

The 2000 J.B. Rudnyckyj Distinguished Lecture

University of Manitoba

Presented by

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THE NEW RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDES: POSTMODERN POETRY AND MULTIMEDIA IN THE LATE SOVIET AND EARLY POST-SOVIET PERIODS.

The current situation in Russian poetry is clearly a bitter-sweet one. On one hand, there is unprecedented freedom of expression and publication and any poet with a small amount of cash or connections or reputation can be and is being published, if only in an edition of 100-1000 copies. On the other hand, the audience for poetry has shrunk to a size comparable to that in the Western democracies, namely a minuscule one for which an edition of 100 copies might seem generous. And the rewards for being a poet are limited to a few small monetary prizes and name recognition. No more stadiums filled with eager listeners, as in the 1960s, nor advances on editions of 100,000 copies that immediately sold out.

Optimists did not realize that there would be a trade-off with this newfound freedom. Poetic fruit that was not forbidden was no longer as interesting as mass-media entertainments, romance novels or rock music. The seemingly huge readership for Russian poetry before glasnost was an artificial phenomenon that fed on poetry's ability to push the limits of Soviet censorship beyond the usual framework. The opportunists, who were hoping to get rich on poetry once the walls were down, have

been sorely disappointed. But realists have accepted this turn of events as natural. The audience anywhere for good poetry is likely to be small, and complex thought and language tends to appeal only to a few. So by Western standards, the situation of poetry in Russia has become what we recognize as familiar and normal.

Nevertheless, despite this new environment (or perhaps because of it?) Russian poetry has entered on what I see as a new golden age. I think it is safe to say that there are more important Russian poets currently active today than at any time since the 1910s. Moreover, there is a significant pluralism of styles and orientations in which no one orientation or group can claim hegemony, though some might try. This in itself produces a healthy postmodernism.

The term postmodernism has been around for several decades now and has been defined and disputed in many ways. Rather than getting into this discussion, for the present purposes I would like to characterize it mainly as pluralism, the acceptance of a variety of styles, sometimes even within a single work, in which there is little sense of hierarchy or preference, but rather a tolerance for all levels, materials, and sources. Defined negatively, it is pastiche; defined positively it is liberal democracy.

If we take as a guide "the free play of desire, signifiers, and capital which characterizes postmodernism" according to Paul McCarthy[1], then it would seem that contemporary Russian poetry is a fine place to look for Russian postmodernism. The removal of government-imposed taboos has led to an opening of the floodgates of "desire" to themes of graphic sex, alternative lifestyles and gender politics; poetic languages now incorporate all lexical levels from *mat* (the Russian equivalent of four-letter words) to biblical archaisms and all verse forms from traditional syllabotonic quatrains (still predominant) to the freest of free verse, and along with this the freedom to manipulate the signs of high modernism and Soviet kitsch as language ready-mades; finally, the new capitalism in Russia has produced opportunities for publishing and new media for doing so in unprecedented variety and freedom (e.g. poetry on the Internet).[2] Many poets that I know have created their own web sites and, to take other examples, this summer Viktor Krivulin sent me his latest book as an e-mail attachment, and Vsevolod Nekrasov's new book, originally planned for publication by *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, but subsequently rejected by them, is now available on an Internet link to Alexander Levin's website, levin.rinet.ru. Replacing the relatively stable, state-controlled order there is currently a *stolpotvorenie golosov*, a Tower of Babel of voices competing for attention. This pendulum swing from the imposed, Apollonian hierarchical order of Socialist Realism to the Dionysian anarchy of the post-Soviet period is perhaps more marked in the Russian context than the move from modernism to postmodernism has been in the West. As a result, it has led to a feeling of disorientation and a sense of loss of mission for Russian art in general, and for Russian poetry in particular. Not long ago, poetry was thought to be *the* status art, the "true voice of the people," as in Evtushenko's oft-quoted phrase "*poet v Rossii bolshe chem poet*" (A poet in Russia is more than a poet).[3] But this lack of "mission," this decline in the cultural status and loss of audience, many be as much the consequences of the broader postmodern condition as of the changed political and economic situation in Russia.

Given the tremendous quantity and variety of recent Russian poetry, it is much more difficult to discuss it broadly than was previously the case; therefore I would like to concentrate on only a few features, particularly those involving multimedia, and

discuss only a few key figures whom I think of as characteristic of the postmodern period.

