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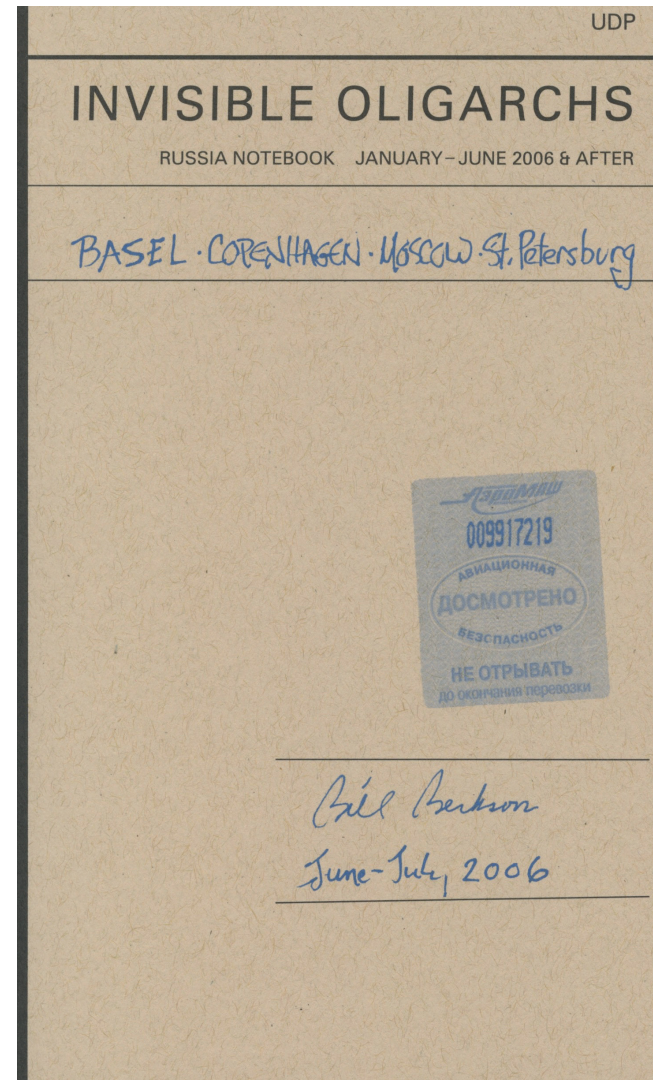
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# INVISIBLE OLIGARCHS

RUSSIA NOTEBOOK JANUARY–JUNE 2006 & AFTER

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BILL BERKSON

UGLY DUCKLING PRESSE

BROOKLYN, NY

## Preface

On June 18, 2006, encouraged by our friend Gordon Knox's invitation to join up with his Montalvo Art Center group in Saint Petersburg, Connie Lewallen and I flew from Basel to Copenhagen and thence via SAS to Moscow, where we stayed 4 days before pushing on, via Aeroflot, for a slightly longer stay in Saint Petersburg, until the 27th when we headed home via Helsinki. The notebook—a grey, 8 ¼-by-6-inch Apica model with faintly blue-lined pages, bought the previous April in Japan—contains the scatter, barely chronological, of impressions received during the trip. There are scribbles, pasted oddments, newspaper and magazine clippings, and some of the many photographs Connie took to record our wanderings. In the process, we met many new friends, saw several of the major monuments, and enjoyed the wonders of White Nights either side of the Summer Solstice. I gave poetry readings—one in Moscow, two in Saint Petersburg. The notebook reflects much, but not all of what we did.

In this edition, the actual notebook pages (transcribed, but also in some cases, digitally reproduced) are both preceded and followed by other notes and correspondence, notably with Kate Sutton, an American who, by the time we met, had lived in Saint Petersburg and familiarized herself to an astonishing degree with that city and its culture, both traditional and contemporary. Kate's letters frame the notebook beautifully, as they provide both commentary and correction, as well as perspective, more fully informed than mine, of the elusive element once known as “the Great Russian Soul.”

—BILL BERKSON, 2015

## Prelude

*Kate Sutton to Bill Berkson, January 6, 2006*  
re Russian readings for Montalvo group:

. . . . Russians begin their literary history with Pushkin, so I guess that's as good as any place to start. It's peculiar that Olesya and Viktor would suggest stories over poetry, as it's his poetry that really created the language (grammatical irregularities occur 95% of the time due to some slip at the tip of Pushkin's pen somewhere along the line). Of course, there is always the dilemma of reading poetry in translation, especially Russian, which is particularly notorious because of its emphasis on rhythm, but regardless, I have hardly sat through a Russian literature class that does not quote his "Bronze Horseman." The poem, which deals with the question of where Russia lies exactly, geopolitically and culturally, and what it means to be an Asian country with its front hooves rearing into Europe. While I personally do not find it as engaging a read as *Eugene Onegin*, the "Bronze Horseman" has come to stand as a symbol for the city and its presence is constant in all the literature that follows (believe me). *Eugene Onegin* (The Oxford World Classic has a good translation of this one as well, by James E. Falen, I believe) is elegant and easy to read, and embodies Pushkin in his role as dandy-extraordinaire. I find this particularly charming as it's fantastic to comprehend how a former capital of a beastly cold country could have a poet-dandy as its hero (I couldn't imagine if little bronze Oscar Wildes sprouted up in Britain like the Pushkins holding court in Russia).

About Bely's *Petersburg* (which I just reread last week, so it's fresh with me): Bely is undeniably a riveting, dizzying read, though I have not read Cournas, only Malmsted (which is a bit dry. Perhaps that's the translation to which

you were referring?). I have reservations on this one only in that *Petersburg* collages scenes from basically all of Russian literary history and transposes them onto the political milieu of the turn of the century, the explosive era of assassinations and terrorism which opened the way for the Revolution. The book is marvelously crafted to mimic that explosiveness, that delirious, crackling sense that you never can put your finger on anything exactly and at a moment's notice a sardine tin can become a deadly instrument of war and revolution. Quite a work. That said, the book can also be mind-numbingly frustrating, especially if you are not fully versed in all the references and inside jokes.

As for Gogol, I feel like this entry goes without saying. The Pevear/ Volokhonsky translation of his short stories is excellent. He has two distinct periods, the Ukrainian village stories (from which Chagall plundered a lot of his more whimsical imagery, flying goats, et al.) and the Petersburg tales. Of the latter, the most essential are "Nevsky Prospect," "The Nose," and "The Overcoat." "Nevsky Prospect" is shockingly relevant, as Nevsky Prospect remains that all-hallowed avenue of opportunity. It captures one of the irrefutable charms of the prospect (and the city), which is that the second you step out onto the street, you cannot say for sure where you will end up or with whom (which is why three years after I came to visit the city for a week, I still find it hard to leave). "The Nose" is a quirky little love letter to the absurdity of the Russian social order (which was strictly separated into ranks for both military and civilian careers) which is now sort of fashionably read as an ode to sexual obsession. As for "The Overcoat," Nabokov's quote about how all Russian literature crawled out from under Gogol's "Overcoat" should say it all.

I have read the Modern Library's Dostoevsky translation, and it is decent enough, but it is sort of painful to

recommend his stories (especially as passionate as I am with *Brothers Karamazov*). For brevity's sake, "Notes from Underground" does the trick though in bringing out all that self-doubt, narcissism and irrationality plaguing the conscience. (As does Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, which is one of my unexpected absolute favorites, but really doesn't belong on this type of list, as its not so much an introduction to anything as much as it is an exploration of what's already there, which would only (possibly) make sense if you've read it).

Akhmatova can tend to be skimpy and vague in translation, but she is one worth investigating, as is Mandelstam. Unfortunately, I am just getting into him myself, and therefore could not suggest the best translations, but I will keep you posted should I find one particularly true. I would by all means tack some Mayakovsky onto this list. From our conversations earlier, I understood that you (or at least Frank O'Hara) were familiar with his works already, and so I would leave that call to you. In most survey courses, his plays are most commonly handed out, since they lend themselves to translation a bit better and still boast that brash imagination of his.

As for Turgenev, he (like Chekhov, for that matter) tends to be more provincial. His characters have that same curious habit of spouting diatribes and ideologies as Dostoevsky's, but Turgenev's prose is much sparer, and the majority of conversations occur at country homes or on hunting expeditions. As for Chekhov, he's a master of those lazy days at the dacha, tea growing cold and wisteria sighing and all of that strikingly composed, but not in the spirit of Petersburg. Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* is giddy and fabulous, but it's distinctly Moscow-flavored, and thus maybe not the most relevant here. Daniil Kharms is quite a character, appalling and creative and absurd, a whole different type of dandy,

but his work can be a bit abrasive if you aren't braced for it (something about the obscene violence and the complete defiance of reason sticks in the throat). Viktor Pelevin is an interesting, well-received contemporary writer. His flagship *Generation P* took on the integration of the post-Soviet society into the world of consumer advertising with the sort of sarcastic observance as, say, a David Foster Wallace type. I have not read an English translation (though I found one entitled *Homo Zapiens* that is currently pinch-hitting on my reading list) but some American students who read excerpts in English (not sure what translation) found it boring and well trod, so who knows on that one. I was just trying to think of someone interesting and contemporary.

