

## Conference Paper

# Art Discourse of the Yekaterinburg Avant-Garde: From the 1960s Basements to the 1980s Exhibitions

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## Abstract

This paper is devoted to the first domestic international conference *Avant-Garde Movements in the Soviet Fine Arts: History and Modernity* organised by the Department of the Art History of the Ural State University, by the Regional Department of Culture and by the White Gallery under the direction V.A. Malinov. The conference took place on January 19–21, 1990 in Sverdlovsk in the Cinema House. This event, which united art critics of the Urals, Siberia, Moscow, Kiev and Sofia, was one of the first sophisticated attempts to consider the issues faced by art movements which were not officially recognized and, therefore, existed “in the underground”. Due to various objective and subjective circumstances, local cultural strivings of that time were expressed more fully in painting and graphics than in other art forms. Sverdlovsk visual arts became well-known far beyond the region and played a special role in the city’s artistic life. The exhibition focused on the members of the art partnership “Surikova, 31”. Almost two hundred artists and over six hundred works were presented in the 1987 exhibition. The exhibition stunned the public due to the age range of the artists, the explosion of movements and styles, and most of all the freedom of expression. Since then, exhibition activity has emerged from the basements and become public. Materials from the Ural conference 1990 are still interesting and relevant as part of the history of non-official art both in Sverdlovsk/Yekaterinburg and Russia in general.

**Keywords:** modernism, avant-garde, Artists’ Union, socialist realism, underground, the second avant-garde, nonconformism, postmodernism.

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## 1. Introduction

In 1993 a collection of articles was published in Ekaterinburg: a small run published in local Verkhnyaya Pyshma printing house on the thin newsprint paper. It was the collection of papers about the first Russian international conference *Avant-Garde Movements in the Soviet Fine Arts: History and Modernity*. The conference, organized by the Chair of Art History of Ural State University named after A.M.Gorky, Regional Department of Culture and the White Gallery directed by V.A.Malinov, took place on January 19–21 1990 in Sverdlovsk Cinema House. By bringing together art historians from Ural, Siberia,

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Moscow, Kiev and Sophia, the conference became one of the first attempts in Russia to provide a comprehensive exploration of the form of art that had been long officially rejected and had existed as an underground movement.

Only during the late 1980s – early 1990s this art provoked wide public interest and became a popular topic of research. Among the exhibitions there was “The Other Art” exhibition in Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow 1956–1976. *K khronike khudozhestvennoy zhizni*. (Vol. 1). Exhibition catalogue (Vol.2). Ed. by L.Talochkin and I.Alpatova, Moscow 1991). There were many articles published in periodicals and specialized journals (for example: *Ot shestidesyatykh k vos'midesyatyam. Voprosy sovremennoy kul'tury*. Ed. by V. Ye. Lebedeva. Vsesoyuznyy nauchno-issledovatel'skiy institut iskusstvoznaniya Ministerstva kul'tury SSSR. Moscow, 1991; *Stil', napravleniye, metod. Problemy stilevykh napravleniy v sovetskom iskusstve 1960-kh – 1990-kh godov*. Ed. by A.V. Tolstoy. Rossiyskaya Akademiya khudozhestv. Moscow 1992).

However, proceedings of 1990 Ural conference remained relevant back then and continue to hold interest today as part of the history of non-official art in Sverdlovsk/ Ekaterinburg and Russia in general. Most of these proceedings were published in aforementioned collection *Avant-Garde Movements in the Soviet Fine Arts: History and Modernity*. Among the conference participants were Moscow specialists Andrey Erofeev, Natalia Briling, Alexandra Obukhova, Vitaliy Patsyukov, Irina Uvarova, Yevgeniya Kikodze (Tbilisi), Yaroslava Bubnova (Sophia).