As my first example, I'd like to focus on Nina Iskrenko's poem "Hymn to Polystylistics," which virtually declares itself to be a manifesto of postmodernism.[4]:

Hymn to Polystylistics

**Polystylistics is when a knight from the Middle Ages
wearing shorts storms
into the wine section of store #13
located on Decembrists Street
& cursing like one of the Court's nobles
he drops his copy of Landau & Lifshitz's
"Quantum Mechanics" on the marble floor**

In this poem, polystylistics (a term attributed to the composer Alfred Schnittke) is defined by five stanzas in which items from various historical, cultural and intellectual spheres are thrown together into a single oxymoronic moment, as if to say that all world history and material culture can now be made present in a simultaneous virtual reality, a situation which is in fact not far from the truth in the information age. Differences of time, place, scale, context are easily eliminated by language's potential for shifts of reference. The absurdity of juxtaposition is most obvious in the first stanza, just quoted, where a specifically "medieval" knight storms into a Russian grocery store and drops his copy of *Quantum Mechanics*. Thrown in are references to "shorts," which are unlikely either in the Middle Ages or on a city street in Russia, and to the Decembrists as historical figures and Soviet cultural icons. There is also the oxymoronic "*kurtuazno rugaias*" (cursing like one of the Court's nobles), since crude language is presumably uncourtly. In subsequent stanzas, the disjunctures become progressively more subtle and personal, the fifth stanza providing a bitter-sweet Chekhovian moment of male/female cross-purposes in shared goals (immortality for him in the biological, for her in the artistic):

**Polystylistics is when I want to sing
& you want to go to bed with me
& we both want to live
forever**

**After all how was everything constructed
if this is how it's all conceived
How was everything conceived
if it's still waiting to be constructed
And if you don't care for it
well then it's not a button
And if it's not turning
don't dare turn it**

The "coda" that ends the poem is an illogical collage of causalities and clichés (including an "erased" reference to Tolstoi) which concludes on a reference to E. M. Remarque that suggests "no exit" from this absurd state of affairs ("*Na zapadnom fronte bez peremen*" [All's quiet on the Western front]). "Polystylistics" is something

of a misnomer here, since the linguistic style represented is uniformly literary standard; rather, the "polystylistic" factor is the content, the references, that are assembled in a "gesture of random historical citation." [5] Thus the poem states its postmodern program without really embodying it very deeply.

Other Iskrenko poems, however, are more successful at this. "Seks B Piatiminutka" (Sex B A Five Minute Briefing), [6] in a context of alienated physiological brutality, juxtaposes in its first stanza one of the more lyrical of Pasternak's Zhivago poems ("Winter Night": "*Melo, melo po vsej zemle/.../Melo ves' mesiats v fevrale*" [It swept and swept over the whole earth/.../It swept for the whole month of February]) with "the whole weekend in Iran" ("*ves uik-end v Irane*") using a recent anglicism and an improbable, politically charged location. The Pasternak reference continues throughout in ironic juxtaposition to the crude, violent sex being described. Metaphors range from machinery and chemistry to the arts (Tarkovsky and Verdi) and include political icons like the military hero Shchors and May Day fireworks. Along the way there are several "erasure" substitutions, corrected slips of the tongue, such as *genitalen/genialen* (genital/genial) that underline a quasi-Freudian ambiguity of viewpoint. The result is a description of all-encompassing sex of epic cultural dimensions in the style of, but more graphic than, Maiakovskii, and minus his sense of personal involvement. The poem strikes a balance between a kind of humorously detached monotony and a broad physical grandeur. Present here to some extent and more obvious elsewhere in Iskrenko's work is a protest against male dominance in society, such feminism being arguably another element of postmodernism in her work.

One feature present in these examples from Iskrenko is the quoted reference. In other of her poems this feature is more prominent, but the movement in which quotation, that hallmark of postmodernism, is moved to center stage is Moscow Conceptualism. This is where the visual and the verbal arts intersect in interesting ways. As with Conceptualism in the West, Moscow Conceptualism began to take shape first in the visual arts. In the 1970s such artists as Ilya Kabakov [7] and Erik Bulatov began to turn their skills as children's book illustrators to more adult and subversive purpose in their unofficial work. The traditional Russian focus on verbal symbolism was incorporated into the purely visual sphere to produce mind-games based on sometimes very subtle quotation of Soviet imagery and clichés. A good example is Bulatov's painting "Don't Lean" (1987). The white block lettering of the phrase "*Ne prisloniatsia*" (Don't Lean) across the middle of the canvas in a foreground position that corresponds to the horizon line reproduces the stencilling to be found on the glass windows of the doors of a Moscow subway car (and elsewhere). In other words, don't lean on the doors, since they will soon open. This familiar phrase, which is normally encountered in a very specific urban context, turns the rural farm landscape behind it in the painting into something seen through the glass door window of a passenger train. The interplay of these two layers generates a variety of meanings, beginning perhaps with the ecological metaphor "Don't lean on nature," i.e. preserve the wilderness. More subtle messages emerge from the ironies of the situation: If the scene is indeed being viewed from a train, then the train and its inscription are already an imposition on nature, as is the cultivation of the field depicted. A political layer can be found in the superimposition of a governmental dictate on the background of what is assuredly a collective farm, which had also been created by government fiat. The positioning of the text in the painting also suggests the dominance of the verbal over the natural and the immediate over the distant. Moreover, while the subject is painted in a realistic fashion, the composition is highly organized and symmetrical, to the point of abstraction, like a

