* (London: Verso, 2013), 38–46.

¹² Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 218–22.

¹³ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

of art and its listener or observer, thereby imposing limitations on how the work is interpreted, can also be understood as an aspect of the high art superstructure. Aura potentially inhibits the work's impact on people's lives: you are invited to gaze in awe at a declared masterpiece, not interact or play around with it.

Benjamin hoped that aura would be eradicated by the technological advancement of film, handing the power of defining art back to the common people. Instead, Hollywood created the cult of the movie star and American modernism managed to diffuse the political energy of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde, redefine it as "critical art," and absorb it into the postwar canon.¹⁴ Thus, in the West, conceptualism became critical art, an apolitical art that criticizes other art, rather than a revolutionary art that aspires to change society. The logic of critical art meant that a new artist (e.g., Cage, Warhol) could take on the role of the artist-as-genius directly and claim to represent "real" art, as opposed to existing ("false") art. In the West, this contributed to erasing the divide between artist and artisan, artwork and industrial design, art-as-object and art-as-experience. A prominent example of this is Joseph Beuys's introduction in the 1960s of organic, naturally decomposing materials in his installations, partially in order to prevent them from being preserved in museums.¹⁵ In Russia, however, historical developments took a different direction. As we shall see, Russian conceptualists faced a contrasting situation with strictly limited opportunities and had to find other ways of challenging the art establishment.

The Case of Russia

Secular art began flourishing relatively late in Russia, but little more than a century after Peter the Great opened the country for European influences, Russian authors, playwrights, composers, painters, and sculptors were winning worldwide recognition and admiration. By the nineteenth century, the arts were already serving as the main arena for societal and social debate in the Russian empire. The Hegelian vision of critic Vissarion Belinsky (1811–48) of art as a vehicle to expose social ills, fight injustice, and improve and reform society was soon reflected in the works of Russian realist painters and authors.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*

¹⁵ This did not deter curators from creating retrospective exhibitions of Beuys's work. At the 2005 "Joseph Beuys Actions, Vitrines, Environments" at London's Tate Modern, the smell of rancid fat was accepted as an integral part of key exhibits.

The ideals from the golden age of Russian realism had a profound impact on the Russian intelligentsia's concept of the national art canon. The social concerns of realism fitted well with the Marxist-Leninist historical narrative of the budding Soviet Union. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, modernist forms thrived, but unlike in the West, where the avant-garde was dedicated to the deconstruction of bourgeois aesthetics, Russian modernist revolutionaries were also engaged in a competition over cultural hegemony in the new Soviet state. The Soviet clampdown on independent artistic groupings began in 1928 and culminated in the socialist-realist doctrine, which made artists "engineers of the soul" under party supervision.¹⁶ Where American modernism redefined revolutionary art of the 1910s and 1920s as "critical art" and incorporated it, the Bolsheviks discarded and excluded it wholesale in favor of a more monolithic socialist art under party control.

Importantly, however, the idea that great art engages constructively in improving society was not only hijacked by socialist realism but extended through various other trajectories. Critically minded artists within the Soviet Union employed old realist ideals in their attempt to continue discussion and debate in the rapidly closing cultural space of the 1930s and in the wake of the late 1950s thaw. For the Russian émigré intelligentsia, the same ideals were valued as a means to expose the ills of Soviet society. From the early 1960s onward, even socialist realism allowed a certain degree of old-school realist attitude, especially on less ideologically controversial topics such as environmentalism or feminism. Thus, in a Russian context, the ideals of realism hooked up with lingering Kantian moral imperatives and, quite possibly, Russian Orthodox sentiments about the distracting and immoral qualities of "art for its own sake."¹⁷

The romantic notion of the artist-as-genius has remained strong in the Russian discourse on culture, where the national poet Aleksandr S. Pushkin is still regularly—and without irony—referred to as "our sun." This also reflects the special status attributed to literary text in the Russian cultural canon. Of course, not everything comes part and package with "high-art Pushkin." It is no secret that Pushkin also wrote epic poems littered with pornographic imagery and swear words, but the mere mention of such a fact continues to create controversy.¹⁸ After all, the protection of Russian literary language

¹⁶ The Soviet obsession with text and image is reflected in literature and cinema being the first art forms affected by socialist realist doctrine.

¹⁷ For more on the relationship between church and secular art in Russia, see Mikhail Suslov, "The Russian Orthodox Church in Search of the Cultural Canon," *Transcultural Studies* 12 (2016): 39–65.

