

## Reports and Commentaries

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### PROJECTING ART: CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC AND CURATORIAL PRACTICES IN MOSCOW, RUSSIA

by Vlad Strukov

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In September 2011, I had the privilege of being invited to the 4<sup>th</sup> Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. While in Moscow, I was able to observe contemporary artistic and curatorial practices, and my report contains some thoughts—*vpechatleniia* [observations]—that I hope will be of interest to the readers of *Digital Icons*, by virtue of their concern with the medium and media application in the focus area of the journal.

The theme of the 4<sup>th</sup> Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art was ‘Rewriting Worlds’. The main project of the biennale was curated by Peter Weibel, Professor and Director of the Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. Weibel defined the mission of the biennale as a means to survey contemporary art with all its ‘transfers and transformations, translations and changes, <...> on a global scale’ (Weibel 2011: 26). In his rationale for the exhibition, the curator used three categories that, in his view, define the condition of contemporary art, ‘1) the paradigm of the net, 2) the performative turn (the participation of the public), and 3) rewriting programs’ (Weibel 2011: 26). I, like I imagine any other scholar of new media, was thrilled to see a major exhibition of contemporary art taking place in Russia to be determined not by well-known and well-recycled ideological causes but rather by the media turn.<sup>1</sup> However, ideology was present as ‘ideologies’, i.e. forms of contesting power in various regions of the world and as forms of art itself. In fact, Weibel constructed his own ideology of the relationship between old and new media: ‘a contemporary Biennale must be characterised through “media justice.” The new media like computer and net art should not suppress the old media like painting, but likewise the old media should not suppress the new media’ (Weibel 2011: 26). The curator resolved such an epistemological malfunction by resorting to the concept of ‘post-media condition’ (Weibel 2011: 27), which somehow reminded me of the post-structuralist debates of the 1980s and the postmodernist ‘anything goes’ of the

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘cultural studies’ side of me, however, acknowledges that the objective of ‘rewriting words’ can be interpreted broadly—in Derridian terms—as a means of re-appropriating new territories and of marking their ideological valence.

1990s. Perhaps, Moscow of 2011 was an ideal space for revisiting the ideological paradigms of the period especially now that the 1980s are very much in vogue.<sup>2</sup>

My own reading of the post-medium condition at the Moscow Biennale was inspired not so much by the curatorial practice of ‘the equivalence of the media and the mixing of the media’ (Weibel 2011: 27) as by the media obsession that was apparent in the main project as well as the special projects of the Moscow biennale, not to mention numerous other exhibitions that were on display at that time. My main impression of the Moscow Biennale and its various satellites<sup>3</sup> was that of media overload: a visitor to the TSUM display<sup>4</sup>—the main exhibition space of *Rewriting Worlds*—was greeted by a gigantic screen that showed Kamila B. Richter’s *The Garden of Error and Display* that presented an endless flow of digital animation controlled by real time Twitter feeds, actual financial and economic data published online, and user interventions. Undoubtedly, the piece functioned as a fantastic illustration of the curator’s idea of the connection between global capitalism, new—digital—forms of cultural production and (human) space. However, the artwork seemed to have a subliminal function of framing the exhibition as some sort of carnivalesque spectacle whose main purpose was to frame and sustain media frenzy (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Screenshot of Kamila B. Richter’s *The Garden of Error and Display* (2010, internet and data based interactive projection).



Source: <http://www.gardenoferroranddecay.net/enter-the-garden/> (accessed 3 January 2012).

Indeed, the items on display at the main project, as well as other exhibitions, *en générale*, competed for audience attention by staging their own spectacles of media paroxysm,

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970-1990* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (24 September 2011-15 January 2012; curated by Glen Adamson et al; <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/postmodernism/> accessed 3 January 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Predictably some visitors found these smaller projects far more exciting than the central exposition as I managed to gauge in my conversations with artists, curators and general public; however I am not concerned with the ideologies of curatorial work and spectatorship in this publication.

<sup>4</sup> TSUM Art Foundation, Moscow.

whereby the dominant form of the delivery of such an experience was that of the projection.<sup>5</sup> Whether projecting a still image, a video, film, or data based interactive piece, projection seemed to command the Moscow Biennale, and it overshadowed other forms of art and experience. It is not, therefore, surprising that I started wondering how the use of projection related to Weibel's concept of the post-medium condition, and also about what it meant to contemporary Russian audiences in Moscow 2011, and finally whether projecting art in itself has become an art form, i.e. 'projecting art'.