On another note, I would highly recommend Svetlana Boym's book *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*. While the book is a sociological study, in some cases truth is stranger than fiction; this is one. The Soviet mentality is something so elusive for me, and yet the more I look into Russian contemporary art, the more essential it is, and the more addicted I am to figuring it out. I mean, what would it be like to grow up with no conception of, nor any compulsion towards or expectation of, private space? If anything, a xeroxed copy of the chapter on communal apartments would cover it; it's mindboggling to imagine growing up with separate switches to the bathroom light so that every watt can be meticulously charted and billed to the correct resident, or separate ovens crammed into an already impossibly small kitchen. It's a good reminder that the country you are in was subject to one of the most incomprehensible of experiments, as sometimes it's easy to slip into the postcards and the nostalgia for empire and the romance of the Romanovs and all of that, and somehow the recent history gets shuffled away, when in some ways it is even more compelling. For instance, the crumbling palaces

along the Fontanka and the Moika will clearly recall the Pushkin-era Petersburg of prosperity and propriety and carriages calling on Tuesdays after breakfast, but there's also that lost link of the sixty years the former palace served as the House of Geologists or Banner-Painting or maybe just housing for 300 people, rather than 30, which goes back to a fundamental difference in the way Russians view space, public or otherwise.

## St. Petersburg Readings

### *Basic Reading—Olesya Turkina's List:*

Andrei Biely [or Bely] *ST. PETERSBURG*, trans. John Cournas, Grove Press. (There's another, newer translation supposedly not nearly as good.)

*ST. PETERSBURG: A CULTURAL HISTORY* by Solomon Volkov (Olesya confirms that this is very good.)

Nikolai Gogol *THE COLLECTED STORIES* (Vintage Classics), trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky. [Olesya singled out the story "Nevsky Prospect." We would add "The Overcoat" and "The Nose."] [also his novel *DEAD SOULS*]

Fyodor Dostoyevsky *THE BEST SHORT STORIES OF* (Modern Library) has "White Nights" but also "Notes from Underground" etc. [Of course, the novels *BROTHERS KARAMOZOV*, *THE IDIOT*, *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT* etc. etc. are important if one has the time.]

Andrei Bitov *PUSHKIN'S HOUSE* [easily available via amazon.com, as are most of these]

Alexander Pushkin Oxford World Classics edition *THE QUEEN OF SPADES AND OTHER STORIES* [There's also a more inclusive Everyman's Library edition of the stories]

## Suggested Further Reading

—from Bill Berkson & Kate Sutton:

Svetlana Boym’s—COMMON PLACES: MYTHOLOGIES OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN RUSSIA. [Out of print but available inexpensively on amazon.]

Alexander Pushkin—Poems: EUGENE ONEGIN

[Falen translation in Oxford World Classics]

also: “The Bronze Horseman” & others in the Everyman’s Library edition.

[Xerox of “Bronze Horseman” to come]

Anna Akhmatova THE COMPLETE POEMS (Zephyr)

Osip Mandelstam SELECTED POEMS, trans. McDuff  
CRITICAL PROSE & LETTERS (Ardis Press)

Nadezhda Mandelstam—HOPE AGAINST HOPE

HOPE ABANDONED

Vladimir Mayakovsky poems & plays—THE BEDBUG &  
SELECTED POETRY

LISTEN! EARLY POEMS [City Lights]

Viktor Shklovsky—LETTERS NOT ABOUT LOVE

SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

*Other great Russians not necessarily associated with St.*

*Petersburg: Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy,  
Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, Mikhail Lermontov,  
Alexander Blok, Mikhail Bulgakov [The Master  
and Marguerita] . . . . .*

Kate Sutton to Bill Berkson

February 26, 2006

. . . . I won’t lie, Russian can be murderous in poetry, especially in terms of verb aspects (one of the two can mean both something you do constantly or something you have tried and failed, and it’s all in nuance). I was surprised at how the translators [of Pasternak’s “Poem”] responded to the rhythm implied by the verbal aspect by cleaving some of Pasternak’s little flourishes (for example the seaciffs are not just bathing themselves, but bathing in the sea). I am also admittedly charmed by your insertion of “slow” into the desert’s blue smile. You also have darkness filling the bedrooms instead of the literal “there were dark bedrooms,” and then “night paling rather than “was on the decline” (I would definitely need to think about that more to polish it over) which just draws you back into that slow blue smile.

In college I had a very enthusiastic Latvian professor with a crippling lisp and an unbounded passion for Pasternak, and he was the kind of exuberant soul you want to sympathize with, like there was some way you could protect all that passion if only you could have a little yourself, so I really tried to love Pasternak the way he did. It worked for *Doctor Zhivago*—a recent reading shocked me by how callous I had grown to it, the distance between the notes in the margin and where I am now—but I never fell into the poetry. Professor Fleishman kept repeating that, with Pasternak, I just needed to take a small chunk and keep chewing on it, which point he illustrated by confining me to a close reading of two paragraphs from the entirety of *Doctor Zhivago* for my final paper. Anyway, last winter I found myself brainstorming translations of Pasternak’s poetry with an English historian to pass the time on the train from Moscow to Irkutsk. All I remember was rolling



around in one particular poem—with a lingering line about the trees with stars in their hairdos—and how it made me want to discover all those sleeper punches throughout his poetry. I didn't though, and to be honest, I haven't given Pasternak much thought since then, so this was an interesting little project for me.

## *Notebook Russia 2006*

i vass lybli—I love you.  
Schastlivo (“be the happy one”)—good luck  
do vstrechi—See you there.  
Do svidaniya—goodbye  
Poka—bye!

*Byt*—everyday life, the daily grind [untranslatable site of  
Russian urban woē]  
“objective reality”—as in “Goncharova transcends rather  
than succumbs to *byt*.”

*Bytie*—transcendent existence/ Spiritualized life (appropri-  
ated by Stalin to mean a life of dedication to Soviet reality)  
*Iz*—from  
*Mladost*—youth  
*Sladost*—sweetness  
*Poshlost*/ *poshly*—fake, vulgar, obscene  
*Kamen*—stone  
*Morya*—sea  
*Shesti*—Booksmith  
*Svetli*—light  
*Temnyi*—dark

*History*  
Sankt—Peterburg 1703  
Petrograd 1914  
Leningrad 1924  
Saint Petersburg, September 6, 1991

## OLD EVENTS

## THE LIVES OF SYSTEMS

## FOREIGN ARTICLES

### THE OUTER LUNG

### SHAMPOO TRIBUNE

*Some Good Artists Too Easily Forgotten:*  
Arnold Boecklin  
Gianlorenzo Bernini  
Jacob Lawrence  
George Braque  
Rebecca Horn  
Kurt Schwitters  
Jannis Kounellis

Jan Van Eyck, they say, inspired by Greek icons, invented  
the secular close up.  
Hans Holbein & others followed his lead.

*June 18*  
From Basel to Copenhagen airport.  
Dark wood floor recommended by Ron “Great Dane”  
Padgett.  
& ah, the Agile Dane.  
ZZZleep Hotel one train stop away.

*June 19*  
SAS to Moscow  
the forest plain that is Russia, seen from descent

Hotel Renaissance Moscow—home to global dealings  
shuttle to Pushkin Square

Meet Muntadas, Daria of Russian Contemporary Art  
Center and young media critic at Les Zamis de Jean-  
Jacques, Nikitski Blvd. 12.

On the subject of fluffpuffs (large cottonballs drifting  
through city air, like those Fellini's *Amarcord*), Daria says,  
“We Russians always put something white in.”

PUKH, “cotton” from cottonwood trees.

Mr. Boffo Media Crit: “The moment of [Boris] Groys is  
over!” (smirk, *kaputt*)

Funny incident at the Art Center: Antonio Muntadas gets  
up and begins his slide lecture on his work in English with  
Russian translator to one side of the stage. “Wait, wait!”  
says the official from—Muntadas's visit is sponsored by the  
Spanish government and therefore his talk must be given  
in Spanish. Connie's and my Spanish is very shaky, if at all,  
and our Russian nowhere near; ergo, the talk is lost on us,  
but we know Muntadas's work pretty well, and the slides  
are completely legible.

*June 20*

Tretyakov Museum: Andrei Rublyev,  
Vrubel's “demon” triptych

contemporary art in garage of the chocolate factory:  
Andreas Roiter's good little paintings

Others in Tretyakov: Kosopalov, Chiukin, Sokov,  
Boris Turetsky (abstractions of 1970s), Zhakarov.

*Moscow is one of the least polite cities in the world, accord-  
ing to a survey of 36 cities released Wednesday. The Russian  
capital ranked 31st, ahead of only Seoul, Kuala Lumpur,  
Bucharest, and last-place Mumbai, according to Reader's  
Digest magazine.*

*The most polite people live in New York, followed by  
Zurich and Toronto, the survey found . . . .*

*The survey found that people were just as courteous in  
rich countries as in poor ones and that people acted nearly  
as politely during rush hour as at other times of the day.*

—*MOSCOW TIMES*

1920s rage for Russian Soul: “its passion, its tumult, its  
astonishing medley of beauty and vileness,” wrote  
Virginia Woolf.

And the *London Review* says “tough obstinacy,” manifest  
in Dostoyevsky, Tolstoi, Chekhov as “an intense gloom.”

*June 21*

Mayakovsky Muzei—through dark passage catty-corner  
opposite pink and cream KBG Lyubyanka headquarters.  
M's apartment house altered—hence dim little shop corri-  
dor ending in grey courtyard. Entry bears reddish brown  
Constructivist style trellis with his name on it. Museum is  
closed today, Wednesday, groan. . . .