¹⁸ The Scotsman, "Russian literary giant Pushkin labelled as a peddler of porn," *The Scotsman*, January 30, 2005, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/world/russian-literary-giant-pushkin-labelled-as-a-peddler-of-porn-1-1402249>.

(including the suppression of swear words) is considered by some to be a question of national security.¹⁹ Not everyone in Russia is, like the renowned linguist Oleg Trubachev, ready to accept that language, like the ocean, is an organic whole of forms, shapes, and levels of depth.²⁰

In the Soviet era the artist-as-genius was modified and retained because of ideological necessity: the party was in control of aesthetic and moral education. Amateurism, however well-intended, had the potential to derail the masses from the ideals of communism; therefore, the decontextualized “greatness” of high-art²¹ was merged with Marxist-Leninist historical determinism. The message was that, being ahead in the historical development, all Soviet people are not only educated but morally superior to the downtrodden masses of the capitalist West. Thus, they also know their masters of truly great art.

In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and turmoil of the early Russian Federation, the arts enjoyed an unprecedented level of freedom from political and social control. However, along with the old ideological constraints the cultural infrastructure disappeared as well. Houses and palaces of culture and the education of cultural workers had been in the hands of the now defunct Soviet trade unions, few or no replacements were offered, and until a new infrastructure began to emerge, creative artists were left at the mercy of a poorly regulated consumer capitalism. New institutions began forming from below as artists shared workshops and facilities, formed art collectives, and staged shows and exhibitions. Simultaneously, the Russian Federation had to preserve its prestige and protect its cultural heritage, its art museums and collections, reinforcing a hierarchy-defined superstructure. Eventually, the grassroots initiatives and extended superstructure would meet, sometimes on common ground, sometimes in clashes between traditionalist values and new ideas. Such clashes were reflected in the cultural debate of the mid- to late 1990s. The limitless experimentation far beyond previous moral, political, and aesthetic standards provoked deep fears of cultural degeneration and the loss of tradition. A particularly heated debate raged over the fate of the Russian language, where traditionalists called for its protection from destructive neologisms, loans, dialect, slang, swear words and erratic grammar; whereas experimentalists utilized the same to

¹⁹ Liudmila Verbitskaia, “Sokhranim russkii iazyk—sokhranim Rossiю,” *Gudok*, September 21, 2005, http://ruskline.ru/monitoring_smi/2005/09/21/sokhranim_russkij_yazyk_-_sokhranim_rossiyu/.

²⁰ Oleg Trubachev, “Puteshestvie za slovom, chast’ 2,” *Russkoe voskresenie*, September 6, 2000, <http://www.voskres.ru/bratstvo/travel2.htm>.

²¹ Byrne, *How Music Works*, 299.

demonstrate the living, changing Russian language's versatility, adaptability, and linguistic power.²²

In 1985 cultural historians Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii described the historical development of Russia as a pendulum, swinging back and forth between a progressive and a reactionary mode. In the same year Slavic scholar Vladimir Papernyi,²³ writing from the point of departure of architecture in the Soviet 1920s and 1930s, first proposed a complementary view of a "revolutionary, cosmopolitan and experimental Culture One [which] is regularly transformed into an imperial, complacently solidified and stagnant, monumental and nationalistic Culture Two."²⁴ Papernyi's perspective is helpful in the current context on two levels. Following this perspective, we can conclude that, first, cultural and aesthetic hierarchies tend to share the values and objectives of Culture Two, whereas opposition or rebellion against them corresponds with key qualities of Culture One. Second, two decades of Culture One are framed by two eras dominated by Culture Two, namely the late Soviet era and the Russian cultural climate since 2010. These two decades coincided with Russian conceptualism, which grew forth from the mid-1970s, flourished in the 1990s and 2000s, and became suppressed by the mid-2010s.²⁵

In line with Papernyi's perspective, the seeds of Russian conceptualist art were sown during the hegemony of Culture Two by key figures such as Dmitri Prigov (1940–2007), Vitaly Komar (b. 1943) and Alexander Melamid (b. 1945) in the 1970s. Their ideas would inspire the provocative and controversial conceptualism of such influential artists as Aleksandr Brener (b. 1957), Oleg Kulik (b. 1961), Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955), and Avdei Ter-Oganian (b. 1961) in the 1990s. Since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidencies—aided by laws, regulations, and legal

²² For more on the Russian language debate, see Michael Gorham, *After Newspeak: Language Culture and Politics in Russia from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

²³ Vladimir Papernyi, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁴ Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Literature since 1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7.