I am under no illusion that projecting art is some sort of a new development. In fact, Margot Lovejoy argued for the historicity of projection as an artistic language in her *Digital Currents: Art in the Electronic Age*: 'the viewer in a projection installation environment becomes related to the camera movement—and contexts in the shifting experience of seeing lighted moving images presented as split, overlapping, multiplied, serialised, mirrored, rotated, made miniature or gigantic' (Lovejoy 2004: 142); and Christopher Eamon and Stan Douglas philosophised the art of projection in their volume of 2009. However, I am more drawn to Frederick Baker's understanding of projection as a cultural form. In his study, he coins the term 'projectionism' that, in his view, has a hybrid nature and 'offers the chance to show patterns of time that are not restricted to either present, future or past. There are places where fossils, loops and bridges come together. The past, future and present can mix in the human mind in epiphanies' (Baker 2008: 94).

If projectionism is indeed a cultural form that transcends time in its linear syntagms, then perhaps it defines contemporary Russia as a culture existing in the mix of times, whereby chronological patterns are easily mixed and consumed in the endless flow of loops of memory and experience. Perhaps in this sense, Marina Chernikova's video entitled *Future. Yesterday. Every Day* [Budushchee. Vchera. Ezhednevno; 2011], shown as part of the special project *Anthropologizing the Future*<sup>6</sup>, is a perfect manifestation of such fluidity of time and forms of being. Chernikova as well as many other artists interpret the simultaneity of times as an ideological issue, i.e. she links it with another postulate of projectionism, which is its engagement with the surface as part of the artistic expression. Numerous video art pieces presented at *Media Impact: International Festival of Activist Art*<sup>7</sup> illustrate precisely this aspect of projectionism that helps Baker distinguish between any projection, for example, cinema projection with its concentration on the neutrality of the surface (Baker 2008: 97), and projectionism per se. The artists in this exhibition conceived the surface on which the image is projected not only as a contact medium but in fact as an ideological space, which I tend to view as a general statement concerning post-Soviet spaces' ability to produce—or, on the contrary, obfuscate—a new (ideological) message. This was also a concern in works pre-

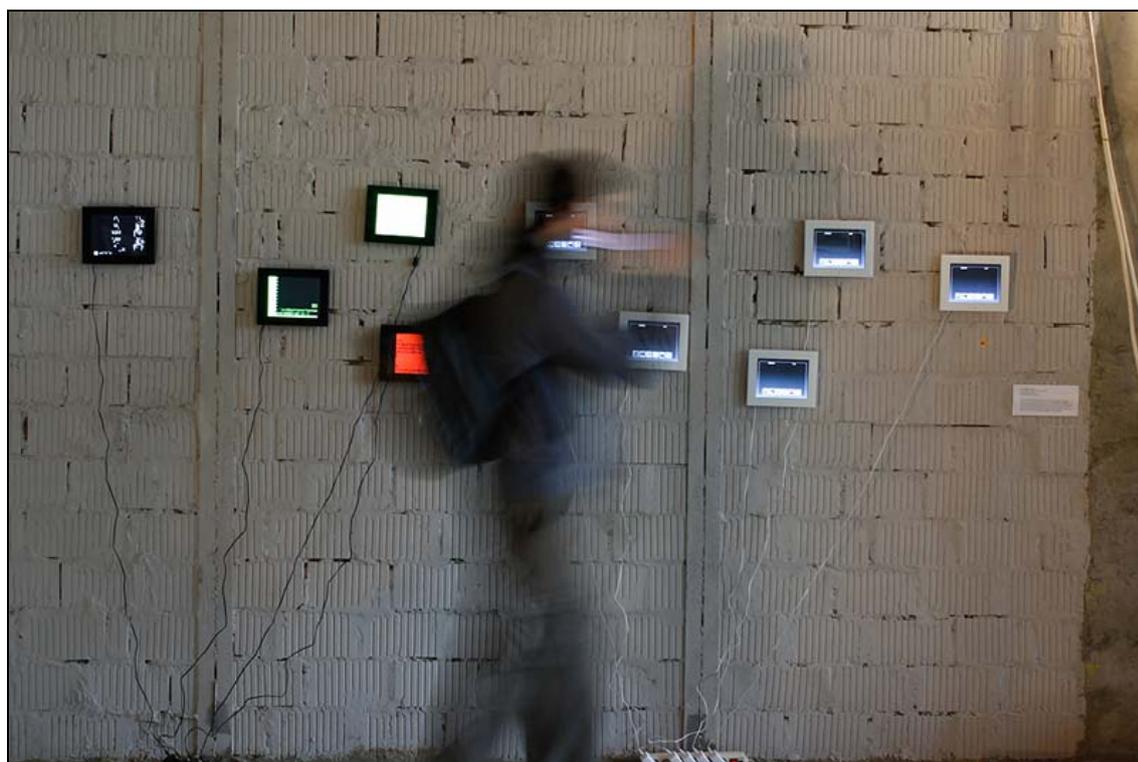
<sup>5</sup> I am listing here just a few examples of art works that involved a projection. Please note that their actual number was a lot greater. *OP\_ERA: sonic dimensions* (2005, Reiane Cantoni & Daniela Kutschat, Brazil); *Portraits of the Homeless, Renters and Mortgagees* (2008, Chen Chieh-jen, Taiwan); *P.I.G.S.* (2011, Claire Fountaine, France); *Circuit Square* (2011, Evol, Germany); *Bloodlight* (2011, Gints Gabrans, Latvia); *Pot, Kettle, Black* (2010, Kate Gilmore, USA); *Anxiety States* (2011, Alina Gutkina, Russia); *Rewriting the Erased* (2009, FX Harsono, Indonesia); *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010, Isaac Julien, UK), and so forth.