Perplex of Mayakovsky's end. No one seems to agree.  
Tatyana Yakovlev (later Mrs. Alexander Lieberman) or  
new ballerina? Suicide or murder/execution? “Now you and  
I are quits”—last note? continuation of “At the Top of  
My Voice”?

Meet Muntadas et al at  
 LES ZAMIS DE ЖАНЖАК (Jean Jacques)  
 BORRO Mr. Media Crit: } NIKITSKI BLD  
 12

"The moment of [BORIS] Groyz  
 is over." (Smirk.)

KOSOPALOV            ПОН  
 CHUKIN                СОП  
 SOKOV

Boris Turetsky abstracts of '70s  
 ZHAKAROV

## Report: Moscow Impolite City

THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES  
 Moscow is one of the least polite cities in the world, according to a survey of 36 cities released Wednesday.  
 The Russian capital ranked 31st, ahead of only Seoul, South Korea; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Bucharest, Romania; and last-place Mumbai, India, according to the survey by Reader's Digest magazine.  
 The most polite people live in New York, followed by Zurich and Toronto, the survey found.  
 The magazine sent out a team of reporters — half of them men, half of them women — to assess the politeness of residents in big cities in 35 countries.

The reporters gauged the politeness of strangers by carrying out three tests: Each followed people into public buildings 20 times to see whether the door would be held open for them, each bought small items from 20 stores and recorded whether sales assistants said thank you, and each dropped a folder filled with papers in 20 busy locations to see whether anyone would help pick up the fallen papers.

The survey found that people were just as courteous in rich countries as in poor ones and that people acted nearly as politely during rush hour as at other times of the day.




**МОСКОВСКИЙ МЕТРОПОЛИТЕН**

СТОИМОСТЬ (РУБ)	№ БИЛЕТА
15	0177183378

Действителен в течение трех дней с момента продажи.

**Билет для проезда в метрополитене не более одной поездки**

Просьба сохранять билет до конца поездки. Подделка проездных документов преследуется по закону.



## IS Passengers

**CITY STATISTICS\***

June 13 — June 19

Crime	Total	Solved
Murder	10	7
Assault	15	8
Robbery	212	87
Rape	1	1
Theft (total)	691	179
Apartment burglaries	157	10
Fraud	73	42
Car theft	20	5
<b>For the Record</b>		
Car accidents		206
a) killed		15
b) injured		223
Suicides		24
Missing persons		37
Bodies discovered		65

Source: Moscow police

\*City police said that due to technical problems, statistics were missing for June 16 and June 19.

have all been charged with the... could face up to three years...

“hopeless attachments to unattainable women”—online  
Mayakovsky site

M. rehabilitated—he’s now remembered, dishonored as  
hack writer of school rote Party doggerel. In fact, the  
whole line of modern Russian poetry seems re-shuffled,  
managed (as ever) by hidden powers.

IN: Brodsky & (via Brodsky?) Akhmatova, Mandelstam  
Tsvetaeva?

Pasternak

Khlebnikov?

Yessenin?

Voznesensky?

Yevtuschenko (whom Ferlinghetti at Spoleto  
called “the Discus Thrower from Smolensk”)?

OUT: Mayakovsky?

6 p.m. reading and Q&A at American Center, thanks to  
Marina Fushille. Nice group of Russians learning English  
around the table.

Marina teaches Connie and me Moscow hitchhike tech-  
nique—walking in required direction, left hand down and  
out at 45-degree angle. Lunch at restaurant of best cuisine:  
Georgian.

#### *PUSHKIN MUSEUM*

old masters—generally disappointing but for:  
the four Poussins, including *Andromeda Mourning for Hector*  
some early Italians (Sano, Matteo di Giovanni, Lorenzo da  
Monaco)

Chardin *Attributes of the Arts*

Dutch (Pieter de Hooch, Gerard Dou, Meiris, Kelf)

(In haste to get to Kremlin we neglected the modern section  
across the street.)

In the Kremlin, Cathedral of the Annunciation, four black-  
robed monks from Georgia sing—“and everyone /and I  
stopped breathing.”

Absurd Areoflot delay on tarmac: 45 minutes in the cabin,  
packed, no air, no air conditioning, heavy heat. Finally,  
“even” the Russians complain; fans come on.



MAYAKOVSKY MUZEI  
Thin dark passage opposite  
pink and cream K&B  
Lynbyanka building. M's  
'apartment house altered -  
hence thin little shop corridor  
to gay courtyard. Entry  
bears reddish brown trellis  
of Constantinian order  
announcing the fact. Museum  
is closed Wednesday - today.  
(Groun.)

Perplex of M's end: Tatyana  
or New Ballerina? Suicide or  
murder? "Now you and I are  
Switz" = last note? continuation  
of At the Top of My Voice?  
M. rehabilitated - now remembered  
as school Party doggerel. In fact  
the whole line of Russian poetry seems →

## Saint Petersburg

June 22

Check into Hotel Kempinski, on the Moika.

Diderot lived in that house by the Moika, the Narishkin palace. He had expected to stay with the Falconets but no soap.\*

\*By the time his role in the *Encyclopedia* ended in 1765, Diderot had gained the reputation of being an important French intellectual. A flattering sign of Diderot's growing reputation came from Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Russia's Catherine the Great. In his series of paintings honoring the various arts, Fragonard chose Diderot to represent literature. His hair short, his forehead high, his mouth turned up in an enigmatic smile of reason, the philosopher holds a volume of the *Encyclopedia* and appears to be a Roman citizen wearing an eighteenth century dressing gown. Catherine the Great relieved Diderot of financial concerns in 1765 by buying his library for fifteen thousand livres and appointing him as its curator for life at a salary of another one thousand livres a year. She agreed not to take formal possession until after Diderot's death.

In 1773, Diderot went to Russia to thank the empress for her patronage. The trip inspired a number of works reflecting on politics and education, and during this time Diderot probably completed his best-known novel, *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (writ. c. 1771, pb. 1796; *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, 1797.)

He died of emphysema and dropsy in Paris on July 31, 1784. [But a 9th grader's online paper says he died on that date in Russia.]

How much was wrecked?

"Blockade."

Q: Where is Stalingrad?

A: Somewhere—vaguely, southeast of Moscow—in the Caucasus, a.k.a. Volgograd.



**Dancing Diamonds** Yulia Lopatkina, prima at the Mariinsky Theater, modeling a necklace by Cartier on Thursday. Cartier are sponsors of the theater's production of Balanchine's "Jewels."

## Russians Cool On Visiting Petersburg

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*Invisible Murk Around*  
— *invincible*, says Akhmatova, as in “the darkness  
surrounds us”

AHHBI

Blok  
Punin  
Mandelstam  
Gumilev  
—her men

PUT YOUR ICON  
IN A CORNER  
PRAY

“shadows of 1913” et passim

WRIGLEY’S  
*Spearmint*

the fluffpuffs fly here, too

WRIGLEY’S  
*Doublemint*

*Russian from Akhmatova*  
morya—sea  
samoga—edge  
bez—without  
geroya—hero  
stikhi—poems  
vremenz—[of] time

beg—flight  
iz—from ?  
shesti—book

*June 23*

*RUSSIAN STATE MUSEUM*—Olesya Turkina, curator  
Symbolism’s Golden Oldies: Milioti *Birth of Venus*  
and *Paradiso*.

Vodkin’s “floating” apples over red cloth (the Jane  
Freilicher of old St. Pete, he tried to make paintings, some of  
them epic in theme and dimensions, with only three colors)

Vrubel

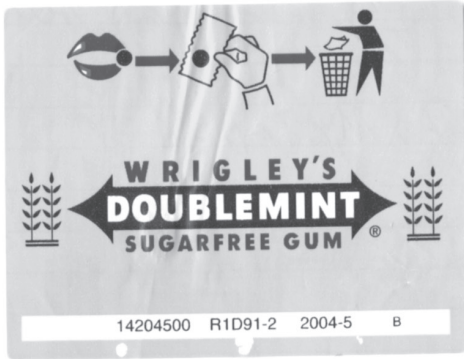
Puni *Red Violin*, 1919

Rozanova, Popova, Goncharova—her powerful *Grape  
Carriers*, *Winter* and more, and great walls of Rodchenkos  
(constructions, no photographs). Not much Malevich before  
1921 on view—just one, in fact. (Later I learn this is a fixed  
little-or-no-Malevich policy.)

No photography. (None of Rodchenko’s, in particular.)  
Photo still not a museological art here.

Americans and Russians achieve high visual art indegrees of  
so-called “abstraction” via foreign (French) clues (Cubism),  
then change the rules to suit temperament. Russians in  
1910 or so best at this: Goncharova, Rodchenko, Malevich  
pull planar abstraction into the no-space/ether of icon  
panels. “It approaches a desert in which nothing exists but  
pure feeling”—e.g. non-objective. Olesya hadn’t heard this,  
or at least not in English translation. Curators seem to  
take little interest in such artists of Revolution; same deal  
as with Mayakovsky.





The bluffs here, too -



Those Strawinsky violin playing from  
"after" - from the wings - how to  
make that happen,



Основная сцена (Театральная пл. д. 1)

23.06.2006  
22:00

**Партер**

Цена: 3200 руб.

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Ряд 5 Место 27

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**Ladies and gentlemen!**

We ask you not to bring bags, packages and flowers with you into the hall and to refrain from entering after the 3rd ring.