²⁵ The 2010s read as another shift from Culture One to Culture Two finds support in Timofeeva, Olga, "Vladimir Papernyi: Na dvore ocherednaia 'Kul'tura Dva' pravda s 'Feisbukom,'" *Novaya gazeta*, January 29, 2013, www.novayagazeta.ru/arts/56485.html. The successful suppression of Russian conceptualist protest art since 2010 is confirmed by the emigration of members of the Voiná group, Pussy Riot, and of Petr Pavlenskii; see Yngvar Steinholt, "Cats, Punk, Arson and New Media," in *The Routledge Companion of Media and Activism*, ed. Graham Meikle (London: Routledge, 2018), 153–61. Notably, pioneering Russian conceptualists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid emigrated to NYC in 1977, during the former hegemony of Culture Two.

initiatives—Culture Two sentiments gradually came to dominate the public discourse on the arts. As the pressure increased, a new generation of artists, boosted by the spread of the internet, took up the fight. They merged conceptualist ideas with activism and tapped into the energy of ongoing social protests. The ensuing protest art, while utilizing ideas and concepts inspired by the late Soviet conceptualists, combined their tongue-in-cheek irony with a more extrovert, radical, and militant activist stance. Their answers to the suppression of Culture One were retaliation and escalation. Tellingly, Voiná's first performance was based on throwing homeless cats over the counter at McDonald's. A few years later, its radical faction was overturning police cars and torching prison vans. However, as conceptualist protest art mercilessly attacked the cultural elite and their aesthetic ideals, the ever-growing controversies wore on the enthusiasm of their supporters. Among a wider public that felt annoyed rather than empowered from the outset, disinterest turned to hostility, a development helped by negative media coverage, smear campaigns, and court trials. In effect, the protest art rebellion against a dogmatic and patronizing official discourse on culture was beginning to reinforce the very same ideas it aimed to undermine. During the Pussy Riot trial in 2012, progressive-minded intellectuals were voicing concern about the long-term effects of protest art stunts in turning the public opinion away from what they saw as the legitimate political goals of social activists, toward hierarchical, antidemocratic, and outdated philosophical conceptions of art and morals. The pendulum gains momentum not only from the pull of Culture Two but from the push of Culture One, and vice versa: too much control facilitates release as much as too much release facilitates control.

Papernyi developed his perspective while studying the transition into Stalinist architecture. His perspective embeds the concepts of Culture One and Culture Two in a spatial approach and he partially describes the transition from the 1920s avant-garde to the neoimperial 1930s in spatial terms. Thus, Culture One is linked to a horizontal axis defined by lateral orientation, centrifugal forces, boundary-crossing, diffusion; whereas Culture Two is linked to the vertical axis typified by centralization, boundary-establishment, hierarchy. On a secondary level the horizontal is associated with experience (poetry, experiment, collaboration, mechanism, performance) and the vertical with object (epic, consolidation, heroism, work). This links Russian conceptualism, with its strategies of imperfection and/or dirt aesthetics, to the horizontal orientation of Culture One, traditionalism and the establishment and defense of aesthetic hierarchies to the vertical orientation of Culture Two. In itself, however, this tells us precious little about the roles played by the aesthetics of imperfection and dirt in the actual cultural shifts.

Perhaps a closer look at the cognitive and metaphorical structures behind the horizontal and vertical axes could provide us with a few more answers.

Spatial Aesthetics, Imperfection, and Dirt

That we experience the world around us through our bodies is hardly a controversial statement, yet it took a cognitive turn within the humanistic disciplines to appreciate how fundamental this fact is to human language and, by extension, creative arts. This cognitive turn has given rise to the widely used approach of metaphor theory,²⁶ as well as cognitive poetics.²⁷ The return of focus to the human body has also enabled the current spatial turn within the humanistic disciplines. The human creation of meaning begins with the basics of gravity and its impact on our motoric and biological functions. Next comes our basic knowledge of our surroundings: light comes from above, plants and trees stretch toward the light, overview is gained by climbing up on objects, rotten fruit falls down to the floor, organic matter (our own feces included) decomposes down on the ground (from which new herbal life grows), and so on.²⁸ The basic metaphor UP IS PURE not only contrasts its opposite DOWN IS DIRTY, it also organizes and informs our relationships with social, spiritual, and cultural phenomena. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan puts it: “Culture may be deemed ‘low’ or ‘high’. ‘Low’ is of the body and the earth, ‘high’ is of the mind and the sky; the one associated with the common people, the other with the elite, a distinction that the elite make to which the common people acquiesce.”²⁹