<sup>6</sup> [Antropologija budushchego], curated by Natalia Kamenetskaia. Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow.

<sup>7</sup> [Mediaudar: mezhdunarodnyi festival' aktivistskogo iskusstva], curated by Tatiana Volkova. Tsentr dizaina ARTPLAY.

sented at another exhibition entitled *On/Off*.<sup>8</sup> For example, Elena Martynova's video installation captured the ideological interpretation of the projection surface in relation to new media and global capitalism (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Photograph of Elena Martynova's *Video Acquisition of a Workplace* [Video-zakhvat rabocheho mesta, 2011, video].



Source: <http://latvian-animal.livejournal.com/138124.html> (accessed 3 January 2011).

The persistence of projectionism that emphasizes the loop<sup>9</sup> as a dominant cultural form was particularly evident in *Allegoria Sacra*<sup>10</sup> produced by AES+F group, which brings together four artists, Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovitch, Evgeny Suvatsky and Vladimir Fridkes (See Figures 3-6). The multi-channel video installation was created in collaboration with the composer, Pavel Karmanov, and includes his minimalist music as well as pieces borrowed from Chopin, Handel and Tchaikovsky. The work is based on the painting by Giovanni Bellini (c. 1500), and like his work, it depicts a mixture of diverse characters taken from real history as well as Christian and classical mythology. *Allegoria Sacra* is the third video installation produced by AES+F—the first two, *The Last Riot* and *The Feast of Trimalchio*, were shown at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and 2009, respectively—and therefore, invites an interpretation of this part of the trilogy as Purgatory.

<sup>8</sup> [Vkl.Vykl.], curated by David Ter-Oganian, Arthouse.

<sup>9</sup> I understand 'loop' here as a method of displaying video art and other forms of projectionist art as well as a symbolic form of cultural memory, and an artefact in itself.

<sup>10</sup> It was presented at the Moscow Multimedia Art Museum, curated by Ol'ga Sviblova.

**Figures 3-6.** Shots of AES-F's *Allegoria Sacra* (2001, multi-channel video installation).



Source: Vlad Strukov.

In *Allegoria Sacra*, various people are stranded in a modern airport, awaiting their flight, hence destiny. While waiting in the airport, they engage in a complex choreography of motion, with different characters and layers of space moving at a slow pace and engaging in, what I would define as, a ‘virtual dance’. The imagery alternates between scenes showing characters moving and scenes depicting them asleep. In either case, what dominates the piece is the representation of touch: whether a touch of a hand of one person on the body of another, or a touch of surfaces and layers of the space. The gentle caressing continues uninterrupted, accompanied by an outstanding score. This touch is structured as a loopy motion: the imagery circles—seemingly—endlessly, taking over the space of the viewer, an effect enhanced by the imagery being projected using six separate projectors on a curved screen encompassing 180 degrees of the spectator’s space. It creates a sense of complete immersion, whereby the touch is symbolic of the touch of god, of the divine essence of art. The same touch problematises the notion of the surface, as the touch transcends the constructed planes of the digital environment that the characters occupy.

Truly majestic in its form, *Allegoria Sacra* condenses the notion of ‘projecting art’ in its purest form: set somewhere between film and video art, digital animation and portraiture, photography and fantasy, poem and music, the artwork (re-)constructs layers of cultural history and advances ‘vpechatlenie’ [impression] as a main conduit of art. The touch functions as a symbolic hieroglyph in this piece, uniting the characters and their emotions and also signifying cultural ruptures; it has a performative function of haptic quality and purveys the surface of the screen as a locus of contemporary art.

Eamon, Christopher and Stan Douglas (2009). *Art of Projection: Elsewhere*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz.

Baker, Frederick (2008). *The Art of Projectionism*. Wien: Czernin Verlag.

- Lovejoy, Margot (2004). *Digital Currents: Art in the Electronic Age*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Weibel, Peter (2011). 'Rewriting Worlds. Art and Agency' in *4<sup>th</sup> Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art: Catalogue*, edited by Nikolai Molok. Moscow: August Borg, 26-29.

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