Rothko color-field work. In a sense, the text and the background are both quotations, since they were chosen not for their visual interest per se, but for their recognizability as contextualized cultural clichés. The careful combination of text, context and composition using mundane materials is an important feature of Moscow Conceptualism.

To step back for a moment into the 1970s for some earlier sources, an example of the use of Soviet iconography without the overt use of verbal elements is Bulatov's "Krasikov Street" (1976), in which a billboard shows Lenin on an empty white background marching toward the glorious future, while the ordinary citizens of one of Moscow's residential streets are hurrying to work in the opposite direction. With their eyes to the ground, the citizens are totally ignoring the billboard. By contrast, Bulatov has several works composed completely of text, such as *Stop-Go* (1975) and *Exit-No Exit* (1975), in which blue words encourage movement into the picture, while red ones prevent it. A pointed expression of the common paradox of Soviet bureaucratic practice in which everything is supposedly permitted and yet nothing in fact is allowed.

One of my favorite additional examples, Komar and Melamid's *Our Goal is Communism!* (1972), duplicates a common slogan on propaganda banners and signs in the usual white letters on a red background, but attributes the words to the painters themselves instead of to the Party or to the people in general. This twist is truly sly. While presumably the government would want each individual Soviet to sign on to this slogan, by literally doing so the artists are establishing their right to issue such slogans, a right that the Party jealously and anonymously reserves to itself alone.

And a final example, which I have not seen, was described by Vsevolod Nekrasov in his 1989 article on Conceptualism. Here one should note that for a conceptualist work a verbal description is often its main embodiment. The example is a 1982 piece by Abalakova and Zhigalov in which an ordinary chair is placed in an exhibit space with a note that reads "*Stul ne dlia tebia. Stul dlia vsekh*" (The chair is not for you. The chair is for everyone). The insultingly informal second person singular form of address,[8] suggesting that you as an individual are worthless, and the absurd concept of a chair for the people as a whole, beautifully sum up the essence of the Soviet system, as Nekrasov notes.[9]

To return to the medium of poetry, the contemporary poet who has moved the issue of quotation to the very center of his poetic theory and practice is Lev Rubinstein. In a 1991 interview Rubinstein stated: "I as a conceptualist maintain that everything has already been written (*vse uzhe napisano*) and in our native literature everything is already there. And I'm involved exclusively in working with context and regrouping." [10] This statement certainly makes him a quintessential postmodernist who ostensibly assembles his material, but does not originate it. The statement that "everything has already been written" immediately evokes Borges' image of "The Library of Babel," in which all possible books already exist.[11] In the Information Age, with the accumulation of human culture and our almost immediate access to most of it, there is indeed a strong likelihood that someone has already said, written or thought just about anything one can come up with as an author. In traditional poetry, given a limited stock of meters, rhymes and line lengths, the potential for unoriginality is very high. Rubinstein's works would seem then to be the perfect embodiment of a postmodern orientation. They consist of short segments of text

seemingly gathered from everyday sources as "ready-mades" of language, written down on index cards, and then assembled into larger compositions of typically 70-100 items. His unique card system emphasizes that the units are discrete, self-contained, collected and impersonal. They appear to be merely an assemblage of quotations in the manner of cento poetry. However, Rubinstein has been known to slyly remark that his material consists largely of "quasi-citations," i.e. items that are designed to seem like quotations when literally they are not. In other words, although it is certainly possible to find some items for which a specific source can be identified, in most cases Rubinstein is operating with sophisticated selections from a vaguer common fund of standardized expression that can be contextualized, but not necessarily traced to a single source, much like features of a postmodern building that can be identified as references to a particular past style without there being a specific building where the feature can in fact be found.