In the Soviet context the elite was represented by the party, which, according to the ruling ideology, was all-knowing. It considered good or high art that which guided and enlightened the people according to party doctrine, low art was mere entertainment, and bad art was art which (actually or potentially) confused or distracted the masses from communist goals and ideals. The taste of common people could not be trusted, constructive and enlightening art had to be provided by trained professionals. Examples of art forms that at various times caused concern in higher party ranks were musical

²⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

²⁷ Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²⁸ For further discussion, see Åsne Høgetveit, *The Moral Vertical in Russian Cinema: Female Pilots, Flight Attendants, Cosmonauts and Aliens* (Ph.D thesis, Tromsø: UiT—The Arctic University of Norway, 2019), 22–6.

²⁹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Romantic Geography: In Search of the Sublime Landscape* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 2013), 17.

styles such as jazz and rock, dances such as the Swing, nonfigurative graphic art or sculpture, and poetry or fiction concerned with individual emotions and experiences. Members of the Union of Soviet Composers described the evolution of music as a painstaking climb from the base barbarity of rhythm (stone-age, ancient past, down) to the lofty heights of harmony (civilization, future, up).³⁰ In other words, Western-inspired rhythmic music represented evolution in reverse. As for non-figurative art, on September 15, 1974, Soviet authorities were put on the spot by a brave, unsanctioned art exhibition in the Moscow suburb of Beliaev. The exhibition became known as The Bulldozer Exhibition, because it was attacked and destroyed using bulldozers and water cannons. Artists were beaten up and arrested like criminals, and works of art quite literally equated to dirt by being crushed into the mud. The event was disastrous for the artists involved, yet succeeded in exposing the extent of barbaric violence the authorities were prepared to sink to in order to defend their professed high-culture ideals.³¹ The bad publicity created by the event internationally would force Soviet authorities to briefly ease the conditions for artists on the margins.

How can insistence on aesthetic ideals create such havoc? Possibly because the metaphors PURE IS UP and GOOD IS UP are fundamentally connected to VIRTUE IS UP.³² We refer to people as being of “high” moral standing and comparably to others as having “fallen” into disrepute (DEPRAVITY IS DOWN). In her study of female characters in Soviet and Russian movies, Åsne Høgetveit introduces the concept of the moral vertical.³³ Significantly, she points to fundamental cognitive aspects of moral verticality that precede spiritual or religious concerns. Acting morally brings social well-being, it is uplifting, whereas morally failing in the eyes of your peers or society brings you down (makes your heart sink). Emotions have the ability to make us feel light or heavy. In his work on air and dreams, Gaston Bachelard goes as far as stating that moral values cannot be expressed without reference to a vertical axis.³⁴

Høgetveit’s concept of the moral vertical is of crucial importance to our discussion of aesthetics of imperfection and dirt. It is the moral vertical that gives the hierarchic construct of Culture Two its claim to hegemony. High art is virtuous. Popular art might well be neutral, but there is also bad—morally harmful or culturally alien—art. The cultural canon is sought

³⁰ See, for example, Anatolii Doronin and Arkadii Lisenkov, “Chto proku ot roka,” *Molodaia gvardiia*, no. 5 (1986): 214–31.

³¹ Erofeev, “Pussy Riot and the Cossacks,” 9.

³² Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 17.

³³ Høgetveit, *The Moral Vertical in Russian Cinema*, 27–30.

³⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1988), 10.

reinforced by reference to the many threats it faces. Defending established aesthetic and cultural hierarchies is defending virtue, and various moral panics are employed in its defense. Ironically, this reveals a certain lack of belief in the power of virtue on the part of the most dedicated defenders. Most importantly, however, the Culture Two discourse questions the morals of anyone who, for any number of reasons, challenges the status quo. This brings us to the question: what strategies are available to artists representing Culture One in the face of a dominant Culture Two? Clearly it would not be considered virtuous to simply demand the right to represent virtue on the terms of the establishment. Instead, the artist can abide by the rules, play into the hands of cultural hegemony, and expose its shortcomings through the work of art itself.

