A City's Artistic Rebellion

Photographs and other works that pushed boundaries in late-cold-war Leningrad.

ART REVIEW

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A MENTION OF THE EAST VILLAGE in the 1980s carries a distinct cultural message: artists living in a gritty, post-punk universe, making art that critiqued mass media, consumerism and traditional art boundaries. It turns out that despite the Us-Versus-Them, Capitalism-Versus-Communism rhetoric of the late-cold-war period, Russian artists of that era were working in a very similar vein, albeit under different circumstances. You can see this in "Leningrad's Perestroika: Crosscurrents in Photography, Video and Music," an exhibition at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

Leningrad itself has a complicated history. Constructed under Peter the Great in the early 18th century, the city — then and now known as St. Petersburg — was notoriously built by conscripted Russian peasants and Swedish prisoners of war, thousands of whom died in the process. It later became a home for modernist experimentation: Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist paintings were first exhibited in Leningrad (then Petrograd) in 1915; and when Alfred H. Barr Jr., the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, visited in 1927, he met everyone from the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein to the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and declared the city "the most important place in the world" for him at that moment.

The 1980s in Leningrad brought policies like perestroika ("restructuring") and glasnost ("openness"), promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev. But artists had already been practicing their own version of perestroika, rebelling against Soviet art and educational institutions.

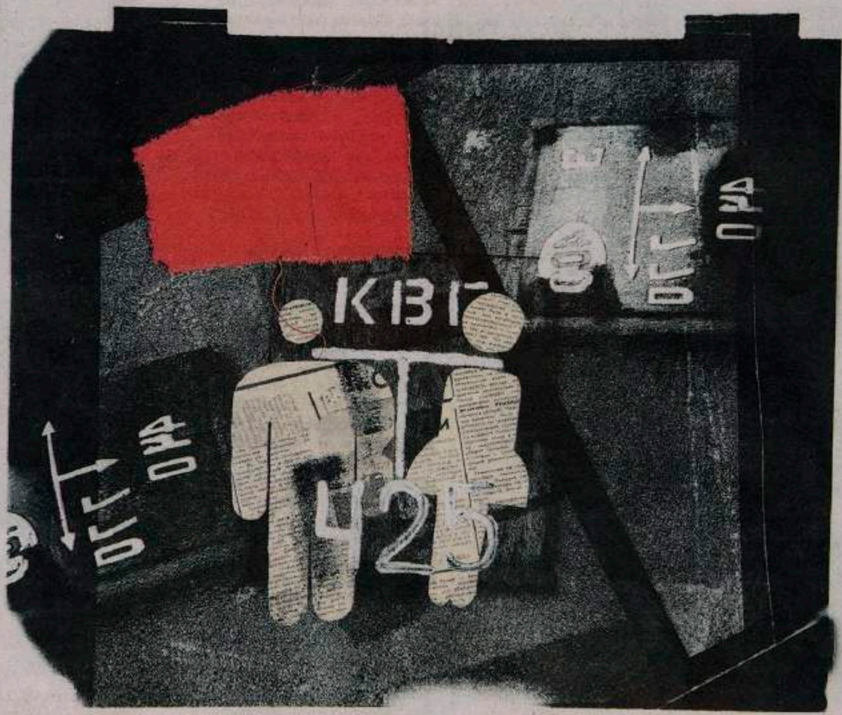
Photography, in particular, was a fruitful medium. A reading section in the exhibition includes the book "Leningradsky Photounderground" by Valery Valran (2007), which describes how photography was not included in official art education — or viewed as art at all — but treated instead as an important "ideological weapon." Hence, it was prohibited during the Soviet era to photograph religious ceremonies, nudes, even "scruffy backyards and scrapheaps, drunkards and beggars, people queuing for rarely sold products and squalid everyday life in general."

Given that Soviet workers were supposed to look heroic, industrious and patriotic in photographs, Natalia Tsekhomskaya's casual, humanistic images of smiling workers from the series "Nevskii Trudovoi" (1982-86) were notable. Similarly, Alexey Gordienko's photograph "Demonstration, Leningrad" (1988) feels pertinent — although the exhibition does not include a translation of the placards carried by the activists or any description of what they are demonstrating for (or against).