Given that Rubinstein's texts are fairly long, it is not possible to discuss even one in its entirety, and each of them has certain features unique to itself, but as an example, let's look at some length at "*Poiavlenie geroia*" (The Appearance of the Hero, 1986).[12] The first 94 of 110 items consist of one-line sentences. These are short, conversational phrases that turn out to be all in iambic tetrameter, an organizing principle I confess not to have initially noticed because of their ordinary, everyday nature. Each of them requires us to construct a conversational context in which they might reasonably be said:

- 1. Nu chto ia vam mogu skazat?**
- 2. On chto?to znaet, no molchit.**
- 3. Ne znaiu, mozhet, ty i prav.**
- 4. On i poleznei, i vkusnei.**
- 5. U pervogo vagona v sem.**
- 6. Tam dalshe pro uchenika.**

- 1. Well, what can I say to you?**
- 2. He knows something, but is keeping quiet.**
- 3. I don't know, maybe you are right.**
- 4. It's healthier and better tasting.**
- 5. By the first car [of the train] at seven.**
- 6. There's more about the schoolboy here.**

Thus, No. 1 suggests a context in which someone has raised a problem and the respondent seems to want to extricate himself from involvement (perhaps the other has done something stupid or something inexplicable has happened). No. 2 has us posit a scene in which the speaker feels that someone is keeping a secret. No. 3 is possibly a response to No. 2, in which case retroactively 1-3 could be taken as a dialog. No. 4 breaks this possible continuum by turning *on* (he/it) into a consumable item (e.g. cognac or bread). No. 5, as anyone who has been to Moscow or Petersburg knows, is a typical formula for arranging to meet someone on the subway, though it lacks the station name and direction of the train, which, however, might have been indicated earlier in that conversation. Each of these items qualifies as a quasi-citation which one can easily imagine having encountered in some conversation. One can also imagine Rubinstein collecting such randomly heard phrases as iambic tetrameter lines that have turned up in real life.

No. 6 breaks this pattern by making a more specific reference to a schoolboy and does not in fact seem to be a ready-made. Nevertheless, in a similar fashion one can posit a speech context, such as two people reading a story or a letter together, with one pointing out that there is information about a/the given schoolboy coming up. References to the schoolboy recur in Nos. 32 and 93, and finally in the first longer entry, No. 95, it becomes clear that the schoolboy is the hero of the title and that No. 6 was his first appearance in the poem. Nos. 95-110 contain episodes in his story. Two examples:

96. On his birthday the schoolboy had a party for his classmates: two little girls and three boys. The food consisted of seven pieces of sponge cake and five bottles of "Baikal" soda. One girl ate two pieces of cake and drank a bottle and a half of "Baikal." But one of the three boys on a dare drank up the remaining soda and said that he could drink even more. The kids didn't finish the cake: there remained one whole piece and one somewhat eaten piece. After eating, the kids played "opinions" and "dunderhead." The birthday party turned out to be interesting and fun.

When the guests had left, the schoolboy remained alone and started to think. [...]

100. The schoolboy asked: "To dissolve into being or to dissolve into non-being - isn't it all the same?" The teacher said: "I don't know." And the schoolboy left and started to think.

This is a typical Rubinstein structure in that one organizing feature is intersected by another, very different one, and readers must exert themselves to combine the two without much help from the author. In the present instance, one would like to find a place for the miscellaneous one?liners in the narrative about the schoolboy, but this can be done only provisionally, just as one can only provisionally create a context for each individual item and build mental links between them. Certain contexts seem to recur, such as conversations around health and medicine (4, 14, 21), or people moving about a city (5, 7, 11, 16, 19, 65), or a boring guest who has overstayed his welcome (9, 12, 47, 56), or a disagreement (1, 8, 15, 18, 20, 24, 25, 26), or doing a crossword puzzle (41, 43). Some items could be taken as replies to other items. Some are rather ambiguous (e.g. No. 17: "In the range of 100-120" rubles? pages?) or very generalized (e.g. No. 18). On the one hand, we seem to be dealing with a collection of discrete voices and independent contexts, but on the other hand there seems to be a hidden (but perceptible) organizing force. The presence of a vague kind of recurrence suggests that there is some pattern or purpose to the organization of items, that they are in fact not assembled randomly. One suspects that they are drawn from several conversations and we are moving from one to another, as if remembering pieces of dialogue from the past or, alternately, moving about a room full of conversing people. They appear to be linked, if only by having been collected, selected or recalled by a single conscious agent.