## 2. Materials and Methods

The collection of articles comprehensively explored the phenomenon of non-official art in the capital and in the provinces, striving to explain this phenomenon as a whole. Moscow school was researched in Natalia Briling's and Sergey Kuskov's articles *Renesans modernizma i yego kharakter. Moskovskaya shkola* and *Kollektsionirovaniye proizvedeniy khudozhnikov-shestidesyatnikov*. They also authored papers on 1950s–1970s period, *Studiya Eliya Belyutina. Materialy* and *Otnosheniye k predmetu i problema russkogo pop-arta*. The birth of conceptual art as a 1970s artistic movement was analysed by Vitaly Patsyukov in his article *Proyekt-mif-kontsept*, where he explored this movement as a bridge connecting our era not only to the avant-garde dreams of 1910s–1920s, but also to the more remote archaic epochs. Monographic papers focused on concrete artists: on Mikhail Shvartsman, an outstanding artist of the second half of the 20th century, author of his own aesthetical and philosophic system (Sergey Kuskov.

leratizm of Shvartsman) and on Georgiy Litichevsky, contemporary master of installations, painted lubok and 1980s comic strips (Alexandra Obukhova. *Georgiy Litichevsky – khudozhnik*). Georgian avant-garde was explored in the article by Yevgeniya Kikodze (*Sovremennyyi gruzinskiy avangard*).

The collection was prefaced by the article *Modernizm-avangard-sotsrealizm-postmodernizm* written by Sergey Kropotv, philosopher specialising in aesthetics who at the time was the Dean of the Department of Art History at the Ural State University. It was concluded by the extended dictionary of terminology of contemporary art prepared by Tatyana Zhumati, who also served as the collection's editor.

### 3. Discussion

What made it possible to hold such a conference in Ural region? Undoubtedly, it was nourished, first and foremost, by the achievements of Sverdlovsk visual art acknowledged far and wide beyond the regional borders, which played an important part in the artistic life of our city. Due to the combination of objective and subjective factors, in Sverdlovsk mental and spiritual strivings of the era became reflected in painting and drawing more than in any other type of art.

The late 1950s and early 1960s, i.e. the “thaw” era, were also important for Sverdlovsk because during this period a lot of alumni of Leningrad and Moscow art institutes returned to their native city. Together with the graduates of local Art College, they formed a new generation of young artists, which determined a new professional level and new creative strivings. There was a new creative atmosphere in the city characterized by mutual support of the artists and their mutual influence. The “austere style” with its staunch civic consciousness fit especially well for the Ural industrial centre: here it remained popular for a long time. Characteristically, this was not only a feeble imitation. Ural artists did not want to lose the romantic belief in the possibility of “good”, “non-conformist” official art. They dreamed of creating monumental artworks filled with civic spirit. An ideal representative of this dream was Ernst Neizvestny, whose image reached mythological dimensions. A real-life example of this style is the 1968 mosaic *Osvobozhdennyi chelovek (The Man Unbound)* by Boris Talberg on the facade of the Ural House of Culture belonging to the Electric and Mechanical Plant.

For Sverdlovsk artists, the peak of social illusions and the beginning of their crisis coincided with the First Zonal Exhibition of 1964 titled *Socialist Ural (Ural sotsialisticheskiy)*. At first the idea of such exhibitions was met with enthusiasm, and nobody noticed any association with the “zone” of GULAG. The exhibitions facilitated contacts

with the artists from Chelyabinsk and Orenburg, Perm and Ufa, Tyumen and Kurgan; they strengthened the positions of previously insular young innovators and initially even opposed the administrative system that had organized them. At least, when the Moscow authorities demanded to remove from the exhibition G.S.Mosin's and M.Sh.Brusilovsky's painting *1918*, they were categorically refused. Debates about this picture enveloped the entire city. It was a rare example of an artwork – a work of visual art – that became not only artistic but also public event. Out of the group of the painting's defenders emerged the left wing of the Sverdlovsk branch of the Artists' Union, as well as the foundations of local nonconformist associations.