Celebrating Artistic Imperfection

The absence of “critical art” as a concept in Soviet Russia deprived Russian conceptualists of the role of artist-as-genius, leaving them with that of the artist-as-jester. This involved accepting and embracing—more or less tongue in cheek—the verdict of the cultural establishment: you are no artist (at the very least a failed or imperfect artist, or not an artist in the traditional sense, or even opposed to the ideals of art as such). This position could also prove an asset. Igor Iarkevitch may have presented himself as a failed Solzhenitsyn and an “onanist” (his writing is purely intended to satisfy himself), but his writings may still one day enter the literary canon. Andrei “Svin” Panov (1960–98) in the 1980s vehemently denied being a punk rocker and even playing music, describing himself and his band as just “stinking skunks.”³⁵ Today he is commonly honored as a visionary musician and credited with bringing punk rock to the USSR. In the 1990s, conceptualists Oleg Kulik and Aleksandr Brener, exploring the contradictions between the purity of the artistic genius and the depravity of the common man, staged the artist-as-dog and the artist-as-vandal. Kulik toured art galleries, convincingly and consistently impersonating a wild, filthy, and most unruly dog.³⁶ Brener’s performances included spray painting a green dollar sign on an iconic

³⁵ A. Kushnir, *Zolotoe podpol'e: polnaia illiustrirovannaia entsikloperdiia roksamizdata 1967–1994* (Nizhnyi Novgorod: Dekom, 1994), 211.

³⁶ Roberta Smith, “On Becoming a Dog by Acting Like One,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/04/18/arts/on-becoming-a-dog-by-acting-like-one.html>. For more on the dog in Russian art and writing, see Henrietta Mondry, *Political Animal: Representing Dogs in Modern Russian Culture* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015).

painting by Malevich and describing it as a dialogue between two artists about the social elite's commodification and appropriation of the arts.³⁷

Letting go of, or openly challenging, your status as an artist could also free the work from the constraints of an elitist art discourse, allowing it to be valued on its own terms. Works can be positioned below the reach of high-art conventions in a number of ways: subtly, by emphasizing its formal imperfection (e.g., amateurism, lack of refinement, lack of completion, or secondary importance) more directly by signaling that it is something other than art (e.g., a joke, pastiche, satire, comment, celebration, or play) or provocatively by describing it as the antithesis to art (e.g., suggesting it is garbage, dirt, filth, or abject matter). In all three instances the main emphasis is on the cultural object representing something else than (and potentially inferior to) "art" in the traditional sense. Immediately, enhanced by the creator's deliberate evasiveness about what exactly the creation represents, this approach raises the principal question: if indeed it is not art, what is it? In order to establish this, the audience must reconsider the fundamental question: What is art?

On this basis, a sympathetic audience might, like John Carey,³⁸ question certain limitations of the current definition of art. Art, the message is, is not reducible to sacred objects of worship in museums; art is practice, a living experience that should rightfully include and interact with all other art, including masterpieces of the past. If art is indeed a part of life, it follows that it is no more pure, elevated, or moral than life itself, but just as full of contradictions, chaos, and grittiness. Precisely these features tend to be underplayed, removed, or rearticulated in the formation of aesthetic hierarchies with firmly established borders. From the practicing artist's perspective, art should not require protection from other art or from life in all its forms and shades. Aesthetic hierarchies and their ulterior motives are at best superfluous, at worst damaging. Nevertheless, their very existence enables rebellion as much as rebellion necessitates the protection of the canon: each side depends upon the other for their *raison d'être*. This is the context in which quite literally, pardon my expression, the shit hits the fan in Russian conceptualist and protest art.

Dirt Aesthetics

Thus far we have compared two competing discourses on art in the Russian context: one horizontal, inclusive (Culture One) versus one vertical, exclusive

³⁷ Schutte, "Aleksandr Brener."

³⁸ Carey, *What Good Are the Arts*.

(Culture Two). Strategies involving various notions of imperfection (“I am not really an artist,” “what I do is not really art”) aim to expand the definition of art and what it represents. Simultaneously, imperfectionists take (or pretend to take) the dismissive comments of elitist art discourse (“this is not proper art”) at face value. Yet also outraged denouncements are regularly directed from the top of the aesthetic-moral vertical at someone below (or outside). An artist whose work is denounced as “filth” has the same option as the imperfectionist, to embrace the verdict of the elite. However, in this case, the consequences are different and more radical. By accepting to be the creator of filth, or to impersonate filth, the artist engages directly with the moral-aesthetic vertical and volunteers to represent the diametral opposite of high art’s alleged beauty, virtue, and purity. Where the imperfectionist leaves the high end of the aesthetic-moral vertical aside and concentrates on laterally expanding the central part of the extended vertical axis, the impersonator of filth draws the vertical axis demonstratively to its logical conclusion at its lower extreme.