The items devoted to the schoolboy have a structure to them in which each incident has a kind of Zen quality to it that results in the schoolboy meditating on its meaning. There are subtle echoes in many of them of lines that have come up earlier, as if the earlier lines are part of the schoolboy's life as well. So despite the evident preponderance of disjuncture, there is a mysterious feeling of connectedness, as if indeed All is One. This hidden organizing factor is typical of Rubinstein, as is the intersection of two principles (here, the one-line pieces of

dialogue in iambic tetrameter and the story of the schoolboy), and these create a dialectic requiring the reader to construct a synthesis, to discover links between the two disparate principles. Or, as Jim Collins put it,

only by confronting the conflicting discourses we use to structure experience can we begin to understand what is actually at stake in the structuring process. Only then may we begin to see that no hierarchy of discourses or 'cultural orchestration' makes that process automatic in contemporary cultures. The Post?Modern aim, then is not haphazard 'pastiche', motivated only by perversity, but specific juxtapositions for particular purposes.[13]

In most cases one can sense the links, the "purposes," intuitively, but usually one cannot establish precisely what they are. To recapitulate, the Russian scene reflects several connected paths of postmodernism that we have briefly examined:

- 1) the contextual nature of the language models used;
- 2) the issue of parody/pastiche/collage;
- 3) an extensive referential web.

And these are suggestive for further exploration. However, here we will limit discussion to a few additional comments.

Iskrenko and Rubinstein both participate in the first area, contextualized language, which extends back to the 1950s and has recently gained attention in connection with the now recognized Lianozovo School, namely, the trend of "*govornoi stikh*" (spoken lines), as it was named by Ian Satunovskii.[14] Vsevolod Nekrasov has argued that what has been called Moscow Conceptualism should really be named Contextualism[15], since it posits that any speech act (or art act in general) occurs in a specific context which is extremely important for framing the speech's significance. Thus any language material, however ordinary or hackneyed, carries with it a context that can be selected and shaped for an artistic purpose. Hence there is no such thing as non-poetic language, only language that has not been properly framed and given an artistic purpose.[16] Simple speech, lines from pop songs, personal remarks to friends, propaganda slogans, quotations from Pushkin or Blok are all used and contextualized to artistic effect. For example: Vsevolod Nekrasov

The context is both a poem, Blok's "*Noch, ulitsa, fonar, apteka*" (Night, street, streetlamp, drugstore, 1912[18]), one of Blok's most pessimistic and depressing, and Blok's poetic profile. To these Nekrasov adds Brodsky as a contemporary singer of the Petersburg myth and, by contrast, Moscovite Nekrasov's own lowered (but carefully framed!) speech style and parodic debunking of such myth-making.

On the issue of parody, the second of the postmodern paths, Linda Hutcheon and others have argued that the feature distinguishing postmodern parody from modernist parody is the absence of ridicule, and she proposes "a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity." [19] In contemporary Russian poetry there is certainly much that seems at first glance like parody, travesty or pastiche. One thinks immediately of Prigov's *millitsaner* poems about Soviet policemen, Kibirov's "*Kogda byl Lenin malenkim*" (When Lenin Was Little, 1990) or "*Sortiry*" (Toilets, 1991) and numerous poems by Irtenev and others. But conversations with Prigov and Kibirov elicit from them a rejection of the term "parody" as applied to such works. Rather they are inclined to underline the seriousness of their themes and the admiration

they have for their subjects. There is a kind of loving nostalgia for the culture of the Soviet period, which was, after all, the culture of their "happy childhoods." [20] Postmodern "double coding" links high and low, elite and mass culture, new and old, classical and modern on an egalitarian footing, without insisting on a preference for one or the other, and without implying condemnation of one vis-à-vis the other. So, while there might be more than a trace of irony and humorous exaggeration in the tone of such works, Prigov's poems, for instance, convey a genuine admiration for his policemen, and Kibirov's "*Sortiry*" is a mock epic with very little mock and a lot of actual affection for his reminiscences of the outhouses of his youth. [21] There is, moreover, a pleasing symmetry in the fact that the elegant city of St. Petersburg gave rise to a group of primitivist drop-outs, the Mitki, while the crude, bustling Moscow gave rise to the Order of Courtly Mannerists, whose goal is to reconstitute elegantly expressed eroticism. The modernist ridicule for failing to live up to some high artistic goal has been replaced by an affection for the poor, the low and the ordinary. For Russia, postmodernism has strong, positive elements of democracy, pluralism and decentralization. This is a rich and subtle area of inquiry that certainly deserves attention, and one should not jump to conclusions based on a Cold War mentality that Russian poets cannot or should not find anything in Soviet culture to love.