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In case of the performance change, tickets can be returned only to the theatre box-office before the performance begins.

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Yulia Lopatkina, principal dancer  
in "Diamonds"  
Marinsky - The curtain (1862)  
about curtains - SHEK GAD

Pushkinskaya 10—"Free Culture Society," est. 1989 by  
dissident artists.

Homeless dissidence now.

Thence to Afrika's studio. Sergei Bugaev a.k.a. Afrika  
("Black") claims to be the grand-nephew ("relation not  
entirely clear") of Sergei Bugaev a.k.a. Andrei Biely ("White").  
Mounting to his many-chambered studio apartment via dark  
blue stairway walls, stone steps vintage 1860s house.

Bathroom in black = "The Lenin Closet,"  
portraits of V. Lenin on all four walls.

Cocktails at Jane Lombard's spacious home, in another  
vintage house. With Suzie Katz, the Petersburg connection  
for US art folk.

Have you been to the Church of the Spilled Blood?

Chopstick wrapper from Brewery Sushi Bar on  
Kazanskaya Boulevard  
(where "Pork Hawk" on the menu = ham hock)

To them now Dostoyevsky is irredeemably gloomy,  
Mayakovsky a party hack.

8 pm curtain at the Kirov Ballet

#### STARS OF THE WHITE NIGHTS

At the Mariinskii. the curtain from 1862 is a curtain about  
curtains (image of curtain in threads of silver and gold).

The sweet irony of *Jewels*—Balanchine's last (1967) homage  
to his Mariinskii training now given to the Mariinskii with  
"Balanchine Style and Balanchine Technique" imparted by

Karin von Aroldingen, Sarah Leland, Sean Lavery, Elyse  
Borne & numerous Russian coaches, as well.

The dancer in "Emeralds" is taffy, a perpetual piety machine,  
imploring. In "Rubies," the error of too much hootchie-  
coochie (they just won't get the snap of jazz moves!). But  
"Diamonds" is great—Lopatkina and Danila Korsuntsev (he  
of the silent footfalls).

Those Stravinsky violins playing from "afar"—as if from  
the wings—how do they—how did he—make that happen?

Yulia Lopatkina, principal dancer in "Diamonds"—all one  
could ask for in a Russian ballerina. Technique with an  
erotic assurance: "Let's do this—mmm, yes, now you take  
me over here and . . . ah . . . very nice. (*They noticed it, too.*)"

June 24, *The Hermitage*

Tops:

Titian—*Danae, St. Sebastian, Magdalen*

Rembrandt—*Danae, Flora*

Rogier van der Weyden—*St. Luke Drawing the Virgin*

14th-15th century Italians—*Simone Martini, et al*

Van Dyck, in the plural!

Goya—*portrait*

Poussin—*Landscape with Polyhemus*

Watteau—*Landscape with a River and 2 Figures*

Fragonard—*Stolen Kiss*

Claude Lorrain

Le Nain bros.

Monet—*Pond*

Bonnard



壽司処

tinkoff.ru

CLUBSTLAK WRAPPER FROM BREWERY  
SUSHI BAR ON KAZANSKAYA

- To their new look, obviously is  
medeably gloomy - Mayakovsky a  
party hack.  
223<sup>rd</sup> SEASON  
FRIDAY, 23 JUNE, 2006 (22.00)

XIV International Festival of Arts  
**STARS OF THE WHITE NIGHTS**

Global Partner  
Vneshtorgbank

supported by  
CIT Finance Investment bank SeverStal GROUP

**JEWELS**

BALLET IN THREE PARTS  
Choreography by **George Balanchine** (1967)

Conductor: **Boris GRUZIN**

Staging by **Karin von Aroldingen, Sarah Leland,  
Elyse Borne, Sean Lavery**

Scenery by **Peter Harvey** (1967)  
Costumes by **Karinska** (1967)

Recreations of costumes supervised by **Holly Hines**  
Original Lighting by **Roland Bates**  
Lighting by **Perry Silvey**

Coaches:  
**Ninella Kurgapkina, Olga Chenchikova,  
Nina Ukhova, Elena Vorontsova,  
Gennady Selyutsky, Yuri Fateyev, Andrei Garbuz**

The Ballet of George Balanchine 'Jewels' is presented  
by arrangement with The George Balanchine Trust and has been produced  
in accordance with the Balanchine Style\* and Balanchine Technique\* service  
standards established and provided by the Trust

The Mariinsky Theatre would like to express its gratitude  
to Mrs. Bettina von Siemens for her support in bringing  
the "Ballets of George Balanchine" project to life

Production sponsored by **Cartier**

Stage Manager: **Alexei Mironov**  
Technical Director: **Igor Suvorov**

Performance Running Time 2 hours 20 minutes  
The Performance has two intermissions

Дилер от ММ

The curtains about curtains? - 1962 original  
How much was wrecked?  
Where is Stalingrad?

Van Gogh  
Gauguin  
Picasso—3 *Women*  
Matisse, a crowd of pleasures: *Dance, Music, Bathers, Red Room*  
Kandinsky—2 improvisations

June 27

Two readings today: 12:30 Summer Literary Seminars, Herzen University and  
5 p.m. American Corner, Mayakovsky Library.

In classroom at Herzen U before me, a lecture by Eugene Ostachevsky on OBERIU (or Absurdism) or “Union of Real Art,” 1926-1936, founded in 18th-c. house on Moika where Diderot lived and Malevich died in 1935.

BEZ—without SMYSL—sense  
BESSMYSLITSSA: A-LOGISM or Senselessness

1941—Daniel Kharmis escaped execution as “spreader of defeatism” by acting out Absurdism—died in mental institution in 1942.

“Internal exile”—“sent to a place, a town, basically just to sit there.”  
Sounds typical.

Group was: Daniil Kharmis, Alexandr Vvedensky, Nikolai Zabolotsky (Nikolai Olanikov) plus Pavel Filonov the looney painter—all 12-14 years old in Revolution 1917. 1920s 2<sup>nd</sup> Futurist generation.

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Group goes (is sent) underground in 1930.  
Khlebnikov’s ZAUM—“trans-sense,” literally “the other side of reason”

For K. Zaum is a universal language, like Kandinsky’s  
“visual Esperanto.”

Kruchenykh: “production of nonsense”

Jacob Druskin—philosopher friend of Kharmis.

Kant’s *ding an sich* / thing in itself: We can’t get there—  
only the representation/approximation in the structures of  
our mind.

“But Trans-Sense will ‘bayonet’ through those structures . .  
. . . there!”

=====

E.O. ends at 12:30 p.m., and I’m up: Sasha [Alexandr Skidan], poet, critic, translator, SLS faculty, introduces me as “a legend” [???], “honored” to have me there, this he says on a par with Creeley’s 2002 visit.

“A reading garnished with lecture snippets,” I say. But I veer off from Plan A to read O’Hara’s “Russian verses” & then talk of “sensation” in connection with “trans-sense”—sensation of or from the surface [read “Strawberry Blond” and “Melting Milk” and end with “Gloria”]. Commentary on the sovietization of American life post-Cold War, Conquest by Absorption [not thought before now].

Another gist: that poetry shows consciousness how to enjoy itself—its structures, blinks, blanks, turnings, even its occasional dead ends.

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*Sensation Notes for Summer Literary Seminars*

Cézanne: “Sensation leads you to color tones. Tones, in return, bring about a revelation of sensation.”

Giacometti: “Bonnard, more fierce than Pollock.”

Bonnard to Matisse, 1945: “I see things differently every day, the sky, objects, everything changes continually; you can drown in it. But that’s what brings life.”

Bonnard’s desire “to show what one sees when one enters a room all of a sudden.”

The point about sensation is that it is or can be a condition of impact, face to face with being or actuality; the modern (and also traditional Asian) understanding of this is that it is sacred ground, primordial. Actuality is missing, missed most of the time. Sensation is in its way the showplace of beauty and also of what was realized and valued in modern discourse as *The Sublime*. Interestingly, this is not necessarily in sequence: what is beautiful is as often apprehended as such through cognition or recognition or perceiving. The mathematician Poincaré’s famous moment of realizing that a theorem he had worked up was correct, had to be, “because it was so beautiful” is an instance; so is T.S. Eliot’s saying of John Donne that a thought to him was a sensation (Eliot said “experience” but I am translating to get closer to the bone) and that this is typical of the poetic turn of mind. Be that as it may, the issue of sensation—in art, anyway—seems primarily tied to appetite – literally, a taste for living, the desire (and hence, the will) to live. Berthold Brecht in his journals took up Wordsworth’s promise of a poem’s efficacy “to haunt, to startle, to waylay” and wondered at “a possible

criterion . . . . does it enrich the individual’s capacity for experience?” & then goes on: “Poetry is never mere expression. Its reception is an operation of the same order as, say, seeing or hearing . . . . a human activity, a social function of a wholly contradictory and alterable kind, conditioned by history and in turn conditioning it.”

## The State

1. An Iraqi poet was asked on NPR what poetry meant to him. He had read poems that reflected the violence he and others at home dealt with daily and others that didn't so much—conventional love poems, landscape observations, and such. “The aim of poetry,” he said, “is to keep the language from going insane.”

2. American poetry now haplessly mired in melodrama and solipsism. Habit of taking one's personal circumstances and converting them into soap opera.