Of course, this artistic strategy is not limited to filth in the literal sense. When Avdei Ter-Oganian brought copies of orthodox icons into a church and proceeded to chop them up with an axe in a work entitled “Young Atheist,”³⁹ he identified with the iconoclast in response to attacks on the contemporary art scene from religious segments in the Russian elite and their allies in the Russian Orthodox Church. However, in order to properly explore the lower extreme of the aesthetic-moral vertical, it will be necessary to discuss the implications of its most extreme manifestations. It follows that the object at hand is normally excluded from cultured and polite conversation. Indeed, the taboos surrounding human excrement may answer for parts of its power, but what could this power entail?⁴⁰ One answer is suggested in one of many anecdotes about Soviet-era punk-rocker Andrei “Svin” Panov.⁴¹

In the early to mid-1980s, rock fans began gathering in the stairwell outside the flat of Boris Grebenshchikov, lead singer and songwriter of the most prominent rock band of the Leningrad musical underground at the time, Akvarium. The walls were soon covered in graffiti. At one point, Panov, in his own response to fans’ worship, defecated on Grebenshchikov’s doorstep. Disgusted, Grebenshchikov called the police. When the constables

³⁹ Erofeev, “Pussy Riot and the Cossacks,” 28.

⁴⁰ For a European cultural history of excrement, see Alison Moore, “Historicizing the Modern European Excremental World-View,” *Advanced Research in Gastroenterology & Hepatology* 10, no. 1 (July 2018). DOI: 10.19080/ARGH.2018.09.555777.

⁴¹ Much like anecdotes generated by the performances of early Russian conceptualists, this one from the Leningrad rock scene survived to this day. Its point on the power of human excrement remains valid even if the events themselves would prove to be pure myth.

arrive, Panov can simply pick up his stool in his hand and walk away, confident the police will never let him in the car with such evidence. Read as a conceptualist performance, Panov's stunt successfully incorporated the reaction of the authorities in a manner similar to Russian conceptualists before (e.g., the 1974 bulldozer exhibition) and conceptualist activist since (e.g., Petr Pavlenskii's "Fixation" [2016]).⁴²

In 1994, Aleksandr Brener staged the performance "Plagiarism" at the A. S. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. Standing in front of a painting by Vincent van Gogh, he fouled his pants while exclaiming "Vincent! Vincent!" The performance title might refer to one of the first performances by Brener, where he made a similar appearance, but restricted himself to imitating the excretion part.⁴³ Brener presented the performance as a "dialogue with the early modernists,"⁴⁴ and his act demonstrates the feeling of humiliation experienced by a (common) artist when facing the work of a Great Artist, whose genius he can never match. Significantly for the current context, Brener overidentifies with the elitist concept of "high" art. By locating himself as an artist at its extreme lower end, he performs a total inversion of the aesthetic-moral vertical. The act of defecation represents the most trivial of human actions and arguably the one furthest removed from human creativity. On the one hand, in the context of late modern art, the act could be considered a cliché, on the other hand the potential of excrement to disgust people is virtually inexhaustible. Thus, sarcastically presenting himself as artist and his performance as art, Brener symbolically locates himself and his feces-sullied pants at the opposite end of the axis from the celebrated master Van Gogh and his masterpiece. In other words, "Plagiarism" exposes the full logic of elitist concepts of art by demonstratively drawing the full aesthetic-moral vertical from top to bottom.

Brener's approach is fundamentally different from the horizontal outward push made by proponents of Culture One in the 1990s. Loosely connected to the Moscow conceptualists in the early 1990s, author Vladimir Sorokin, in

⁴² Pavlenskii famously nailed his scrotum to Moscow's Red Square. For his removal, police were forced to act as carers, cover the naked man, and gently remove the nail pinning him to the cobblestone—an awkward task to handle for law enforcement officials. Petr Pavlenskii, "Fixation," *YouTube*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giFkin-0hPI>. Sylwia Hlebowicz, *Petr Pavlenskii as a Case Study of the Paradigm of Iurodstvo in Modern Russian Art* (MA thesis UiT—The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, 2015), 66–71.

⁴³ Russian Gesture, "Alexander Brener. 1994 'Plagiarism' (with B. Mamonov and A. Litvin). A. S. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts," *Russian Gesture: Online Russian Performance History*, December 30, 1994, <https://ru-performance.livejournal.com/27989.html>.