Another work by Mr. Gordienko looks innocuous, but its subject is radical: "Building of the Klub '81,' Leningrad" from around 1988 captures Club-81, which a wall text describes as a community of "unofficial" poets, writers and literary critics established in 1981, many of whom were routinely sent to jail for their activities.

The exhibition includes some of the best-known figures of Soviet photography, like Boris Mihalevkin and Boris Smelov. In addition to photographs of Mr. Mihalevkin's family and works like "Jazz" (1986), which pays homage to the music underground frowned upon by officials, there is an untitled photograph by Mr. Mihalevkin from the 1980s in which a group of girls stands in a classroom under portraits of "great" Russian men. Photographs by Mr. Smelov include "Apollo With Spider" (1984), a creepy close-up of a statue with an arachnid perched on its cheek, and "Of the Same Breed" (1991), in which two dogs, straining at the end of their leashes, face off in an urban park. Shot the same year the Soviet Union was dissolved, the image is reminiscent of Daido Moriyama's famous photograph of a stray dog, taken outside an American military base in Japan, which serves as a metaphor of dispossession and defeat.

The works of a younger generation, including Alexey Titarenko, Galina Moskaleva and Andrey Chezhin, are marked by formal and conceptual innovations that mirror more distinctly what was happening in Europe and the United States. Two works from Mr. Chezhin's 1994 series "Album for Thumbtacks" include figures with their faces blocked out by big circles, reminiscent of the work of John Baldessari and David Wojnarowicz, but also alluding to the practice of excising discredited individuals from official Soviet photographs.



COLLECTION OF THE ZIMMERLI ART MUSEUM AT RUTGERS, NORTON AND NANCY DODGE COLLECTION OF NONCONFORMIST ART FROM THE SOVIET UNION

A 1987 collage with silver gelatin print from the series "Nomenclature of Signs" by Alexey Titarenko.

Mr. Titarenko's "Nomenclature of Signs" series from the mid-80s, which uses montaged Soviet insignia and architectural details, feels perfectly in keeping with that period's craze for semiotics and post-structuralism. Ms. Moskaleva's series "Elections" (1984-89) consists of photographs whose color is altered, creating the sensation of a surreal dream, rather than a photograph documenting election sites.

Some of the most interesting works in the exhibition are the videos, which show Leningrad artists pushing even further beyond traditional mediums and boundaries. Popular music became an alternative art form for young British and American artists, and Alexei Uchitel's 90-minute documentary "Rok (Rock)" (1989) captures a similar phenomenon, with bands like Kino, DDT and Akvarium. The film itself is a kind of green-tinged Jean-Luc Godard meditation featuring the near-empty streets of Leningrad in gray, drizzly weather. (The film's lack of subtitles or other translation helps the alienating effect.)

Examples of "Necrorealism," gritty 8-millimeter films filled with mock-murder scenes in the snowy countryside (or perhaps an urban park) feel very much akin to the rough, underground cinema of East Village denizens like Richard Kern or Chris Kraus. The most captivating performances, however, are those of Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, a former soldier who impersonated Marilyn Monroe and became one of the Soviet Union's first public transvestites, in a country that still punished homosexuality with prison. (He died in Bali this year.)

Declaring a "sextroika," Mr. Mamyshev-Monroe sings "Happy Birthday" in butchered English to a mannequin President John F. Kennedy on "Piratskoe Televidenie (Pirate Television)," which ran from 1988 to 1992. It is a gesture of demented irony and subversion — and perfectly in line with contemporary feminist theory, like Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" (1990) and the idea of gender as a "performative" category.

It is also a keen reminder of how, despite the differences between the official cultures of the United States and the Soviet Union, many artists in both places were working in very similar modes, using performance, irony and camp, as well as photography, low-budget film and video, to examine new modes of sexuality, work and politics — or to commemorate, in their own way, the end of an empire and the cold war.

"Leningrad's Perestroika: Crosscurrents in Photography, Video and Music" runs through Oct. 13 at the Zimmerli Art Museum, 71 Hamilton Street, New Brunswick. Information: (732) 932-7237 or zimmerlimuseum.rutgers.edu.