I am not proposing a theory, a poetics here so much as just letting you know some of the strands of thought that have been on my mind for some time, and maybe to help myself draw them together. Sensation is usually thought to be confined to the pre-verbal—that is part of its glory—but as I continue to write, the feeling that poetry often returns the senses of words—the facts of each as it strikes one's reading or listening consciousness—to that instantaneous sensation. One may try, as Morton Feldman said of his music, “to hold the moment” at least for the duration of any particular instance, the word as struck. I also think this is implied in William Carlos Williams statement that a poem or any of its parts should constitute an event—a revelation, he said—in the language in which it is written.

Like they say, every word counts. A poem is built word for word, one then another, as if frame by frame, shot by shot, in a film. Interestingly, the analogy I'm after was anticipated by Stan Brakhage in a talk at MacDowell Colony in 1989:

*The simplest definition of poetry that I know is you put one*

*word after another, you're not making a sentence to condemn somebody to your opinion. If you're making a poem a single word counts and with filmmakers every 1/48<sup>th</sup> of second counts. So at any rate putting these things together, why can't people see?*

Now—with or without all that in mind—to read some poems. It occurs to me that this sensation business, maybe because it was so much in the air for the painters at the time, has been with me from when I began to write seriously. My poetry tends to be written word for word, word by word, sometimes with a kind of graphic shape in mind (not that the poem takes that shape in any typographical way)—bricks, bubbles, architecture, a spread perhaps. A separate word or phrase can act like a shot in film: it occurs, and then cuts or veers to something else. A kind of pattern recognition, never exactly recognizably my own, takes charge, and it is this that sometimes defers or erases syntactic probity. A poem's coherence may hang by a thread. When I was in my early 20s I was pretty aggressive about this; I considered myself eager at one point to write poems that didn't mean anything, or that anyway subverted any pin-down-able meaning. Come to think of it, that hasn't changed very much.

[reads poems]

In attendance: unknown students, mix of Russian & US; Mikhail Iossel; Sasha; E.O.; Peter Gizzi; Kate...Lunch with Kate, Eugene, Sasha at Zoom Café—vegetable soup and ham & cheese sandwich, perfectly OK, simplicity a relief.

On to meet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko at Borey Café Gallery...a tedious ego, there. No, that's after the Mayakovsky Library reading at 6 p.m., before which we

rush taxi to Muzei Dostoyevski. Whew. Ron is right: there, in the center of the foyer, is the Master's high hat in a bell jar.

Working further backwards: we had walked—Kate, Eugene (Genya), Connie and I—down Nevsky to a get close look at *The Bronze Horseman*, a photo op.

Arkadii, 61, married to seemingly pleasant, handsome biologist. Friendly enough, if distracted (by?). Ostachevsky sits between us. O & I talk, not AD & I, so it is diffuse. AD & wife talk. Is there a protocol? High hat—“Mayakovsky's hat worn by a horse.”

#### 'BYZANTINE' ROOSKIES

– your goofy alphabets,

almost non-existent manners

hallways

icons

*byt*

[bvyt]

(not much in use now, says E.O.)

“Now you & I are quits”

We're Helsinki bound

Helsinki airport

severities of the Finn

Houllebecq: “Pasternak? Connais pas. Il est mort, et moi je suis encore vivant.”

## Saint Petersburg Details

“No democracy—*dermocracy*,” says taxi driver friend of Marisa Fushille of American Center, Moscow. *Derm* in Russian means “shit.”

Russian politics often called “Byzantine.” *Viz.*, “*The Byzantine empire developed very effective military and diplomatic techniques that helped to ensure its long survival. In fact, the adjective “Byzantine” is often used to connote enormous complexity, as in “Byzantine” diplomacy. It refers to the complexities of constant palace revolutions, coups and murders over the centuries that made dealing with Byzantine officials an extremely difficult matter.*”

Social services broken down. Pensions lost. Old ladies without pensions make living as museum guards. Old folks stand on sidewalks of major thoroughfares singing the Internationale, raising Stalin banners high.

Peter's trashy streets. Morning after Graduation Day of All the Russias in St. Pete teams of women with whisk brooms tied with red rags sweep up cigarette butts from cracks in pavements, plastic vodka bottles from Palace Square.

Elena's mother escaped Leningrad 1942 on a truck across the frozen Gulf of Finland.

Edmund J. Safra Synagogue in St. Pete—the only name-bearing synagogue in the world, Gregory the cantor tells us.

Visiting the dovening men upstairs in the synagogue (the feeling this is rude).

St. Nicholas the Sanctifier, of Myra (Demire, Turkey).

“As sugar dissolves it spreads happiness.”

— SAS sugar packet

The Neva’s banks were “dressed” in Finnish granite, Pushkin says, under Catherine II.

Diderot recommended Falconet as sculptor for the Peter statue. Finished 1782.

Petersburg prone to floods and fires.

Dostoyevsky in “White Nights”—how life in St. Petersburg is “that life which is a mixture of something purely fantastic, something fervently ideal, and at the same time (alas!), something frightfully prosaic and ordinary, not to say incredibly vulgar.”

Peterhof: Ceremonial tableaux of people set off by trees along the shore as we walk to Mon Plaisir: one man wading, a couple kissing, family members each standing atop a rock.

Elena’s apartment in another 1860s building (there had been a fire in the 50s/60s?). Walls thick so that a steam heater does for minus-30-degree winter days. Those Khrushchev houses use gas, electric—anything, all at once—there are power outages, accordingly.

St. Petersburg’s yellow, blue & white or plain white facades must be repainted every ten years. Good town for house painters. A team repaints the black enamel railing of the horse-tamers bridge (Fontanka). At Catherine Palace in Tsarskoe Selo, the stucco Titans at the rear were originally

gold leaf; the leaf fell off after a single winter. Gold leaf on stucco no good in this climate, if any. Now they are painted a horrid shit yellow. Putin asked the Director what would it cost to re-gild the statues. “I have no idea! It is impracticable!” “Come on, you know these things!” “Millions—but!” Days later, Putin calls with a plan: cover the Titans with form-fitting titanium sheathing and put gold leaf on that. Putin is serious; it might get done.

White Night sunset 11 p.m., sunrise 4 a.m. No real darkness between.



Elena Gavrilova (guide)  
Marina Shayj (guide)  
Alexei Leporc (Hermitage prints curator)  
Olesya Turkina (curator)  
Roger Bevan (tour guide)  
Alexei Yurchak (anthropology prof., UC Berkeley)  
The Ultimate Travel Company

Granite pedestal under *The Bronze Horseman* inspired  
the Constructivists.  
(That's the way it goes.)

*Russian dancers are not trained for the speed that Balanchine's work demands. "We practically cannot do Balanchine," Vishneva said. "You dance till you drop." She also had the musical responsiveness that is required for Balanchine, and which is not a hallmark of Russian dancing . . . Also she has the celebrated Kirov back. When she turns around you can see all the movement emanating from the lumbar spine. But you don't have to see it. Always, you can feel that this generator is working, and this gives the movement force and unity, which read as spiritual qualities—the body as soul.*

—JOAN ACOCELLA, *NEW YORKER*, JULY 10 & 17, 2006

(Good for Lopatkina, too.)

Comparable Apartments & Destinies: the Alexander Palace (residence of Nicholas & Alexandra et al 1904–1917) and Akhmatova's place on Fontanka Embankment. Rooms, beds, pictures, oddments, papers.

"Aromatic" borscht—the difference, it has meat in it.

Best food in Moscow is Georgian—Georgian *tapas*. (Tblisi in Moscow, on the terrace upstairs.)

No photographs in Russian museums, except of course for the personal museums of Akhmatova, Nabokov, Dostoyevsky etc. No postcards, either.

*Dear Levi: Here's the deal as I understand it: Gorbachov in college hung with the radical poets & acquired big tender ideas, but proved incomprehensible to his Soviet colleagues, whereas Yeltsin's will to power was entirely understandable, business as usual—he junked Gorbie's plans for independent republics & hooked up with the oligarchs. Y's failing was drink. Putin is only one of a set of surviving KGB officers who now rule the Russian roost, and they are beholden to no one, strictly bare-knuckles power. Putin may erase the term limit but only because the leadership has no other prospect who's as good for their purposes.*

[to David Levi Strauss, July 2006]

The Pushkin poem Elena recited on the bus en route to  
Tsarkoe Selo:

*I loved you and perhaps I love you still  
The flame still high perhaps, yet  
Burning so quietly within my soul,  
You shouldn't feel the slightest distress.  
I loved you in silence, hopeless, sometimes  
Too jealous, sometimes too shy.  
May you find another who will love you  
As tenderly and truthfully as I.*

Beauty of the prospect from Catherine Palace to the  
Cameron Gallery.

stages famous  
ies: Gian  
Algardri,  
et al.

myriakon (Northern Pont) in August, 2003  
are displayed. It is a little bronze jug  
containing 99 coins of Town Kizik made of  
electrum (a natural alloy of gold and silver).  
The coins are dated back to the end of the  
VI - V century BC, there are 53 kinds of  
them with various images.

The State Hermitage.

**Saint Nicholas of Myra in Lycia.**



Among the  
Christian saints, the image of  
Nicolas - the  
Sanctifier was  
especially wide-  
spread in Russian  
medieval culture.  
Displayed are  
ca. 150 icons,  
sculptures, em-  
broidery works,  
personal votives and church decorations,  
religious drawings. Each of the items is  
unique as of its artistic features,  
iconography, and perfect craftsmanship.