⁴⁴ Maria Katkova, "Meretrix & Prostibulum," *Umelec Magazine*, no. 2 (1998), <http://divus.cc/praha/en/article/meretrix-prostibulum>.

his early short stories, explored the extremes of literary language suddenly accessible after the Soviet collapse. His quest sometimes pushed the very limits of syntax and grammar toward breaking point and his scenarios from the absurdly funny into the unsettling or the outright sickening. In the short story “Sergei Andreevich,”⁴⁵ for example, a schoolboy has grown so utterly obsessed with admiration for his teacher that during a school trip he follows him into the woods where he eats the teacher’s excrement. Like Brener, Sorokin disgusts and provokes his audience, but he does so within a larger context of exploring the lure of ideology and its, often brutal, consequences. In his 1994 novel *Norma* (The Norm), published as the debate about norms of the Russian language and morals raged, Sorokin portrays the act of conforming to ideology as coprophagy.⁴⁶ Ideology quite literally requires people to act as animals. Surely, Sorokin’s transgressive push contributed to the return of forces aligned with Culture Two,⁴⁷ but unlike Brener in *Plagiarism* he did not demonstratively identify with them.

Oleg Kulik collaborated with Sorokin in the 1990s and his unruly dog takes the concept of human-turned-animal further.⁴⁸ In the 1990s Russian conceptualists explored what happens to an artist no longer obliged to contribute to the creation of model citizens (Soviet Man), when the artist becomes an ordinary person, a simple person, a bad or filthy person, or even a non-person. Kulik’s artist-as-animal, stripped of all human faculties, engages with the aesthetic-moral vertical in a similar manner to Brener’s “Plagiarism,” if less directly. While the dog in one sense represents the non-artist Other of the elitist discourse on art, it remains more ambiguous, pointing at the bottom end of the aesthetic-moral vertical without explicitly aligning with it. The barking, growling, urinating, and defecating but also cuddly and playful dog occupies an ironic middle ground between Sorokin’s alteration between a horizontal and a downward push, and Brener’s identification with the vertical’s lower extreme.

How did Russian authorities react to such artistic challenges? The first decade of the new millennium saw an increase in government control of the Russian cultural sphere and a corresponding reduction in the space available for experimental, critical, and provocative art. Whereas Russian authorities initially kept a low profile, extreme nationalist groups and religious zealots began, sometimes violently, to target contemporary art exhibitions they felt

⁴⁵ Vladimir Sorokin, *Pervyi subbotnik: rasskazy* (Ad Marginem: Moscow, 2001).

⁴⁶ Vladimir Sorokin, *Norma* (Ad Marginem: Moscow, [1994] 2002).

⁴⁷ Sorokin’s 1999 novel *Blue Lard* brought him charges for dissemination of pornography for, among other things, its portrayal of Stalin and Khrushchev as homosexual lovers. Vladimir Sorokin, *Goluboe salo* (Ad Marginem: Moscow, 1999).

⁴⁸ Smith, “On Becoming a Dog by Acting Like One.”

offended common decency or religious feelings. When curators reported the vandalism, expecting the protection of Russian law, they were instead charged with “inciting religious hatred.” The first major incident happened in January 2003 at the exhibition “Careful! Religion!” at the Moscow Sakharov Centre.⁴⁹ In March 2007 Andrei Erofeev and Yuri Samodurov were taken to trial for “Forbidden Art 2006,” which exhibited twenty-three works of art previously banned by the authorities.⁵⁰ The response came in the form of a more militant and confrontational art activism: the Voiná group attended Erofeev and Samodurov’s trial to perform a punk song, “All Cops Are Bastards,” live in the courtroom. The subsequent “radicalization” of protest art is reflected in the performances of Petr Pavlenskii, who went from sowing his lips shut during the Pussy Riot court case to torching the doors of the FSB (formerly KGB) Liubianka headquarters.⁵¹

Editor of a five-volume dictionary of Russian swear words, linguist Alexei Plutser-Sarno (b. 1962) became involved in Voiná’s performances during 2008 and began publishing a chronicle of their performances on his blog.⁵² As the group’s self-appointed ideologist, Plutser-Sarno co-organized a demonstration on May 14, 2008, at the opening of the “Art of Moscow” exhibition. Artists and guests were invited to play the role of “Demonstrators,” equipped with slogan T-shirts and placards, while Plutser-Sarno shouted appeals through a megaphone. The slogans denounced contemporary art (e.g., as “rot and puke,” “complete fuckery,” “drugs and porn,” “a shithouse”), called for the extermination of contemporary artists, or praised the Great Masters of the past.