The third area is that of endless open-ended referentiality. This feature is a particular characteristic of poets usually classified as the metarealists or metametaphorists. Examples are Dragomoshchenko's "*Nasturtsiia, kak realnost*" (Nasturtium as Reality, 1990), Parshchikov's "*Dengi*" (Money, 1989), Ivan Zhdanov's "*Rapsodiia batarei otopitelnoi sistemy*" (Rhapsody of a Heating Radiator, 1982) and, in fact, many of Brodsky's poems. The genealogy here seems to be from the English Metaphysical poets through Brodsky to the younger contemporary poets, though Mandelstam (esp. his "Horseshoe Finder," 1923) surely played an important role. The approach involves an elaborate reflection on some fairly concrete object, such as, in the case of Dragomoshchenko, a nasturtium in a pot on an apartment balcony, [22] or Parshchikov's three-ruble note. The poet proceeds to bring into view a wide-ranging collection of associations with the given object that can be concrete, metaphorical, historical, idiosyncratic, literary, linguistic, technological, etc. As Dragomoshchenko puts it, "poetry is always something else." [23] One typically has the sense that the poet is free-associating over an immense verbal territory in which everything can potentially be included in a sequence of associative links. While the style tends to be "high" in the sense of richly poetic and complex, the objects and associations can be, and often are, mundane and "low." The point is that ultimately everything is related to everything else and a hierarchy is either absent or purely personal. This could be seen, as may be the case with Iskrenko, as a cultural crisis of ennui and indifference, or as mystical appreciation for the interdependence and interconnectedness of all reality.

I would like to conclude my presentation with a brief consideration of the group of poet-artists who have called themselves the Transpoets, the core members of which are Serge Segay (Sergei Sigov, b. 1947), Rea Nikonova (Anna Tarshis, b. 1942), and Boris Konstriktor (Boris Axelrod, b. 1950). These are multimedia artists par excellence with work covering and combining media from the visual to the sonic. Their journal *Transponans* is one of the monuments of samizdat art, 35 issues published in an edition of five handmade copies from 1979 to 1986. In many respects the Transpoets are a reembodyment of the avant-garde of the first decades of the 20th century, especially Futurism, and their work resonates with many subsequent Western avant-garde movements, such as Dada, Sound Poetry, Concrete

Poetry, Fluxus, Mail-art and Performance Art. But they have their own unique profile and innovative contributions. Perhaps Serge Segay's strongest area is his bookworks, which employ a wide range of mostly manual techniques to create rich and varied effects. To best appreciate them, one must be able to hold them, turn their pages and study them up close.

Nikonova's work is truly protean and all-encompassing in its exploration of form. She has set as her goal the cataloguing and illustration in her own works of essentially all possible artistic techniques and devices. A few selected examples can only hint at the tremendous range of her invention.[24] An example of one of her gesture poems is from her book *Foro* (1983). However a two-dimensional image cannot convey the fact that the pages have cutouts in them, and therefore the effect is one of layering in which parts of poems from subsequent pages are visible and become part of the given page. One must experience this book "in depth." Of particular interest, at least to me, are her efforts to combine literary and musical devices, something that has been tried in the past, usually without much success. A short example is "Canon" [Fig. 4] for three voices, dedicated to David Burliuk. The original text is as follows:

The text is essentially transrational *zaum*, with only the first phrase making a kind of sense (The donkey shouted a briquette). Furthermore, it creates true polyphony in its overlapping of three voices. Some of Nikonova's grandest quasi-musical works are her so-called "pliugms", series of variations on two or three phrases in combination using every imaginable form of manipulation, from the sonic to the purely conceptual.[25] An example is "Pa de katet" (Pas de cathetos [leg of a right triangle; pun on pas de quatre], published in *Transponans* No. 30 [1985], recorded 1990). In this case the themes are from Archimedes ("Kill me, but don't touch my drawings") and Pythagoras ("The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the legs (catheti)."

The themes obviously suggest development in geometric terms, so it is interesting to compare the visual manifestations of the work with its audi version, where sonic equivalents of the geometric patterns must be created.

Hence, Nikonova's performances often involve props, gestures and sound effects. There is often a level of humor present in her works, as well as a distinct inclination towards minimalism.