During the early 1960s, many young people searching for the new ways to express their worldview found themselves in the Railworkers' House of Culture, in the amateur studio headed by Nikolay Chesnokov since 1959. The role of this studio was described by Anna Ry Nikonova-Tarshis in her article *Uktusskaya shkola* that described the problems of 1960s–1970s conceptual art. (Later T.M.Troshina remembered this studio in her article *Pereformatirovaniye granits konformizma i nonkonformizma posle "ottepeli": studiya N.G. Chesnokova* published in *Labirint* magazine, no. 2, 2015). The majority of Sverdlovsk nonconformist artists of 1960s – early 1970s started either in this studio, where “adepts of avant-garde were experimenting freely side by side with the adherents of socialist realism” (A.Tarshis, V.Dyachenko, V.Gavrilov, E.Arbenev), or in the designer group of the branch of All-Union Scientific and Research Institute of Technical Aesthetics (Ural-VNIITE), which had recently opened in Sverdlovsk.

Back then, in the basement of the house that stood at the corner of Krasnoarmeyskaya and Malysheva street worked the artists Valery Dyachenko, Mikhail Tsaryuk, Veniamin Stepanov, Vladimir Evladov and Viktor Reutov. Later they moved to the basement on Rosa Luxemburg street (near the Art College), where they were joined by Viktor Goncharov, Anatoly Zolotukhin, Alexander Lysyakov, Evgeny Makakhin, Valery Gavrilov and Vladiir Zhukov. Their work resulted not only in the first shows of art projects at the zonal exhibitions, but also in the first basement exhibitions of the “other art”. Soon the most outstanding personalities attracted their own groups (“tusovki” as they were to be called later).

There was “Gavrilovsky basement”, or “The Crow Nest” (22 Gorky street), with its host Valery Gavrilov who had become engrossed in aerographic surrealism: painter, drawer and sculptor whose works were permeated with sensual mysticism and morbid expressiveness, whose wife, poet Zinaida Okulenok-Gavrilova was also his co-author. Many artists, writers and architects flocked here attracted by the atmosphere of creative

freedom. This was the place where the painter Alexander Alekseyev-Svinkin developed his talent, becoming deeply immersed in the stylistic experimentation.

The “Birdhouse”, or “Starling-House” (located at the corner of K.Libknecht and Malysheva street in the building of an old photo studio), which received its name both because of its location and because of the surname of Alexei Skvortsov (from Russian “skvoretsh”, meaning starling bird), who produced happening films, colour-and-music and scenographic experiments in kinetic art and carnival performances with their “inspiring chaos”. All of this marked not only perestroika-period Sverdlovsk but also an expanding postmodernist process.

“Bukashnik” at 5 Tolmacheva street was a workshop of Evgeny Malakhin, photographer, poet and musician, an inspirator of everyone and everything creative, friend of the members of Odessa underground, who in 1988 organized an ensemble association Kartinnik, whose aim he described as a “folk-punk-show-skomorokh-tusovka”, that is: to paint, sing, dance and gift painted boards with texts (the so-called mini avant-garde), to bring joy and to provoke thinking.

The workshop of Alexander Lysyakov, photographer and painter who worked for the *Na smenu!* newspaper, was located in the basement at number 8, 8th of March street. Lysyakov first began to experiment with the shape symbolism of ordinary objects, and later became an exquisite master of smithcraft. The portrait titled *Photojournalist A.Lysykov* became a testament to the friendship with one of the distinctive artists of 1970s Sverdlovsk, Andrey Zolotukhin, who leaned towards hyperrealism (Irbit Museum of Fine Arts).

The workshop of minimalist Vladimir Zhukov, engrossed in the experiments with colour and space, was located at first in the “basement no. 20” at 16/18 Dekabristov street, where metalloplastic was cut, bent and painted; later it moved to the basement of an old town house at the banks of Iset river (on Rosa Luxemburg street), where bricks were put on pedestal, where words were combined with colour, and where many exhibitions took place, including E.Malakhin’s *May Holidays* and *Gifts*.

Here also, although a bit later, opened his studio Mikhail Sazhayev, master of magical realism who preferred to keep a certain distance from various gatherings (“tusovki”), who combined in his strange nostalgic images the romanticism of H.-Ch.Andersen’s and brothers Grimm’s fairy tales with the world of Russian semi-urban and semi-rural folklore and with the elements of sots-art.