Russian Museum.

**The Guards of Motherland.**

800 rare things from more than 40 museums  
of Russia and the State Historical Archive  
form the core of the exhibition devoted to  
Russian cossacks: weapons, military  
decorations, banners, uniform, the gifts that  
cossacks presented to the royal family,  
household items, official documents, photos  
made straight in the battlefields, etc. It is  
arranged with official support and personal  
assistance of Ilya Klebanov and Dmitriy

Petersburg. The Official City Guide



"AS SUGAR  
DISSOLVES  
IT SPREADS  
HAPPINESS"

- SAS SUGAR  
PACKET

Fyodor Dostoevsky

from "WHITE NIGHTS"

"There are, if you don't happen to know it already, Nastenka, some very strange places in Petersburg. It is not the same sun which shines upon all the other people of the city that looks in there, but quite a different sun, a new sun, one specially ordered for those places, and the light it sheds on everything is also a different, peculiar sort of light. In those places, dear Nastenka, the people also seem to live quite a different life, unlike that which surges all round us, a life which could only be imagined to exist in some faraway foreign country beyond the seven seas, and not at all in our country and in these much too serious times. Well, it is that life which is a mixture of something purely fantastic, something fervently ideal, and, at the same time (alás, Nastenka!), something frightfully prosaic and ordinary, not to say incredibly vulgar."

- the Neva's banks "dressed" in Finnish granite (Puskäkin) under Catherine II
- Diderot recommended Falconet for the Peter statue. (Finished 1782)
- prone to floods and fires



Утвержден приказом Министерства финансов  
Российской Федерации  
25 февраля 2000 г. № 20Н

Код формы  
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Комитет по культуре Администрации Санкт-Петербурга

Литературно-мемориальный музей

Ф.М. Достоевского

ИНН 7825705438 ОКПО 0211882146

ВХОДНОЙ БИЛЕТ

Серия ББ 50 № 034823

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DOSTOEVSKY MUSEUM

КОНТРОЛЬ

The Philosophy Steamer, the first of two vessels on which liberal intelligensia were deported from St. Pete, September 1922 at Lenin's behest. On the wharf stood members of the secret police who said as the ship pulled away, "Why is this happening? Aren't we all Russians?"

Except for the occasional gold-plated stretch limo, the oligarchs are invisible.

PUT YOUR ICON  
IN A CORNER  
PRAY

*Later*

To Charlie Vermont

Dear Charlie,

My mother's father left the family flat eleven years before she was born, then returned to (apparently there was some question about this) conceive her, then left again. My mother described my maternal grandmother as "feckless," one of her words of choice. Her father worked for Ringling Bros. circus, then stayed in New York as a theatrical agent. He died there before I was born. He may have sent money home but mainly I got the impression that the mother and children struggled to keep up appearances—important for them in Crawfordsville, Indiana. The mother, Helen, seems to have run a seminary for girls. My mother split for Indianapolis art school very early, then Chicago, then New York, by which time she realized she would not be a sculptor but a promoter (public relations).

My father's family came from Lithuania and Odessa and settled in Chicago. My father's father was a tailor for Kuppenheimer (still a going concern, I think); his mother taught English to immigrants and published poetry in the temple newsletter. South Side, Chicago—rough stuff, the Black Sox killed my father's love of baseball; Capone & Co., Leopold & Loeb, all firsthand acquaintances.

My parents lived out the American Dream. Never looked back. What family history I now have I got mostly from others.

\$100,000 was the top Yankee salary in the late 1950s, maybe Mantle's, I forget. I remember adding my parents' gross incomes for that year as I had heard them mentioned somehow—\$50,000 each—and thinking how great, how it

fit that other, glamorous standard. So, yeah, upper middle class was what that was. They made a mutual promise to never be in debt. They had much richer friends, or ones who lived more ostentatiously. But I felt they were embarrassingly "above" or other than most of my schoolmates' parents. I now realize that had more to do with style and even the glamour of (show biz) connections.

Since the Russians only show their Tzarist past I wonder if they still think serfdom was all that bad. The corrugated steel art deco socialist realism . . .

The Communist past as such is officially a horror. Younger poets and intellectuals disdain Mayakovsky because they were forced to memorize his pro-Soviet doggerels in school and don't have a clue about CLOUD IN TROUSERS. The showing of truly Soviet-oriented Suprematism and other briefly aligned avant-gardes is meager; photography, Rodchenko's for instance, not considered worthy of museum showing. Yet there are Communists, and those more or less our age (you saw) in the streets with Stalin banners wanting their state apartments and social programs back, singing the Internationale. The old ladies in the Hermitage are those whose husbands died (of drink) and have no annuities, no health care etc. unless they become state employees.

All the reading, looking, talking, before during after the Russia trip told/tells me Russia is Russia in this consistency—Stalin established alternative, quasi-universal serfdom. BYT is the key word. It's the word translated as "daily grind" in Mayakovsky's last poem "love's boat has smashed against the daily grind" but it involves a condition so preternaturally and constantly bleak that an American

**Subject: Bill Berkson Reading in Russia**

**Date:** Thursday, June 8, 2006 6:27 AM

**From:** Bill Berkson <berkson@pacbell.net>

**To:** "Patricia C. McLeod" <PMcLeod@montalvoarts.o  
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**Conversation:** Bill Berkson Reading in Russia

Bill Berkson in Russia  
Poetry Readings with Commentary

June 21, 6–7 pm  
American Center  
Moscow

June 27, 12:30–1:30 pm  
Summer Literary Seminars  
Herzen University  
St. Petersburg

June 27, 5–7 pm  
American Corner  
St. Petersburg



At The Bronze Horseman, with Eugene Ostashevsky and Kate Sutton

office worker's term is hardly it. Stalin used the flip of this word—which connotes spiritual life—to identify utter devotion to the Soviet, it was your highest goal as a citizen.

Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman*, Gogol, Dostoevski's stories, on and on—Russian lit is full of this tale of twofold oppression, seemingly relished at the “grass” roots: the Tsar has the Big Stick, but the bureaucrats have every blockage and insinuation.

Did you try getting an answer to a straight question from anybody? In Japan, where we had been in April, you get a titter or some intimation that you've made a minor impropriety; in Russia, in June, blank stare, and the sense that if you pushed the matter you could be killed.

It is hard to imagine how much devastation the regimes of 1917-1989 left. Rural economies wrecked by 5-year plan. 40 miles outside Moscow mud tracks and potatoes at best; so people commute (no good public transport) to the cities and back, haplessly—no rooms in town, that's for sure. Yet an American girl I know loves the life in St. Petersburg, the camaraderie, the whole deal, regardless, some romance (in any sense) there, I suspect; she finagles to get back, then to get by.

Tsvetaeva's *Moscow Diaries* translated by Jamie Gambrell are great. It is instructive how most of the good poets didn't appreciate the Bolsheviks. We tend to forget the promise that was in the Kerenski moment and early soviets. I guess that was similar to Gorbachov's. The way I hear it, in school Gorbie hung with the poets and intellectuals and got all these neat liberal ideas; he took his chance, had a run but the gist was essentially alien

to the general crowd and specifically no good for those ready to make their killings—the oligarchs who began by shooting to the top of the various industries—who then turned to the drunken Yeltsin as their front man. Too much chaos there, so enter the guys who know how to run the show traditionally—KGB, Putin et alia—who actually have the nerve and muscle to push the oligarch's around and even out (can this can hold against all that money and the muscle it can muster? it seems so). So, now, you hear the arguments from all but this much-advertised “opposition” that Russia (who knows about those other “republics”?) is always this way, in need of the Strong Man, the bureaucrats' nonchalance.

Happy year to you & Ann, as ever,  
Bill

## “10 + 10”

The round numbers in the title of this traveling anthology exhibition refer to equal sets of Soviet and American painters, all of whom are under 40, commingled in the show's ranks. The Soviets—Yurii Albert, Vladimir Mironenko, Yurii Petruk, Leonid Purygin, Andrei Roiter, Sergei Shutov, Alexei Sundukov, Vadim Zakharov, Anatolii Zhuravlev, and Konstantin Zvezdochetov—are all males living in Moscow. The American artists are David Bates, Ross Bleckner, Christopher Brown, April Gornik, Peter Halley, Annette Lemieux, Rebecca Purdum, David Salle, Donald Sultan, and Mark Tansey, all but two of whom live in New York.

Barely three years ago, it would not have been possible to discuss the work of young Soviet artists without having visited the studios and other informal venues of Moscow and Leningrad, at least. Now with glasnost and its mostly commercial repercussions in the West, the situation has changed. The current international art market identified wild-haired varieties of recent Soviet art as right up there in demand with Australian aborigine paintings. Thus, change has been mediated in accord with the jobber's rule: acquisition precedes communication.

Oddly enough, although this show bypasses all that sorry business with a minimum of curatorial channeling and geopolitical superscripts, its prime revelations occur by a sort of transcultural inversion, especially within the American sector. Bleckner and Halley each had a separate alcove gallery to himself, at the very beginning of the installation and at the midway mark, respectively. This situated Bleckner correctly as *hors de concours*, or anyhow ahead of the game. The most recent among his three pictures here, *Architecture of the Sky III*, 1988, is the singularly great painting qua painting in the show—a cosmogony viewed

as if from inside a colander (as one local artist remarked). On the other hand, the intermediate framing of Halley's work effectively raised it as the ideational fulcrum of almost everything else to either side. Suddenly, like Bleckner, Halley zoomed forth as a venerable master painter in the company of others still working out their approaches. He also looked specifically “Russian” and immediate, subjective even, like a true heir of Malevich bringing gratuitous, noisy blasts of outright sensation to the Suprematist desert. In other words, his pictures looked more like pictures and less like his ideas.