Boris Konstriktor is perhaps strongest as a visual artist with his own unique style, dark and grotesque, but with touches of humor and fantasy. However, as is true of the others, he also writes poetry (sometimes combining it with his painting), as well as prose and criticism. In recent years he has produced interesting performance works on tape in collaboration with the Petersburg violinist Boris Kipnis, such as the Cantata "*Devushka i smert*" (Death and the Maiden, 1991) in which Konstriktor primarily provides textual material, while Kipnis provides musical accompaniment on his violin. A short episode in this work, for example, has Konstriktor expanding the text "*Mat/govorila Stalinu! Luchshe b ty/stal/ sviashchennikom!*" [His mother said to Stalin: "Better you should have become a priest!"] by pieces, adding a word each time, in counterpoint to Kipnis's violin cadenzas in double stops, which also increase in length correspondingly. The text is effective particularly in oral recitation, since each additional word changes the statement and the listener's expectations unpredictably, e.g. the first word initially sounds like an elliptical obscenity, as does "*Luchshe b ty,*" and the full meaning of the statement becomes clear only with the

last word, long postponed. By contrast, on the printed page the entire text would be quickly visible and the element of surprise eliminated. The pathetic truth of the statement is burlesqued not only by its mechanical fragmentation, but by Konstriktor's over-intense delivery in contrast to Kipnis's elegant 19th-century-style virtuosity.

In sum, contemporary Russian poetry is saturated with the postmodern spirit and provides more than enough material for serious investigation in this sphere. The abundance of voices and the wide variety of approaches to poetry creates a pleasing new situation in Russia in which it seems unlikely that a single style will regain predominance in the foreseeable future, if ever.[26] We have briefly looked at a range of possibilities from the more content-oriented works of Iskrenko to the more form-oriented experiments of Nikonova, and it is perhaps not an accident that women are playing a more prominent role in the new, dehierarchized situation. The poets themselves appear to be enjoying this state of affairs, even if the critics and general public continue to be unsettled by it. Poetry, at least in Russia, does seem to flourish in times of turmoil and transition, and we are, as I suggested, in the midst of another major flowering of Russian poetry, however implausible that might appear.

NOTES

[1] Paul McCarthy. "Postmodern Pleasure & Perversity, Scientism & Sadism," *Essays in postmodern culture*. Eyal Amiran and John Unsworth (eds.), New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 102.

[2] Renato Barilli refers to electronic media as lying "at the intersection of a pre-modern (pre-Gutenbergian era and a postmodern (post-Gutenbergian) one" See: Barilli, Renato. *Voyage to the End of the Word*. Trans. Teresa Fiore and Harry Polkinhorn. San Diego: San Diego State Univ. Press, 1997, p.45.

[3] The opening line to E. Evtushenko's poema "Bratskaia GES." Evtushenko, Evgenii. *Bratskaia GES. Stikhi i poema*. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1967, p. 69

[4] Nina Iskrenko. Ili. *Stikhi i teksty*. Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1991, pp. 28-30; *The Right to Err. Selected Work*. Trans. By John High with Patrick Henry & Katya Olmstead. Colorado Springs: Three Continent Press, 1995, pp. 33-34. Kent Johnson and Stephen M. Ashby, *The Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, pp. 94-96.

[5] Andreaa Huyssen, "Theorizing the Postmodern," *The Post-Modern Reader*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992, p. 44.

[6] Iskrenko, *The Right to Err*, pp. 74-77.

[7] For a study of Kabakov's relation to postmodernism see M. Epstein's essay, "Emptiness as a Technique: Word and Image in Ilya Kabakov," *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, ed. M. Epstein, A. Genis and S. Vladiv-Glover. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999, p. 299-341. Also in Russian (Epstein, Mikhail N. *Postmodernizm v Rossii: literatura i teoriia*. Moscow: Izd. R. Elinina, 2000, pp. 173-200.

[8] Apparently Nekrasov misrecalled the use of the informal in the note, though I think that Nekrasov's version improves the work. According to Zhigalov and Abalakova in an essay of 1989, the sign for this 1982 work used the formal plural and actually read "STUL NE DLIA VAS – STUL DLIA VSEKH." Moreover, they provide a somewhat different explanation of the intent of the piece: If one looks at CHAIR NOT FOR YOU – CHAIR FOR EVERYONE (TOTART – object 1982) from above, then it is immediately obvious that in contrast to Kosuth's "Chairs," which analyze the linguistic laws of art, this piece, taken out of circulation, is turned into a Throne for the invisible anonymous force of the General, which totally supplants the private and personal, but thanks to the "pronouncement" of the formula which exposes the nature of this dominion and which again returns it to circulation – in the form of an art work. Nor does this object fall under the definition of Duchamp's ready-mades, since the socio-cultural force field created by it removes it from the frame of an "artistic milieu." Natalia Abalakova and Anatolii Zhigalov, *TOTART: Russkaia ruletka*. Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1998, p. 247.