Hijacking the language of the contemporary art scene’s most militant enemies, the slogans mixed it with traditionalist praise of past masters. Artists and audiences performed the oppressive and defaming slogans of their opponents, thus celebrating the very same aesthetic “Other” embraced by Brener in *Plagiarism*. Seemingly, the demonstration built on the same principle of identifying with the strict boundaries of a Culture Two returning in (and by) force. If this was all there was to it, it could be argued that Plutser-Sarno’s “demonstrators” were simply reclaiming control of their space, effectively consuming the energy base for hostile protests themselves.

⁴⁹ Mischa Gabowitsch, *Protest in Putin’s Russia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 180.

⁵⁰ HRW, “Russia: Reverse Judgment against Human Rights Defender Investigate Misuse of Anti-Extremism Law to Stifle Artistic Expression,” *Human Rights Watch*, July 12, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/07/12/russia-reverse-judgment-against-human-rights-defender>.

⁵¹ For further details, see Steinholt, “Cats, Punk, Arson and New Media,” 166–7.

⁵² Alexei Plutser Sarno, *Blog of the Voiná Group Ideologist & Artist Alex Plutser-Sarno: Actions, Performances, Installations. LiveJournal* (2019), <https://plucer.livejournal.com/>.

However, in typical conceptualist ironic manner, the demonstrators' alleged self-empowerment through identification with abject matter becomes less clear-cut in the light of the declared motivation for the performance. Plutser-Sarno presents it also as an inside critique of the development of the contemporary art scene itself:

The meeting and demonstration were held in protest against the hegemony of commercial art, the turning of gallery and exhibition life into pop, and also all sorts of art-shit, in particular 1) The shit that is poured on contemporary art; 2) The shit into which contemporary art is sinking as it becomes commodified and turned into garbage; 3) the shit that artists pour on each other as they split into clans around the cribs; 4) the shit that the Medvedev-circling artist bourgeoisie pour on the image of Russia.⁵³

Now, who is exhibiting moral concerns and constructing a vertical here? By reinvoking and highlighting the dismissal or denouncement of contemporary art by the cultural elite, the art activist knowingly contributes to their reinforcement.

Inverting or Upholding the Vertical?

This probe into Russian conceptualist dirt aesthetics and its relationship with aesthetics and rhetorics of imperfection has, not surprisingly, revealed a complex discourse, characterized by dynamic positions. Approaching the discourse from a spatial perspective derived from Papernyi's cultural shifts, we are dealing with two main tendencies in the form of a horizontal axis (Culture One) and a vertical axis (Culture Two). The first tendency emphasizes creativity over morals and seeks to liberate itself from dominant aesthetic hierarchies through various strategies of imperfection applied to the work and/or its creator. By leaving aside the definitions of "art" or "artist," imperfectionist strategies contribute to a debate of what constitutes art. The latter emphasizes tradition and conformity, cultural and aesthetic hierarchies and tie-in to moral and educational concerns. By impersonating high art's diametral opposite, the ultimate low, dirt aesthetics actively engage with the vertical axis by deliberately targeting conceptions of art-as-virtue. This sets dirt aesthetics apart from imperfectionist strategies.

⁵³ Plutser-Sarno, "Sovremennoe iskusstvo—gnoi i blevotinal"

Clearly, however, art can accommodate more than a single idea simultaneously. The force of Russian conceptualism is to play up to the expectations of making a horizontal push, while on another level aligning with the vertical. This enables the creation of an ironic space where multiple contradictions inhibit clear answers and simple solutions. It provokes, excites, or frustrates, and dirt aesthetics is a main means to achieve such an effect. The example of the 1974 Bulldozer Exhibition thus has two sides: the exhibited works of art themselves and the “performance” of destruction involving the Soviet authorities. Similarly, the lateral drive of Sorokin’s language experiments coexists with the dirt aesthetics of his motifs and vocabulary; Kulik’s unruly dog mocks the artist as well as the dominant aesthetic ideal; Plutser-Sarno’s identification of contemporary art with abject matter not only mocks the language of its opponents but scalds the contemporary art scene itself.

Where imperfectionist strategies seek to erase a rigid aesthetic-moral vertical, expanding the discourse on art and making it more inclusive, dirt aesthetics thrives on remaining in a mutual death grip with elitist concepts of high art. The mutual interdependence of a canon and its challengers suggests the battle is eternal, but in the world of Russian art, who can say for sure?

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