Altogether, the surprises in “10 + 10” hinge on identity shifts—the Soviets appearing not retrograde but at once familiar and hip, like the resourceful children of old yet seldom-seen friends, and the Americans somewhat despondent but prismatically defamiliarized (or more properly, Sovietized). April Gornik's landscapes, for instance, possess distinctly Slavic or Tartarish complexions; her *Mojacar*, 1988, might be Irkutsk, her *Tropical Wilderness*, 1987, the recipient of a chill from near the Finnish border. Similarly with Tansey (that wayward Soviet Realist), Purdum (Rayonist frostbite), Bates (an Estonian's idea of the bayous as wildlife preserve) and Brown (Ilya Repin seduced toward Action Painting by way of Larry Rivers' revisionist excesses). Even Sultan's fruits and fire fighters emerge singed and glowering from a Dostoevskian murk. Of course, much of this shiftiness may be just evidence of how thoroughly the hard-won retrievals of early Russian modernism have affected both Soviet and American art since the early '60s.

The Americans make art explicitly intended for museum status, whereas the Russians have worked in an atmosphere promising next to nothing in the way of shows, much less curatorial sanctions. The Americans are nervy and suave, the Soviets nervy and (understandably) nervous, and where

virtuosity shows up among them, it typically reflects sophistication about design. As Mironenko remarked in a panel discussion at the museum, the Soviets work “in the absence of European amusement, without American unexpectedness.” All the same, the Russians are funny and histrionic. (Among the Americans, only Tansey and Salle equal their monstrous levity). As with the Americans, nearly all the Russians are conceptual painters, and many of their works—including the most imposing and accessible-seeming among them, by Zakharov, Roiter, and Zhuravlev—exist either as parts of series or as residual of other activities. Even Purygin’s exploded Slavic-style folk art seems homesick for its context, which may signal a defining virtue of folk art, generally. Then again, because Purygin and so many of the others use words emblematically in their images, we come up against a severely mortared version of the language barrier. Some translations would have helped; except for the titles and artists’ statements, there are none in either the catalogue or the wall texts. Zhuravlev, at 26, the youngest of the painters here, makes the most normatively abstract art. His image-as-test oils and enamels on canvas, summarily reflective of linguistic confinement, are blocked out with a dandy’s cursive dash. Likewise, the industrial greens and incisions (standing for radio speakers and air vents) of Roiter’s *Unseen Voices* panels, 1988, communicate directly the drab look associated with everyday Soviet urban life.

To what extent do both the Russians and the Americans confine their work to the representation of current art ideas found more or less synchronized in magazines and books? And is “painting” the appropriate rubric for such a show when painting as such (despite its readiness to be shipped) is extraneous to the many non-media-specific intentions on both sides? In prompting and dealing with these questions, the Russians have the advantage of pretty well knowing

what the Americans are about; we are largely ignorant of the dimensions of Moscow conceptualism. Perhaps we are blindly entering our own “period of esthetic starvation,” identified in the East (by the poet Alexei Parshchikov) with Brezhnev and here with Bush and Helms. What will the prospective viewers in Moscow, Leningrad and Tbilisi (where the show will proceed after its American tour) think? They may recognize the monolithic concepts of “America” and “Russia” as two dystopian, labyrinthine voids within which the “10 + 10” artists are gathering their senses.

—BB ARTFORUM, DECEMBER 1989

*What are the preconditions for noticing there is nothing going on in a particular period of history but the passing of time? Between long periods of boredom and brief moments of terror, we arrive at a point of conversion between the two. Thus, the demand for terror grows, out of the emptiness of. . . Of course, this works very well for the Russians.*

—BARRETT WATTEN, GRAND PIANO

—————

*To Mark Rosenthal, June 28*

Dear Mark,

Thanks for putting me onto the source for William Kentridge’s quotations from the Bukharin sessions at the Plenum of the Central Committee, February–March 1937.

Now I am all the more mystified, to wit: on p. 370 of *The Road to Terror*, Document 118 has the following exchange:

Bukharin: *But you must understand—it’s very hard for me to go on living.*

Stalin: *And it’s easy for us?!*



But in your catalogue (and as I recall it in the actual installation *I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine*) p. 125, paragraph 2 has this:

*When Bukharin ultimately says, "It is very difficult for me to die," Stalin replies, "And it's easy for us to go on living?"*

The discrepancy is astonishing, no? My immediate thought was that Kentridge himself willfully changed Bukharin's line to make the exchange all the more telling (and actually in keeping with age-old Russian dialectical habits), which it is — which is why I was so taken with it in the first place. But then it may be that there are different versions (records, even) of the exchange and that Kentridge did not take his from *The Road to Terror* but rather from another source, or else from another translation of the same account, or else... well, who knows?

If you know, or if William knows and is willing to solve this mystery, I would be delighted to get an answer. I am cc'ing William on this matter, just in case.

In any event, I thought you both should see the question. When I visited Russia a few years ago I learned fairly quickly how futile, or even risky, it can be to ask (in the American habit) a direct question, other than, say, how to get somewhere —but even then one might be confronted with a blank stare implying 'who are you and why are you asking me this, or indeed, any such question?' The suspicious attitude goes at least as far back as Gogol, not to mention "The Bronze Horseman," clearly remains intact.

Cheers,

*From Mark Rosenthal, October 29*

Dear Bill,

At last an answer: William did indeed knowingly change the dialogue from the actual transcript. He said that he was thinking about a letter Bukharin sent from death row.

Best to the two of you,  
Mark

"Koba, why do you need me to die?" Bukharin wrote in a note to Stalin just before his execution. ("Koba" was Stalin's revolutionary pseudonym, and Bukharin's use of it was a sign of how close the two had once been. The note was found still in Stalin's desk after his death in 1953.)

## Appendix X (upon request)

*From Kate Sutton*

At first, I balked, because I only read the reading lists, and our interactions there, and I told you it felt like interrupting someone else's conversation. And it did. It's been ages since I've been able to take so much delight—or tap into such patience, which I think is more the crux of it. The patience to root around for those “sleeper punches” of Pasternak's. To wonder about the verb tense, and the way the sounds slide together in Russian. Like that desert's smile, which I guess you knew to be slow.

Instead, I have my iTunes out. I wanted to hear the song, “Lost Girls”, by Tilly and the Wall, but when I entered “lost” into the search field, the program brought up it's own impressive selection. “No one can ever save you/if no one can ever find you.” Not the world's most revolutionary lyrics, but goes down well enough with this wine my mother left. (“Winemaker's Red”—all the leftover grapes, mashed together into an elegant muttddom. “The heady surge of the vine,” and all.)

Anyway, I guess I wanted to go back to time, because you have to take it to really relish these poems. To weigh each word. All the more so for someone “in the trade.” Guess that's why I wanted to listen to this song as I re-read it all. Something about suspension. Waiting but not working—rather, waiting for someone to do the work. And it's funny because there was a time when this wasn't work. And yet, here I find myself, struggling to keep my eyes on the page, and not venturing to other devices, other windows (the voices and rooms of my generation?). I think I envy Pushkin's prophet, who had no choice but to be brought to

his news, to have the wind knocked out of him, only to have it replaced with something else entirely.

Have moved onto “Galaxy of the Lost”, a Lightspeed Champion song covered by the formidable Florence and the Machine. I wish I had never heard her speak—I would have adored her much more.

Anyway, onto the Notebook!

“I vass lybli”—stuck on the first phrase. Just charming imagining who might have taught you this. The emphasis is on “lyublyu”—the “I love”, but it starts off with an “i”—the “And. . . .” that insinuates that this is a return volley, which also accounts for the cutesy inversion. Something a girl might toss over her shoulder at the candy counter, or something. “Do vstrechi” is also a bit optimistic here. Typically that means “until a meeting”, but I like “see you there's” certainty.

“Fluffpuffs” for what we call “letnyi sneg”—summer snow. Sort of quaint, until you try to breathe.

Vrubel's demons. Funny trying to recall the first time I saw those. Honestly, I think I was just taken aback at how much I didn't know, how much I hadn't seen because so much has never left the country. I nearly cried the first time I stumbled into the Russian Museum's Kuindzhe room. Somewhere between Hopper and Thomas Kinkade maybe, but I love him. Hyper-realistic landscapes, always in this stony calm. Light spilling here and there, sloshing around in the water. Some of the most painstakingly rendered sea stones I've ever seen. He doesn't paint like a neurotic. The self-doubt and self-loathing and moral flagellation of Russian literature is nowhere to be seen near Kuindzhe's cows. Not even the rhapsodic moments of Tolstoy, Levin out in the fields

during a storm. His paintings are still. And luscious.

But you didn't mention him in your artists. I guess you were in the contemporary wing. I tried to force a crush on Zakharov, but as much as I tried to sweet talk myself into a fixation, the truth of the matter is, the man is just limp. As a person. Could have been brilliant, but I think he just caught the fear, and then wasn't. And then he moved to Cologne, which sounds just as good as any a place to not be brilliant.