[9] Nekrasov's article, written in 1989, first appeared in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (No. 31, 1990) in abbreviated form. It was published in complete form in Nekrasov and Zhuravleva, *Paket*, Moscow: Meridian, 1996, pp. 307-19. The reference to the Zhigalov-Abalakova work is on p. 315.

[10] *Chas Pik*, (July 8, 1991), p. 11.

[11] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," *Labyrinths. Selected Stories & Other Writings*. Ed. by Donal A. Yates & James E. Irby. NY: New Directions, 1964, pp. 51-58. Borges has been popular among Moscow intellectuals at least since 1984, when two Russian editions of his works were published. In another theoretical statement Rubinstein refers to Borges' story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" (*Ibid.*, pp.36-44; L. Rubinstein, "Chto tut mozno skazat..." *Indeks. Almanakh po materialam rukopisnykh zhurnalov*. Ed. M. Romm. Moscow: Idz. "Efa," 1990, p. 344.

[12] Lev Rubinstein, "Poiavlenie geroia," *Reguliarnoe pismo*. St. Petersburg: Izd. Ivana Limbakha, 1996, pp. 47-56.

[13] Jim Collins, "Post-Modernism as Culmination: The Aesthetic Politics of Decentred Cultures," *The Post Modern Reader*, Charles Jencks, ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 112.

[14] Ian Satunovskii. *Rublenaia proza*. W. Kasack (ed.) Munich: Otto Sagner, 1994, p. 119.

[15] Nekrasov and Zhuravleva, pp. 307-19.

[16] Nekrasov finds grounds to criticize the "bazaar" around the term postmodernism for its lack of concern for artistic quality: "On znachit chto?to drugoe: ne kogda vse ravny, chto v printsipe i tak poniatno, a kogda vse ravno. No 'vse ravno' v printsipe iskliuchaet iskusstvo" (It means something else: not when all are the same, which in principle is understandable on its own, but when it's all the same. But 'it's all the same' in principle excludes art.) (Nekrasov and Zhuravleva, p. 607). In a pluralistic cultural environment, standards of quality and selection become a particularly sensitive issue.

[17] Nekrasov, *Stikhi iz zhurnala*. Moscow: Prometei, 1989, p. 6.

[18] For comparison, the complete Blok poem is:

Noch, ulitsa, fonar, apteka,
Bessmyslennyi i tusklyi svet.
Zhivi esche khot chetvert veka -
Vse budet tak. Iskhoda net.

Umresh - nachnesh opiat snachala
I povtoritsia ves, kak vstar:
Noch, ledianaia riab kanala,
Apteka, ulitsa, fonar

Night, street, streetlamp,
apothecary
A meaningless and dim light.
If you live another quarter century -
All will be the same. No exit.

If you die - you will begin again,
And it all will repeat, as of old:
Night, the icy ripples of the cana.
The apothecary, street, streetlamp.

[19] Linda Hutcheon, "Theorizing the Postmodern," *The Post-Modern Reader*, p. 83.

[20] On this subject see M. Epstein, *Postmodernism v Rossii: literature I teoriia*, pp. 274-82.

[21] Kibirov's "Sortiry" makes use of the octave structure, meter and rhyme scheme of Pushkin's "Domik v Kolomne," as well as its informal, playful tone, thus generating a mock-mock epic tone, that I think Pushkin himself would have enjoyed, as do, by all reports, Kibirov's contemporary readers. Kibirov is one of the most popular and broadly appealing

[22] On postmodernism in Dragomoshchenko see Barret Watten, "post-soviet subjectivity in arkadii dragomoshchenko and ilya kabakov," in *Essays in postmodern culture*, pp. 325-49

[23] Johnson, Kent, and Stephen M. Ashby. *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1992, p. 70.

[24] A more detailed survey of her work can be found in Janecek, "Tysiacha form Ry Nikonovoi," *Novoe Literaturnoe obozrenie* No. 1, (1999); pp. 283-319.

[25] A detailed discussion of Nikonova's pliuugmy can be found in Janecek, "Rea Nikonova's Pliugms," *Sight & Sound Entwined: Studies of the New Russian Poetry*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2000, pp. 110-24.

[26] The most recent anthology of contemporary Russian poetry bears ample witness to this richness and variety. See *Crossing Centuries: The New Generation in Russian Poetry*, ed. John High et al. Jersey City: Talisman Books, 2000.