Finally, there was the “basement” that emerged in early 1980s (on 48b Kuybyshev street), which belonged to Nikolay Fedoreyev, who “did not belong to any genre”, who created objects-concepts; a leader of Sverdlovsk sots-art whose works were permeated

with the zeal of the artist's moral responsibility. It is equally important to remember painted works by Viktor Makhotin, the custodian of "Metal'naya lavka" museum located inside the historic water tower at Plotinka (historically one of the earliest city buildings and a local landmark).

All these groups prepared the road for the emergence, in 1987, of the new artistic group "Surikova-31", which, in turn, gave rise to other associations, "Sacco i Vanzetti, 25" and "Lenina 11" (as told by G.B.Zaytsev). The first independent exhibition without jury featured almost 200 authors and over 600 works. The exhibition astounded by "everything" – from the age range of its participants to the sudden appearance of all schools and movements. Most of all, it astounded by its artistic freedom. Second avant-garde celebrated its victory in the provinces! Since then the exhibition activities become public not only in the capital. Surikovs' exhibition was organized by Valery Dyachenko and Viktor Goncharov. The last exhibition of the famous group took place in 1994: among the displayed works was the conceptual graphic series *Perpetuum mobili* by Leonid Lugovych, who later invented a "chromosome portrait" born from the practice of street portraits.

Non-official art faced more difficulties in Sverdlovsk than in Moscow. Ural artists conspicuously lacked buyers from the diplomatic circles or "Malaya Gruzinskaya" with its covert support in governmental circles; therefore, surviving without commissions from the Artistic Foundation was an extremely hard task. Occasional opportunities of this kind could be found only at the Union of Artists' exhibitions. The struggle for place under the sun was fierce. Former dissenters who became members of the Union faced criticism from the younger and not yet successful artists. Sverdlovsk artistic brotherhood that had emerged in 1960s was gradually collapsing.

Drawing the line between the left wing of the Union and the "other art" is even more difficult for Sverdlovsk than for the capital. Even the artists who ostensibly received official recognition, membership of the Union and opportunity for relatively comfortable existence, constantly had to deal with the censorship from local authorities. Therefore, they had to show their works non-officially – if not in the basements, at least in the apartments (for example at A.Kazantsev's in the 1970s). During this period of "stagnation" and ideological pressure, any picture, sculpture or drawing could be withdrawn without any explanations by direct order of the authorities. Often such episodes resulted from the infighting among the artists themselves: all of them were creative prisoners of the system. Both progressive artists within the Union and the "nonconformists" were internally united by their rejection of contemporary reality; they talked about forbidden social, political and environmental issues using metaphorical language of parables

and allegories. Creative strivings of the members of different generations and styles often came together. Time will show that both official and “other” art constituted the continuous fabric of 1960s–1980s.

The same absurdist perception of reality which formed the foundation of contemporary conceptual art can be found in the circus series of Vladimir Volovich and in *Children’s Games* of Yury Filonenko. German Metelev in his *Petya and the Wolf* (1972) or *The Spring* (1969) and Alexei Kazantsev in his lithographies *Leading Workers of Uralmash* (1972) appear as the predecessors of sotsart. Not by chance, when organizing exhibitions that formed the background for the 1990 conference, Sverdlovsk avant-garde artists invited Ufa artist Mikhail Nazarov and Siberian Gennady Rayshev whose life, despite his underappreciation by the authorities, was closely linked with the Sverdlovsk organization of the Artist’s Union.

## 4. Conclusions

Non-official art ceased to exist in 1991. The opposition between the members of the Artists’ Union and the other artistic groups has longed ceased to matter. During almost three decades that has passed since we have witnessed the emergence of private exhibition centres, auctions, independent private studios and private museums, while state centres of contemporary art have developed forums and biennials in the provinces. The very structure of cultural space has changed, expanding the range of tolerance to the actual art. The developing art market has become an important intermediary in this process, an intermediary sometimes surprising in its paradoxes. Understanding the lessons of recent past, hopefully, will remind us even today about the inevitability of choice between conformism and genuine art (especially since the borders between conformism and non-conformism have been repeatedly redrawn). Obviously, the criteria for all types of art remain the same. How is the artwork made? Is it an aesthetical work? Does it preserve the *Zeitgeist*?

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