Anyway, onto politeness: Russians aren't polite, but it is also tied to fear. Mixing with others' affairs means making yourself vulnerable. "A known associate." I remember watching two men carefully circle a parked SUV, selecting the right window, smashing it, and then pulling a bloody fistful of something or other back into their leather jacket. And this was in the middle of the day, and there were bystanders a plenty but it was made clear No One Would Care. No one would notice, and no one would care, because that way no one gets hurt (except, obviously, the victim). But the thing is, I am not going to throw any stones here. It can get a little If You Give a Mouse a Cookie over there. I was just informed that a Russian friend had invited herself to live in my guest bedroom, and when I had to break it to her that my guest bed is booked through April, she decided that I was obligated to help her find an apartment through Craigslist, through mass emails from my account, etc. My attempt to help within reason was met with a public rebuke for not doing more to help someone who truly desperately needed it (because the three free options she had did not suit her; two were too far from Soho and the third smelled like Chinese food. We spell desperation differently, this girl and I).

My favorite part of the Mayakovsky Museum is his letters with Lili Brik. They were illustrated, and he has one

self-portrait in a cage, because that's where his love for her has put him. Very fourth grade Trapper Keeper style for what is one of the revolutionary romances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I went to the Mayakovsky museum with Luc Tuymans. We didn't stay long.

"(In haste to get to Kremlin we neglected the modern section across the street)."

You missed nothing.

And now St Petersburg, which used to have that Prophet pull on me.

AHHBI—that's in the possessive, and rightly so. She was a creature. And she doesn't translate at all, but I always had a softer spot for Tsvetaeva, who is more the crude chorus girl, who lays it all on the line before the bottle's even empty. I have sympathy for the fellow over-sharers. Akhmatova is all restraint; even when she's heartbroken, she crams it all into that one lost glove, and all anyone can think about after reading it is what lovely fingers she must have had, long and lily-white. I think I may resent her a little for that.

stikhi—verses

I have new appreciation for that Petrov-Vodkin/ Freilicher mash-up.

I think that "winter" you liked wasn't Goncharova's, but Larionov's. He was a true king, but he's been shuffled away. "Homeless dissidence." Such a good line.

Speaking of, on to Beck's "Lost Cause." Not just a good song for the moment, topical and all, but perhaps worth sending the French boy. Or maybe not sending it to him, but fixing his face on this song? "Your sorry eyes cut through the bone/ make it hard to leave you alone/Leave you here, wearing your wounds/waving your guns at somebody new. . . .Baby, you're a lost cause." This may just be the red wine hitting its mark.

Speaking of, back to the text, and now you're in the Hermitage.

Matisse, "A crowd of pleasures" vs. "creepy."

My favorite Kandinsky improvisation hangs in the stairwell. I kept it on my computer desktop for years, but I couldn't even back up to get a good look at it, because the railing keeps you within two meters of the canvas.

"Internal exile"—it is typical.

Maybe a bit off topic, but did you see that Dada show in DC a while back? Dada in Three Movements, or something like that? Leah Dickerman put it together? Anyway, both hands full of ZAUM there.

I had to stop at the 10 + 10 review. Not because of the Winemaker's Red, though it's putting me to sleep (last night I closed down the bar—same bartender, different bar—but managed to bring in a ringer, calling up an old high school friend he found more to his taste. This means I don't have to stroke his egoism, and I still get free hot toddies or tequila shots (same bartender, very different bars).

Anyway, I am stopping because the letter to Charlie took me out of that space of your notebooks, back to a world closer to the one where I am sitting now.

Maybe an appropriate place to stop too. At least my iTunes thinks so. I had to quit the "Lost" songs, and the first thing it sent my way was Billy's Band's cover of "Blue Valentines." I would send it to you, but it's almost better as text—a St Petersburg-based Tom Waits cover-band, it's lead singer doing his best impression of English, with the dirty Muppet voice that's as close as he can come to Waits.

Anyway, thanks for the excuse. Much more entertaining than the usual internet-window shuffle.

To Kate Sutton

More than I could have asked, thank you.

“Fluffpuffs”—funny, this is the subtitles translation for what I don’t know in Fellini’s *Amarcord* when the (I think) what we call “dandelion fuzz” comes flying in the meadows around Rimini: “The fluffpuffs are coming!” cry the kids. They come in clouds.

So there we were sitting outside Les Zamis de Jean-Jacques, Nikitski Blvd, and the letnyi sneg looked like those puffs.

No recollection at all of Kuindzhe—now that I look at what’s online, it’s a touch of Hopper mixed with Caspar David Friedrich, no? But it adds up to, yes! Thomas Kincade with the additive mystery of . . . Kuindzhe! Pure and simple.

Tsvetaeva is more than all that grandiose AHHBI. I loved AA’s rooms, though. (And there is no such monument to Maria?) A note from NOT AN EXIT (book that has just appeared):

*Letters of Pasternak, Tsvetaeva and Rilke: what Susan Sontag calls “a portrait of the sacred delirium of art”—which may be just the delirium of writing letters to phantom ideal loves (whose true love, as it happens, is art, poetry) . . . This sentence already spinning away, drowning in whatever sympathy I muster for them all. But they are all so inward; hardly a moment when anyone—Tsvetaeva’s the occasional exception—tells one salient thing about their days, the weather, gossip, happenstance. Art for them is shelter, and feels puny on that account.*

*Mere piffle compared to the Satanic Delirium of Email.*

Do you know MT’s *Moscow Diaries*—good translation (can I tell?) by Jamie Gambrell?

There’s a glitch now in my appreciation of all that Russian “grandeur”—its assumptions about poet and poetry. It all seems to lead to this adulation of the very poncif Joseph Brodsky or even the posturing I encountered in the person of Arkadii D rather than something that might have issued after Mayakovsky, something down & dirty perhaps, really, in Pasternak’s phrase “smacking of soil of fate,” or better (in my terms) of cement.

Anyway, maybe I should put your latest at the end. Or maybe we should keep going & leave the old notebook to itself.

Cheers, as ever,

*Two Russian Poems*  
*for Kate*

*Poem*

Stars rushed onward. Cliffs bathed themselves.  
Salt spray blinded, and tears dried up.  
The bedrooms darkened. Thoughts rushed.  
The Sphinx nodded to Sahara's whispers.

Candles swam, and it seemed the blood ran cold  
Inside the Colossus. Lips swelled  
Into the desert's slow blue smile.  
As tides turned, night declined.

Moroccan breezes stirred the sea.  
Simoon howled. Archangel snored in its snows.  
Candles swam. Rough draft of "The Prophet"  
Dried, and day glimmered over the Ganges.

*after Pasternak*

*The Prophet*

Parched with the spirit's thirst, I crossed  
An endless desert sunk in gloom,  
And a six-winged seraph came  
Where the tracks met and I stood lost.  
Fingers light as dreams he laid  
Upon my lids; I opened wide  
My eagle eyes, and gazed around.  
He laid his fingers on my ears  
And they filled with roaring sound:  
I heard the music of the spheres,  
The flight of angels through the skies,  
The beasts that crept beneath the sea,  
The heady surge of the vine;  
And, like a lover kissing me,  
He rooted out this tongue of mine,  
Fluent in lies and vanity;  
He tore my fainting lips apart  
And, with his right hand steeped in blood,  
He armed me with a serpent's dart;  
With his bright sword he split my breast;  
My heart leaped up to him in a single bound;  
A glowing livid coal he pressed  
Into the hollow of the wound.  
There in the desert I lay dead,  
And God called out to me and said:  
"Rise, prophet, rise, and hear, and see,  
And let my works be seen and heard  
By all who turn aside from me,  
And burn them with my fiery word."

*after Pushkin [1827]*



*With Connie Lewallen at the Church of Spilled Blood,  
Saint Petersburg*



*INVISIBLE OLIGARCHS*

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“Two Russian Poems” appeared in *Expect Delays*  
(Coffee House Press, 2014)

All photographs in this book, except page 57, by Connie Lewallen

First Edition, First Printing, 2016

ISBN 978-1-937027-81-0

Distributed by SPD / Small Press Distribution  
[www.spdbooks.org](http://www.spdbooks.org)

Ugly Duckling Presse  
Old American Can Factory  
232 Third Street E-303  
Brooklyn, NY 11215  
[www.uglyducklingpresse.org](http://www.uglyducklingpresse.org)

Design by S. Leone and Last Nights Sandwiches.  
Set in Zurich BT and Bell MT Std.

Covers printed offset at Prestige Printing. Printed and bound at  
McNaughton & Gunn on acid-free, partially recycled paper.

The author wishes to express profound thanks to Julien Poirier;  
Connie Lewallen; Gordon Knox; Kate Sutton; Charlie Vermont; Lyn  
Hejinian; Marina Fushille; Mikhail Iossel and Jeff Parker of Summer  
Literary Seminars, Herzen Univeristy, Saint Petersburg; Olesya  
Turkina; Viktor Mazin; Eugene Ostashevsky; Alexander Skidan;  
Robert Storr; Mark Rosenthal; William Kentridge; Elena Gavrilova;  
Alexey Leporc; Roger Bevan; Michael Newton; Stephanie Leone;  
American Corner, Mayakoskii Library, Saint Petersburg; and the  
Ultimate Travel Company, London

Ugly Duckling Presse is a member of the Community of Literary  
Magazines and Presses and a 501(c)(3) registered nonprofit.

This project is supported in part by an award from the National  
Endowment for the Arts.



